

## Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Special Report

# Former KM, State athlete Zeb Plonk to be inducted into KM Hall of Fame

By GARY STEWART  
Editor of the Herald

Farming and sports have always been in Zeb Plonk's blood.

He took a few minutes off from his gardening recently to reminisce about his playing days at Kings Mountain High School and N.C. State University.

Plonk was a lean eighth grader when he came into Kings Mountain in 1922 to attend high school. He had grown up on a farm on St. Luke's Road about five miles north of town and went to the small two-room Plonk School before coming to Kings Mountain.

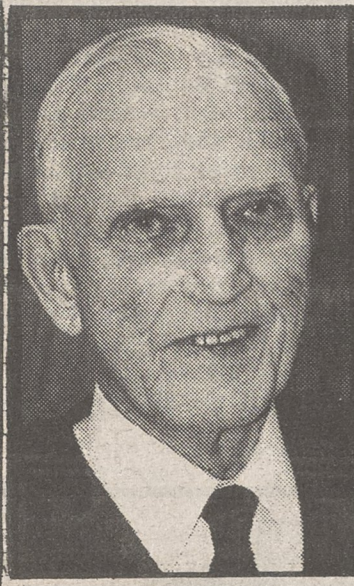
He immediately developed a love for all sports. He played football, baseball and basketball - the only three sports offered in high school at that time - and went on to play football and baseball at N.C. State.

Plonk's size prevented him from being a member of Kings Mountain High's first football team in the fall of 1922. He played football in the 10th and 11th grades (there were only 11 grades at that time) but played baseball and basketball for three years.

The records have long since been forgotten, but Plonk recalled that the Mountaineers were competitive

in every sport and were especially strong in basketball and baseball. The baseball and football teams played at the old stadium located where the American Legion and Eckerd's Drugs are now, and the basketball team played on a dirt court on the grounds of Central School.

"My eighth grade year was 1922, the year they started football in Kings Mountain," he recalled. "I wasn't big enough to play football but I got to see a



ZEB PLONK

little of it and got interested in it."

Plonk was a hard-running fullback on the 1924 and '25 teams.

"In those days you had to play both ways," he said. "You didn't run players in and out, or two-platoon like they do today. But we had some pretty fair ball teams. Logan Stowe - everybody called him Skimp - was small but he was an outstanding athlete. He played quarterback and was real good at it. He was a good kicker and ran the team well."

Plato Goforth, who was a member of the original Mountaineers in '22, was an outstanding end, and Skinny Jenkins and Tim Goforth were also key players.

"Carl Mauney was a real strong lineman," Plonk recalled, "and Bill Mason played center. Mason went on to Davidson and played football there, then he became a judge in Gaston County for a long time."

Swain Morris and Plonk's first cousin, Lloyd Patterson, were also key members of those teams.

"At that time you could play in the eighth grade if you were big enough and good enough," Plonk recalled. "I was too little to be considered for the team at that time. I went out for the team in the ninth grade but I really just played in the 10th and 11th grades."

Plonk recalled beating a larger Chester, SC team on the road, and the Mountaineers also played Shelby, Fallston and most of the other teams in this area.

"Our coach was Monk Banks, who graduated from Presbyterian College," he recalled. "He had played college ball there. He coached baseball and basketball, too. Back then you just had one coach for everything."

Although Banks didn't have a baseball background, he turned out several outstanding teams at KMHS. Plonk recalled that a former Kings Mountain student, Hugh "Red" Ormand, who was playing professional baseball at the time, would always help the team until time for him to report to his pro club.

"The team that we had our senior year, Hugh really got us off to a great start," he said. "The things he taught us carried right through the whole season. We had a real good year. We didn't lose many games."

Plonk recalled that the Mountaineers defeated arch-rival Shelby twice during the regular season but Shelby eliminated the Mountaineers in the second round of the state playoffs.

"We had some really fine teams," he noted. "During the first two years I played baseball Howard Pursley was the key pitcher. He had the best assortment of pitches of any pitcher I ever caught. He could throw an excellent curve, a good change-up and a very good fast ball."

