

Section **B**
Wednesday, March 16, 1988

People

TV LISTINGS

SPORTS

JAKE EARLY

Strong-Armed Catcher Made His Mark In Major League Baseball

(ED. NOTE - For the next four weeks, the Herald will feature one of the four men who will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Chamber of Commerce Sports Hall of Fame at its first annual banquet on Mon., Apr. 11 at 7 p.m. at the community center. Marty Schottenheimer, head coach of the Cleveland Browns, will be the guest speaker. Tickets are \$10 each and may be obtained from members of the Hall of Fame Committee.)

By GARY STEWART
Managing Editor

The story in the old 1941 Kings Mountain Herald said it all then, and still does today: "Anytime people in Kings Mountain gather to talk baseball, the name Jake Early is sure to come up."

Early then, and now, was a Kings Mountain sports legend. His defensive catching abilities and throwing arm drew praise all the way from his small hometown to the major leagues with such notables as Connie Mack and Clark Griffith calling him the "best throwing catcher in the major leagues."

Early, now deceased, will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame at its inaugural banquet on Mon., Apr. 11 at 7 p.m. at the Community Center. He will be joined by two other pro athletes-football star Kevin Mack of the Cleveland Browns and former San Diego pro basketballer George Adams-and baseball promoter John Henry Moss.

Early was a baseball and football star at Kings Mountain High School in the early 1930's. He was billed by the Kings Mountain Herald as the best quarterback in the Western 2-A Conference in 1934 when the Mountaineers started the season with three wins in their first four games but slumped to 4-4 on the season after many players were hit with injuries. Early scored all 13 of Kings Mountain's points in a 13-6 win over county rival Shelby. He tallied on a 10-yard run and ran for the extra point for a 7-0 first half lead, and then returned the second half kickoff 80 yards for a touchdown.

Some of the other members of that team were All-Conference end Ray Barber, center Jack Fortune, end Mickey Mode, guards Johnny Elam and Boone McDaniel, halfbacks Tommy Reynolds and Chubby Leonard, tackle "Race Horse" Plonk, Paul Neisler and Pete Hullender.

Although Early was good in football, he excelled in baseball. He was most noted as a catcher, but because he had such a great throwing arm he was often called upon to pitch when other pitchers got into trouble. Early was the winning pitcher in a 9-5 victory over Cherryville in the spring of 1935 which earned KMHS its first-ever Western Conference championship.

Other members of that championship baseball club, which was coached by W.J. Fulkerson, were Tommie Reynolds, J.D. Hullender, Luther Morrison, Clyde McSwain, Leslie Mode, Gene Leonard, Theodore Thornburg, Oscar White, J.R. Bridges, James White, Eugene Goforth, Henry Ford and Marvin Foster. Three of the players-Early, Goforth and McSwain-went on to play pro ball.

James White, who was older than Early, had fond memories of that team and of Early.

"Jake was a real good ballplayer and gave a hundred percent all of the time," White said. "He was a good catcher and a lot of times he would go into pitch. And he could knock the hide off the ball."

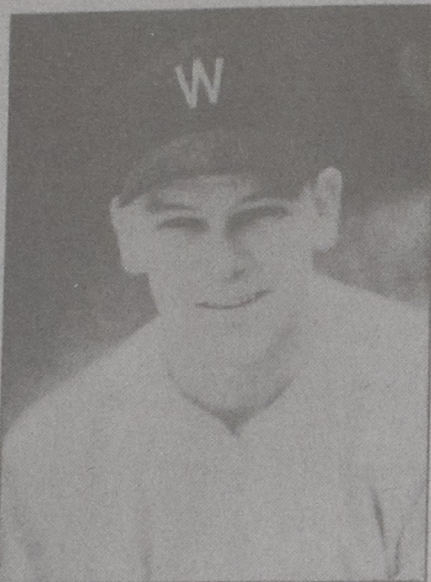
"He was an all out ballplayer who had a lot of fun with the game," White said. "He loved to joke with the umpires."

"We had a lefthand pitcher named J.D. Hullender who couldn't break a window glass," recalled White. "He threw the ball so slow and easy, but he could fool batters pretty good. He'd go out and could go four or five innings before the batters caught on to his slow ball. Then they'd take him out and put Jake in for an inning or two and they couldn't hit his fast ball after trying to hit a slow ball."

Early passed up his final year of high school to sign a pro contract with the Washington Senators in 1936. He was assigned briefly to the Chattanooga Lookouts and then was sent to Jacksonville of the Sally League, where he hit .303 for the season.

Early was remembered as an excellent hitter in high school but his hitting never drew great raves in pro ball. His best season was in 1936 when he hit .317 with the Charlotte Hornets of the Piedmont League and played with several others who later made the majors, including Hall of Fame pitcher Early Wynn.

Early's lifetime batting average in the major leagues was .241 in 747 games, not comparable with some of the greats of his



JAKE EARLY
...KM's Big Leaguer

day such as Bill Dickey and Ted Williams, but a mark that would qualify him as a superstar by today's standards.

Early was called up to the big leagues in 1939 as a backup to the Senators' aging catcher Rick Ferrell. Ferrell was traded in 1941 and Early became the Senators' number one catcher. He caught 104 games in 1941 and again in 1942.

Early's career hit its peak in 1943 when he caught 126 games and caught the entire Major League All-Star Game in Philadelphia. He hit .258 that year.

