

Carl Champion, average athlete but #1 as a fan, to be inducted into Kings Mountain Hall of Fame

By GARY STEWART
Editor of the Herald

As an athlete, he was average at best. As a fan and supporter of athletics and the community he is a ...Champion.

Carl Champion, longtime friend of the athletes of the Kings Mountain area and one of Kings Mountain's most generous citizens, will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Monday night, April 14 at Kings Mountain High School.

He will share the spotlight with former KMHS football coach Bill Bates, former KMHS and UMass basketball star Carl Smith, and former KMHS and Appalachian State football and wrestling standout Chuck Gordon.

Roman Gabriel, former All-American quarterback at NC State University and former NFL Most Valuable Player with the Los Angeles Rams, will be the guest speaker. Dinner gets under way at 6:30 p.m. in the KMHS cafeteria and the induction ceremony will follow in B.N. Barnes Auditorium.

Champion, who calls himself a "sportsaholic," has loved sports from the time he can remember but admits he was never good at them. He played baseball at Bethware High School and with the Kings Mountain American Legion Juniors until he joined the U.S. Army at the age of 16, and he played some slow-pitch softball, mostly for teams he sponsored, in the sixties and seventies. He is an avid golfer.

His best shot at making it big in sports was in auto racing. He was quite successful on area dirt tracks in the late sixties but had to quit that sport because it interfered with his landscaping and contracting business.

But, although he never reaped much success as a player, Champion says his life has been one long ball game. He has traveled all over the U.S. with his softball teams, some of which won national championships, and through his travels has become close friends with some of the top names in professional sports, including Mickey Mantle, Barry Switzer, Whitey Ford, Clete Boyer, Tony Cloninger, Bobby Richardson, and many others. He frequently attends professional baseball, football and basketball games and has been a fixture at the Orange Bowl football game for 37 years.

But except for his family, his greatest love has always been the people in his hometown. He is an avid follower of the Kings Mountain Mountaineers, has sponsored numerous teams ranging from little league baseball and football to adult softball, and has been most generous to numerous fund-raising projects ranging from promoting softball and golf tournaments for youngsters facing life-threatening medical problems to raising money for Shriners Hospitals.

It is not uncommon for Champion to lease a fleet of buses to send KMHS fans to out-of-town playoff games or to landscape, re-seed or help build a playing facility, or foot the bill for a youth team to go to an out-of-state bowl game.

Modestly, Champion says he is only trying to return some of the blessings that have come his way. But most people who know Champion agree that even he doesn't know how much he has helped others.

"I have just been fortunate," he says, "and I thank the Good Lord that I have had the opportunity to be around sports, because I love it. I guess my greatest enjoyment is trying to help somebody."

"I always loved sports. I never was a great player but I always loved it. Where sports were, I was. Any spare time, when I wasn't working, I spent it taking the family all over the country to sports events. My boys and my daughter, Ashley, together we've seen football, basketball and baseball to its greatest."

In fact, Champion jokes, when he played he saw a lot of sports...from the bench.

Champion, son of the late Lyman and Gertrude Ledford Champion of the Oak Grove Community, said he caught "a little bit" at Bethware High in the 1950s under Coach Jeff Wells. "But mostly I sat on the bench."

He also gets a big laugh out of talking about his



Carl Champion likes to joke about his athletic abilities, but he is a good golfer and was invited to compete in Mickey Mantle's 1988 Riviera Fall Golf Classic.

legion baseball days at the old City Stadium, where he played two years for Fred Withers and Don Parker. He recalled one game in particular.

"Coach Parker let me go in a game one night," he recalled. "Keith Layton was pitching and Johnny McGinnis was playing second base. He sent me to centerfield. Keith threw a couple of strikes and then this guy hit the ball. He really cracked it. I turned around and went up that bank at the graveyard. I was really going after that ball, but Johnny McGinnis caught it about 20 feet behind second base. Coach Parker called me back in and told me to sit on the bench with him. That's about the way I played sports. But I loved it."