Another key mound star for the Mountaineers was southpaw Harry "Doc" Ledford, who pitched the Mountaineers to a state playoff victory over Asheville Biltmore in 1926.

"Arthur Hord played with us my senior year," Plonk recalled. "He had been in and out of school and played shortstop. He was a super player. He ultimately played in the Southern Association for New Orleans."

Skinny Jenkins, a slick fielding second baseman, also went into professional ball.

Plonk recalled a tall right-hand pitcher named Clyde Scates, who came from Gaffney, SC to pitch for the Mountaineers one season. He was "recruited" by an avid Mountaineer fan.

"We had a summer team one year," Plonk recalled, "and we were playing in Blacksburg. Scates was playing for them and someone from the Kings Mountain area was really impressed with him and prevailed on him to come up here and go to high school. He had the best fast ball of any pitcher I ever caught, including college pitchers. His fast ball was just unbelievable for a high school player. He was probably 18 or 19 years old. He struck out 18 batters in one game against Shelby, which we won 7-1."

When it came time to qualify for the state playoffs, Plonk recalled, the State Athletic Association ruled

### HALL OF FAME TICKETS

**Tickets for the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Banquet are on sale at Champion Contracting, McGinnis Department Store, the Kings Mountain Herald, and from all members of the Sports Hall of Fame Committee.**

**Tickets are \$10 each and includes a meal catered by Town and Country Barbecue and the induction ceremony.**

**Jeff Mullins, head basketball coach at UNC-Charlotte and a former first team All-American at Duke and NBA all-star, will be the guest speaker.**

**Also to be inducted are Grace Neisler Page, Jimmy Littlejohn and the championship 1955 Kings Mountain High School football team.**

Scates ineligible.

Plonk recalled that Stowe and Swain Morris, who later played at N.C. State, were the leaders on the Mountaineer basketball team. Lloyd Patterson was also a good player. Plonk, although he was just 5-11, played center.

"We had some pretty fair teams, and a real good team my senior year," he recalled. "We played all of our games on dirt courts, except for one which we played at Gastonia High School. That was the only game we played off the ground."

During commencement ceremonies his senior year, Plonk was awarded the prestigious American Legion medal for his athletic and academic accomplishments.

Plonk recalled that the good high school athletes also played summer baseball. Most of the area mills had teams which would play at various locations around town on Saturday afternoon.

"I played for the Cora Mill and we had a pretty good team," he recalled. "I would work out on the farm all week and then come to town on Saturday to play ball. Willie Grice was our ace pitcher, and he was a good one. Grace Davis was a good pitcher. Jasper Roper was a good first baseman and we had a shortstop named Flat Ramsey. Our home field was on Bessemer City Road where Ace Hardware is now."

Prior to his playing days in the mill leagues, Plonk recalled some outstanding teams at the Margrace Plant of Neisler Mills. The team was packed with former professional players and Kings Mountain developed a big rivalry with Shelby.

"Around 1919 or '20, Margrace ended up with a real hot series with a semi-pro team from Shelby," he recalled. "A lot of animosity sprung up between the two cities because of baseball and they decided to have a playoff series. Shelby went down to High Point and prevailed on somebody to let them have the key pitcher off the High Point pro team in the Piedmont League, a guy named 'Bad Eye' Guthrie. That was the man they brought here to pitch for them. I don't know that Kings Mountain knew until after the game that he was a pro, but it created a very bad feeling between the two towns."

After graduating from KMHS in the spring of '26, Plonk enrolled at N.C. State and immediately made an impact on their baseball and football teams. He did not play college basketball. He said his first train ride was to Raleigh to go to college.

His freshman year at State, the Wolfpack had one of the best freshman football teams to come out of the Southern Conference (now the ACC). The team went 6-0, defeating teams like Duke, Carolina, Wake Forest and Davidson.

"We had some outstanding players like Bob Warren, Sparky Adams and Don Childress," he recalled, "and the following year most of the key people made the varsity."

Plonk injured his shoulder in the Carolina game his freshman year and thought it might end his football career. But he was a determined player and played two good years on the varsity level before deciding to give up football.