Early was called into the Army and missed the entire 1944 and '45 seasons. He played service ball at Fort Bragg with four other major leaguers, Van Lingle Mungo, a pitcher with the Dodgers; Ernie White of St. Louis, Cubs' catcher Mickey Livingston and Norm Brown of the Philadelphia A's.

He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and the combat of World War II weakened his legs considerably. He returned to the Senators in 1946 but never again regained his old form. He was traded to the St. Louis Browns in 1947 and sold back to Washington in 1948. He completed his major league career in '49 and moved back to Kings Mountain, where he played and managed in several minor league cities.

Early was said to have the best throwing arm in the major leagues during his prime. Prior to joining the Senators in 1939 he was billed as the "Next Bill Dickey" and Early later said in a newspaper article that the Yankee great often gave him advice between innings of Yankee-Senators games.

Early was interviewed by Charlotte News writer Ralph Palmer during 1939 spring training about his catching abilities and excellent throwing arm.

"I'm a pitcher by rights," Early told the writer. "I pitched my high school team into the conference championship. But when the other fellows were scared to stand back of the plate, I sorta became a catcher."

Early's arm drew praise from Hall of Fame great Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox, who noted in his autobiography "My Turn At Bat" that his most embarrassing moment in baseball came when he was picked off third base by Early to end a game in which the Red Sox were trailing the Senators by just one run.

David Hughes of Kings Mountain, who pitched American Legion baseball for Early here in the mid-fifties, said Early had the natural knack of being able to pick runners off base without even moving from his natural catching position. "You could have a runner on first and third, and without even moving from his catching position, he could look at the runner on third and throw to first and pick the man off," Hughes said.

In addition to having the best throwing arm in baseball, Early was also noted as the best catcher of the knuckleball, which during that time was as controversial as the spitter is today. The Senators' Dutch Leonard was one of the game's best knuckleball pitchers and Early had no trouble at all catching him.

Although baseball was his living, it was always a game for Early. The fun he had as a high school player in Kings Mountain remained throughout his career.

Major leaguers referred to Early as a "chatterbox" who always talked to batters and joked with umpires. Early once caused Ted Williams to drop his bat and hold his sides with laughter when he went into a tobacco auctioneer's routine that included a rendition of "Turkey In The Straw."

It was said that Early's favorite target was Browns' first baseman George McQuinn. Early would go into a radio play-by-play routine when McQuinn stepped into the batter's box. "Here it comes, and it's a high



WASHINGTON BATTERY
...Honey Boy Haynes, left,
Catcher Jake Early

fastball and McQuinn takes it." Early would say. And McQuinn would usually take it. "Now the pitch, and it's down the middle and McQuinn takes it with his bat on his shoulder." McQuinn would usually not swing.

Anytime the Washington pitcher got two strikes on McQuinn, Early would call for a sweeping curve and shout "And McQuinn swings and misses" as the ball was released. And McQuinn, strangely, would usually strike out.

After becoming a regular catcher, a writer once asked Early why he had improved so much behind the plate. Early attributed part of it to playing experience and the pitchers' confidence in his abilities, and then quipped, "You know, if you call for a fast ball and the guy knocks it out of the lot, you remember the next time he comes up not to give him that same pitch."

Even after retiring from the majors Early continued in baseball for most of the remaining years of his life. He coached, managed and played at many area minor league cities, including Gastonia, Charlotte, Statesville and Rock Hill, S.C., for many years and ran the summer recreation program for the city of Kings Mountain. He left Kings Mountain in 1965 and moved to Melbourne, Fla., where he worked in major league training camps until he retired in 1970. He died in Melbourne in 1983 at the age of 70.

HIGHLIGHTS OF JAKE EARLY'S CAREER

1935 - Led KMHS baseball team to its first-ever Western Conference championship. Was winning pitcher in 9-5 win over Cherryville in championship game.

1936 - Signed pro contract with Washington Senators. Hit .303 with Jacksonville of the Sally League.

1937 - Played with Chattanooga Lookouts and Charlotte Hornets.

1938 - Had his best hitting year, batting .317 with the Charlotte Hornets.

1939 - Called up to the Senators where he was backup catcher to veteran Rick Ferrell in '39 and '40.

1941 - Ferrell was traded and Early became Senators' number one catcher. He caught 104 games in '41 and again in '42.

1943 - Early's major league career hit its peak. He caught 126 games, compiled a .258 batting average and caught the entire Major League All-Star game in Philadelphia.

1944-45 - Early served in the Armed Forces and played service ball. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

1946 - Early returned to the Senators and hit .291 in 64 games.

1947 - Traded to the St. Louis Browns and hit .221.

1948 - Sold back to the Senators. Completed his major league career in 1949 and returned to Kings Mountain



EARLY TAKES CUT AT OLD KINGS MOUNTAIN BALLPARK



JAKE ALWAYS GAVE 100 PERCENT...GOES TO AIR AFTER A SLIDING BOSTON RED SOX

March 16, 1988

BRINKLEY FINANCIAL GROUP

CREATING INVESTMENT OPTIONS

www.BrinkleyFinancialGroup.com

Charlotte Office
704.423.9690
2815 Colisum Centre Dr., Suite 100
Charlotte, NC 28217

Kings Mountain Office
704.739.5185
1419 Shelby Rd.
Kings Mountain, NC 28086

Registered Representative Securities offered through Cambridge Investment Research, Inc., a Broker/Dealer, Member FINRA/SIPC Investment Advisor Representative Cambridge Investment Research Advisors, Inc., a Registered Investment Advisor Cambridge and Brinkley Financial Group are not affiliated.