

## Baseball star Jerry Morris to be inducted into Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame

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If it weren't for a scrapbook his mother kept from his baseball playing days, Jerry Morris would be hard-pressed to tell you any of the sensational statistics he compiled for Bethware High School and Kings Mountain American Legion Post 155.

He was too busy having fun.

From the time he first began playing as a little leaguer at Parkgrace in 1953 through one year at NC State University, Morris was recognized as a lefthand hitter with tremendous power and a solid catcher with an outstanding arm.

He is the only KM American Legion player to be selected All-State twice, and his career .388 batting average may also be unmatched.

But, he says, none of that would have been possible if his and other players' parents hadn't taken them to practice and games every day and brought them back home at night.

"They could have made us pick more cotton," he says.

Three of his four years at Bethware High School, Morris played on teams that won either the Cleveland County South Zone Championship or the overall County Championship.

In 1958-1960, he was the leading hitter for American Legion Post 155. In 1958 he led Area IV in hitting with a .417 average and in 1959 his .390 mark helped lead the KM team to the Area IV finals. In 1960 he hit .352 but the team's season ended abruptly when state legion officials claimed they never received the team's birth certificates and disqualified the team from the playoffs.

In 1959 - which is still

regarded by many as the best team KM's ever had in legion ball - the team almost didn't happen. Kings Mountain legion officials had decided not to field a team. But when Morris, Biddix and some other players showed up to play for Shelby, KM legionnaires changed their mind.

The team picked up some good players from Bessemer City, York and Clover and after a slow start tied Mt. Holly-Paw Creek for the regular season title. The two teams went the distance in the five-game series for the Area IV championship, with Mt. Holly taking the deciding fifth game.

"I don't remember specific details about games," Morris joked. "We just played hard and ate good. They fed us steaks that year. When we had losing years you got a pint of milk and a cold sandwich."

"Some of the best things I remember was so many good coaches that I had over the years," he said. "Playing ball was all fun. We didn't do it to try to show our talent. What little talent we had was God-given. The other boys worked just as hard as I did."

Morris recalls George Sellers and Jim Dickey at Parkgrace, Bill Powell at Bethware and Post 155, and Jake Early, Fred Withers, Don Parker and Bill Bates at Post 155 as good mentors.

He remembers Jake Early, a former major league catcher, setting a five-gallon bucket on second base and ringing it with a baseball from the catcher's crouch. Could Morris do it? "Almost," he laughed.

Morris and his good friend and neighbor, Bobby Biddix, were teammates from day one. "We were two peas in a pod," Morris says. "His daddy, Les Biddix, would take us to games and bring

us back home."

At Bethware, Morris said he was "always a step behind" the good athletes. Teammates like Biddix and Jerry Webster were a year older. Then, his senior year, Morris was the veteran. Most of his teammates like Tommy Barrett and Lawrence Bolin, were a year younger than him.

Morris played forward in basketball his first three years and was a good scorer and rebounder. His senior year, he was one of the biggest players on the team at 5-11 and played center. "That would be a small guard now," he laughed.

Morris developed his love of sports in the neighborhood. On Sundays, all of the kids would gather to play baseball at his father Earl's scrap metal yard on Shelby Road. They hit the ball toward Highway 74, but in the early fifties traffic wasn't usually a problem.

Parkgrace was his first taste of "organized" baseball. He and Biddix led the 1953 team to the city championship, with Jerry leading the way in batting with a .714 average and Biddix leading the mound crew.

"I'll never forget that little rocky field down there," he said.

Hitting on the Cleveland County high school fields at that time was a dream come true for sluggers like Morris. None of them had fences. "If you knocked the ball over the outfielders' head it would just keep rolling and you'd get a home run," he said.

City Stadium was a challenge for young hitters, especially lefthanders who had to really get hold of the ball to send it over the long right or right-centerfield fence. Righthand hitters had to clear a high leftfield bank

and road to hit one into the Mountain Rest Cemetery. Hitting a home run to dead centerfield was out of the question. The ball had to travel about 500 feet to clear the huge scoreboard and fence.

"I had to go to the post office one day and I drove down to that little parking lot at the stadium and looked at it," Morris said. "It didn't look as big as it used to be."

During his senior year at Bethware Morris was given the opportunity to sign a pro contract. Coach Powell advised against it and encouraged him to go to NC State, where he played freshman ball one year before coming back home.

"I played in the East-West All-Star game and then went on to State," he recalled. "Back then you had a freshman team and a varsity team. When football was over the football players played baseball. Those were some big boys. Roman Gabriel was

See Morris, 2B



Above, Jerry Morris during his playing days with American Legion Post 155. Below, Morris, right, inducts Bobby Biddix into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame in 2004.



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