"I could still play on offense," he noted, "but I couldn't tackle with my left shoulder. If I'd make a hit it would dislocate."

Plonk's sophomore year, 1927, was the best football season State has ever had, even to this day. The Pack went 9-1, losing only to Furman University, and won the Southern Conference. At that time the SC included all the big schools in the south, such as North Carolina, Duke, South Carolina, Wake Forest, Alabama, Kentucky and Georgia.

"Our most outstanding player was Jack McDowell, who is in the College Football Hall of Fame," Plonk recalled. "Jackie Jordan, Fred Crum, Don Childress, Bob Warren, Sparky Adams and others also had good years."

Plonk said he gave up football after his junior year because he didn't want to risk his chances of having a good senior season in baseball. And, he did have a good year, hitting .300 and leading the team to a first division finish in the conference.

"We had a lot of good players on that team," he recalled. "Sandy Shore and Bill Averette were real good pitchers."

One of Plonk's biggest games came in a 10-5 win over Virginia when he went 3-for-5 with a grand slam home run. He usually hit third or fourth in the lineup.

Chick Doak, whose brother Bill played in the major leagues and had a baseball glove named in his honor, was the coach.

Plonk graduated June 11, 1930 and returned to Kings Mountain to play semi-pro ball for Hugh Ormand. He had been hired by the claims department of Liberty Mutual Insurance Company in Boston but was told it would be September before he could report for work.

"I was really interested in playing baseball in Kings Mountain that summer, but after just two or three weeks I got a letter from Liberty Mutual telling me that they were going to move up the next claims training class and wanted me in Boston on July 7," he recalled. Plonk said he considered turning down the job offer and returning to State to do graduate work, but because the country was in the midst of a Depression



Zeb Plonk as Vice-President of Liberty Mutual

and the immediate future wasn't looking bright Coach Doak advised him to take the job. Plonk recalled playing a baseball game in Kings Mountain on July 4 and boarding a train for Boston on July 5.

Plonk and Liberty Mutual had a 43-year relationship which ended on Plonk's retirement in 1973. He worked his way up through the ranks to become a company vice-president in charge of the electronic data processing operations. While working in Atlanta as an assistant to the division vice president in 1953, Plonk was selected for the 23rd session of the prestigious Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School.

He worked at various locations around the United States, including 21 years in Boston. Those 21 years turned out to be a happy time because Plonk loved sports and Boston had two of the sports world's top teams, the Red Sox and the Celtics.

"Actually, when I first started working in Boston the Braves were still there, and I became an avid fan of theirs," he recalled.

After a nine months training period, Plonk was assigned to Liberty's office in Baltimore, and then he returned to Boston for a year and a half. By that time the Braves had moved to Milwaukee.

He transferred back to Boston in 1955 to become an assistant vice president, and stayed there for 18 years that time. He saw most of the greats of baseball and basketball perform.

"I latched on to the Red Sox," he said. "While I was there they were in the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals, and twice since I retired they have been in the World Series and I have gone back to Boston for both of those series."

After retirement, Plonk returned to Kings Mountain and immediately re-discovered his love for Mountaineer sports. He still attends most of the KMHS ball games and attends most of the N.C. State football games.

He has also been active in community endeavors. He is active in St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, where he has served three different terms on the Church Council. He was on the City Aging Committee for six years, and was on a Rest Home Advisory Council for a four-county area including Cleveland.

For his outstanding athletic accomplishments and his devotion to Kings Mountain athletics and the community over the years, Plonk will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame on Monday, April 18 at 7 p.m. at the Kings Mountain Community Center. His brother, another former Mountaineer athlete, Dr. George Plonk, will induct him.

Plonk called the Hall of Fame selection his greatest honor in sports.

"I appreciate it very much," he said. "There's nobody that loves sports more than I do. I am very grateful. I don't know how it came about, but I'm very grateful to whoever it was that brought it about."



One of Zeb Plonk's proudest moments was when Jim Valvano's N.C. State Wolfpack stunned mighty Houston for the 1983 NCAA basketball championship.