

## Time may be running out on getting Shoeless Joe Jackson in Hall of Fame

By GARY STEWART  
Editor of The Herald

In the American judicial system, one is considered innocent until he's proven guilty.

In the world of major league baseball, he's presumed guilty until proven innocent. And, sometimes, guilty even after he's been proven innocent.

Young people today have probably never heard of a superstar baseball player from Greenville, SC named Shoeless Joe Jackson.

Jackson got his nickname one day in semi-pro ball when a new pair of spikes wore blisters on his feet. He took them off and played barefoot and a fan in the stands hollered out, "look at that shoeless son of a gun." It has also been said that when he first started playing baseball Jackson played barefoot. He came in from the outfield one day and told the manager "there's a lot of broken glass out there." The manager asked, "is it cutting your feet?" and Joe said, "no, but it's roughing up the ball."

Jackson went on to phenomenal success in the major leagues, both with the Cleveland Indians

and Chicago White Sox. But, like Pete Rose, of more recent years he may never take his rightful place in the Hall of Fame.

Most true baseball fans consider that a shame. Rev. Russell Fitts, former pastor of Kings Mountain's Bethlehem Baptist Church and a one-time next door neighbor of Jackson in Greenville, SC, is one of them.

Jackson, whose lifetime batting average of .356 is the third highest in baseball history, and seven of his teammates from the 1919 Chicago White Sox team were banned from baseball for allegedly throwing the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds.

While it is obvious some of the players may have conspired with gamblers to throw the Series, what is so puzzling to Fitts and other baseball fans is that it was proven that Jackson never took any money and never even talked to any of the gamblers in the famed Black Sox Scandal. New Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis, who was also a judge, banned him solely because he felt that Jackson knew of the fix and didn't report it to

his team's owner. The ban meant Jackson could never be associated in any way with professional baseball again.

The trial prompted a young, diehard White Sox fan with tears in his eyes to utter the now famous words "Say it ain't so, Joe" as Jackson was leaving the courtroom. The issue led to several books and movies, including "Eight Men Out" and "Field of Dreams," and even today numerous Internet sites are devoted to having Shoeless Joe reinstated to baseball.

Rev. Fitts was a young ministerial student at Furman University when he met Shoeless Joe and his wife, Ruth, in 1949. Fitts and his wife, Mary, rented a room in a boarding house. The Jacksons lived next door and shared the same driveway.

Joe had been out of the majors almost 29 years at that time. He did play in some semi-pro and "outlaw" leagues under an assumed name for some 10 to 15 years after being banned in 1920.

They were the unlikely of friends - Russell a Baptist preacher and Joe a liquor store operator.

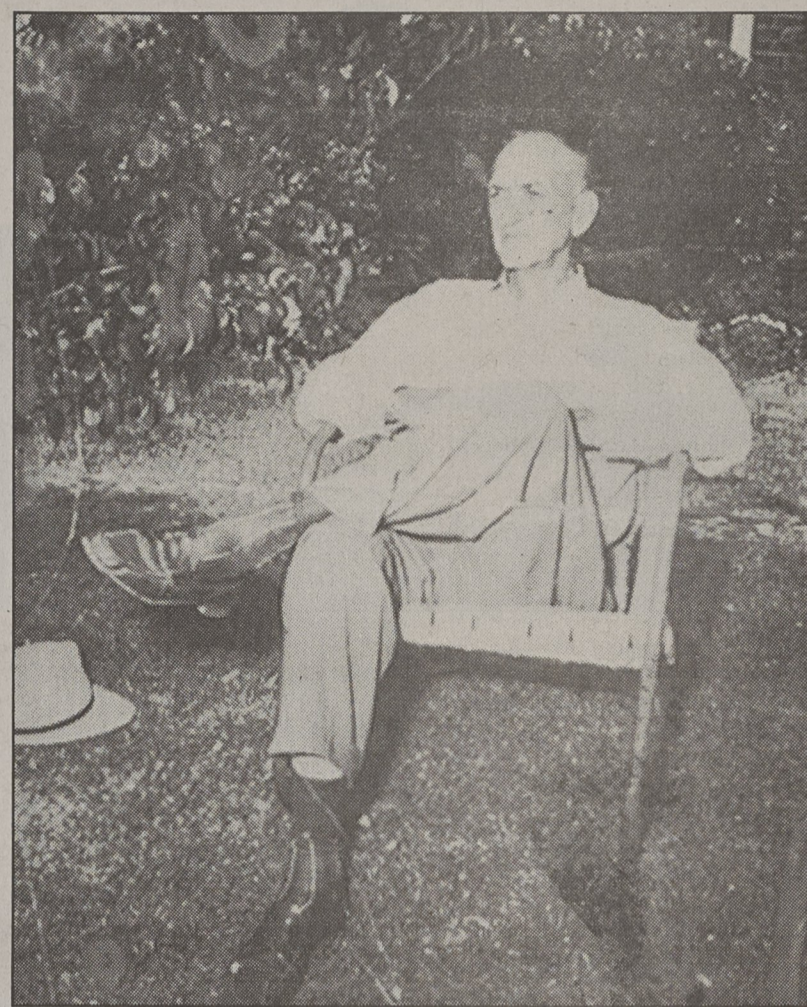
"I went in to see him one day at his work," Fitts recalled. "As I walked in the door he said, 'I don't make anybody come in here.' I said, 'I know, Joe, I didn't come here to argue I just came to see you at your work.'"