Actually, Champion might have come to be a pretty good ballplayer. He must have had some talent in him because all his children - Chris, Kevin, Ashley and Justin - were outstanding athletes at KMHS and Justin is a redshirt freshman football player at NC State. But Carl dropped out of school at the age of 16 to join the Army. He spent three years in the service, including 30 months in Germany. He completed his high school education in the service and when he returned home received his diploma at Bethware.

He moved to Florida where he ran a landscaping company for T.A. Altman from 1958-66, then came back home to open his own business. He had always had an interest in auto racing and he talked his uncle, Howard Champion, John Grant and some others into building him a race car.

"That was in the spring of 1967," he recalled. "It was a 1954 race car. We took it to Shelby Speedway, backed it off the trailer and just scalded everybody and won the race. That was about the same time that Freddy Smith was starting out. I won several races from there on until I quit."

His racing career lasted five years and he was a regular at tracks in Shelby, Gaffney, Rutherfordton, Columbia, Spartanburg and Charlotte. But he was forced to give up racing because of his landscaping business.

"My insurance company approached me and said that they would not write my insurance, liability or workman's comp, if I kept racing," he recalled. "I could either race or be in the contracting business. I had to make a living so I got out of racing. I guess I loved racing about as good as anybody, but I couldn't race and run my business."

During that same period of time, Champion sponsored a number of little league baseball teams. Slow-pitch softball began to experience a boom in this area and he sponsored numerous teams in area church and industrial leagues.

He also organized a traveling team which included area players such as Dewitt Guyton, Jim Guyton and Gene Tignor. It was in a tournament at Grover in 1971 when he met Art Shoemaker of Belmont, who was coaching the Groves Thread team.

At the end of that season, Shoemaker recalled, Groves dropped its softball program and he



Carl Champion, right, and his best friend, Art Shoemaker, in their softball playing days

needed a sponsor because he felt like his team had the talent to win state and national championships. He said he remembered the enthusiasm of "that Champion man" down at Grover and he called Carl to see if he would be interested in sponsoring the team. Champion jumped at the opportunity, and not only did a national championship softball team evolve from that agreement, but also a lasting friendship between Champion and Shoemaker.

"Art's my best friend," Champion says. "There's nothing I couldn't call him and get him to do, and he knows it's the same way with me. We've traveled together and had a lot of good times together. The main thing is he's just as big a sportsaholic as I am. Therefore, we make a good team."

Even though they became best friends and Carl was putting up the money to take the team all over the U.S. to play softball, Champion said Shoemaker didn't take that into consideration when making out his lineup.

"I was on the roster as a player," Champion laughed, "and we were at this big tournament and I wanted to play. I kept aggravating him about putting me in, and I told him I was the one putting all the money up and I wanted to play. He just looked at me and said, 'you go sit on the bench, this team's here to win.' So I didn't even get to play on my own ball team. That goes to show you I wasn't too good of a ballplayer."

Shoemaker would probably agree that Champion didn't need to be in the lineup in a national tournament. But he says an athlete never had a greater friend than Carl Champion.

"Friend to the athlete would be fitting to describe Carl, who is a true Kings Mountain sports legend," says Shoemaker. "He was average as a participant but a giant as a fan, promoter, sponsor, organizer and contributor to all Kings Mountain sporting events. No task is too large or small for him to undertake. He has made Kings Mountain a far greater community because of his major contributions. No man has ever inherited a name that is more fitting than his - Champion."

Get your Hall of Fame tickets

Tickets for the April 14 Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame are \$10 each and include a barbecue meal catered by Town and Country at 6:30 in the KMHS cafeteria, and the induction ceremony that follows in B.N. Barnes Auditorium. Tickets are available at McGinnis Department Store, Carolina State Bank, and the Kings Mountain Herald.



Carl Champion, right, and New York Yankee connections. Left to right, Clete Boyer, former Yankee manager Buck Showalter, Frank Howard and Tony Cloninger.



Carl Champion, left, was a close friend to the late New York Yankee great, Mickey Mantle.