Jackson was not a professing Christian at the time, but he and his wife often accompanied Rev. and Mrs. Fitts to the small Rock Springs Baptist Church which Fitts served at Lake Lure. They'd also go to revivals together.

Jackson moved to Kentucky briefly before his death in 1951 at the age of 62. Fitts believes he accepted Jesus as his Savior by then. But, he also feels he went to his grave a bitter man because he never got over being banned from the game he loved.

"He didn't talk much about it, but he was bitter," he said. "He always maintained his innocence. I never did see any reflection of guilt, but I did see that bitterness because of the way he had been treated."

The two men got along well. "We had a lot of good fellowship," Fitts said. "But he was See Jackson 8A



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO  
Rev. Russell Fitts of Cleveland County snapped this picture of Shoeless Joe Jackson in the back yard of his home in Greenville, SC in 1949. Rev. Fitts supports Jackson's lifelong claim that he was unfairly banned from professional baseball after the famed Black Sox Scandal of 1919.

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Kings Mountain High's baseball team ended its season Monday night with a 5-4 loss to South Point in the opening round of the Southwestern 3A Conference tournament.

Tony Leigh's Mountaineers finished the year with a 3-9 conference and 8-15 overall record.

Devon Lowery hurled the win for the Red Raiders, his second victory in six days over the Mountaineers. He scattered five hits and struck out 14.

South Point grabbed a 2-0 lead in the third inning on an error and two singles, and got a three-run home run by Ian Gibson to go up 5-0 in the bottom of the sixth.

A double by Trent Hopper and a two-run home run by Tyler Falls put the Mountaineers on the board in the top of the seventh. After a single by Brad Goforth, Josh Patterson slammed a two-run homer over the right field wall to account for the final margin. Warren Shirey had the other KM hit.

In action last week, the Mountaineers fell to South Point 8-4 on Tuesday night and lost to regular season champion Burns 4-1 on Thursday night.

Lowery scattered seven hits and struck out 16 for the



GARY STEWART / THE HERALD  
Third baseman Brad Goforth fields a hot ground ball for Kings Mountain's Mountaineers in Southwestern 3A Conference baseball game at Lancaster Field.

Raiders Tuesday. Matt Bridges led the KM hitting with 3-for-4, Falls was 2-for-4, and Goforth and Ross Ellis had one hit each.

South Point grabbed a 3-0 lead after three innings but KM came back in the top of the fifth to cut the margin to 3-2 on a double by Bridges and a two-run double by Ellis.

With two out in the sixth, a KM error opened the gates for the Red Raiders and a three-run homer by Lowery highlighted a five-run rally which put the game out of reach, 8-2.

KM battled back in the top of the seventh as Bridges led off with his third hit of the game and Goforth followed with a two-run homer over the left field fence to account for the fi-

nal margin.

Burns' ace Jason Gold limited KM to four hits Thursday as the Bulldogs ended their regular season with a 11-1 conference and 18-1 overall mark with a 4-1 win.

KM's only hits were singles by Bridges, Hopper, Falls and Shirey. Three of them - by Bridges, Hopper and Falls - accounted for KM's only run in the sixth inning.

Even though they didn't have a winning record, Coach Tony Leigh said it was a rewarding season for his young players.

"These young guys probably faced everybody's number one pitcher all season long," he said. "This conference was probably as loaded with pitching as

we've ever seen and it seemed like every time we went out we saw everybody's ace.

"Most of our games were close. We battled them all the way."

The Mountaineers lose only three seniors off this team - Bridges, Falls and pitcher Derek Dixon, and will have a host of players returning next year for their third year as starters.

"Hopefully, the fact that we never gave up and always played hard will carry on for these young guys next year," Leigh said.

Leigh said he also appreciated the support of the players' parents, who backed the program and also provided meals for JV and varsity players.

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