

Don Leslie - HoF - 1997

DON LESLIE - - - HALL OF FAME - 1997

The year 1955 was a banner one for DON LESLIE and sports played a big role in his young life that year. He graduated from San Diego High School (California), where his nickname was “Casper” (the ghost) due to his being one of the few white kids in his downtown school. Young Leslie was All-City in both baseball and basketball. That year also marked his introduction to the sport of fast pitch softball. Like so many young men of that era, Don’s first experiences in this sport which he was to dominate, came in the City Church League. It was in that league that he teamed up with the legendary K.G. Fincher who was also making his debut in fast pitch. Their church was Mormon, and they were required to attend somewhat regularly to be eligible - - “We (K.G. and Don) went on Wednesday night because that’s when the girls were there.” Altogether Don Leslie and Fincher were teammates for seven seasons during their outstanding careers.

After three seasons, Don graduated to the San Diego City Major fast pitch league. Then it was into the Western Softball Congress in 1960 which culminated in the first of his 13 trips to the International Softball Congress World Tournaments with the Escondido Dolphins who finished in third place in the event. His bio notes that in all but two of those many seasons, Don batted in the leadoff spot for his tournament teams.

Then it was into the U.S. Army where he was a player/manager for his team which captured the European championships in both 1961 and 1962. He also notched a victory as he was chosen as “Most Outstanding Trainee” during his time in basic training.

Following that stint, it was back to California and the Western Softball Congress and into the headlines in a major way. The 1963 season saw Leslie at third base for the ISC World Champion Gardena, Calif., Merchants. This was also the first of two seasons in his brilliant career that saw Don Leslie selected to the ISC All – World Tourney team. That season, as well as the season of 1964, saw Leslie’s team winning the always-tough Western Softball Congress title and Leslie making the league’s all-star team.

Then it was into the Midwest and Rock Island, Illinois, where he was the batting champion of the Rock Island Metro League in 1965. At that time the Rock Island league was loaded with pitching - - as no less than SEVEN of the top 12-ranked hurlers in the U.S. were on the mound!

Having come to Rock Island to play fast pitch, Leslie needed a job and a career. Passing the fire fighter exam in 1965, he became a member of the Rock Island Fire Department. This led to a career of more than 20 years, nine years as Chief of the department.

In 1967, Don's Harrelson Motors team, of Moline, Illinois, captured the I.S.C. World title. Playing in every I.S.C. World Tournament from 1963 through 1974, Don Leslie was again selected to the All-World Tourney team, this time as a second-baseman in 1970 while playing with Bob Neal Ford of Rock Island, Illinois. Along the way, Don played on 10 state championship teams between 1960 and 1974, three in California and seven in Illinois.

Following his tenure as Fire Chief at Rock Island, upon his return to his native California, he became Fire Chief at Borrego Springs, Calif., and later at Deer Spring, Calif.

Additional playing awards included playing for the Pan-American tourney championship team in 1963; being selected to the Midwest fastpitch league All-Star team in 1972, and capturing not only the team title but also being chosen "outstanding hitter" and "outstanding fielder" in the 1971 Maroa, Ill. July 4th invitational.

Achievements in A.S.A competition included playing for an Aurora, Ill. team which captured the 1975 West-central regional title and finished second in that year's A.S.A. nationals.

He even found time for a bit of slow-pitch softball participating in Senior Softball USA from 1989 through 2007.

During his career as a fire-fighter, Don was one of just 12 fire chiefs selected for the first National Fire Chief course.

Pressed to name the best pitchers he faced during his career he named Ty Stofflet as the top lefty and K.G. Fincher, Richie Stevens, and Dick Brubaker as the toughest righthanders.

Now residing in San Jacinto, California, Don remains super active, having built a softball field in 2002 for his church. Since that time he continues to maintain that softball field while running a co-ed slow-pitch league and umpiring over 100 games each season.

Don and his wife of 22 years, Jenice, have three children between them and five grandchildren. He was known throughout his career as a "fierce competitor". Rock Island h.s. coaching legend, Glenn Cook, describes him as "fierce" and as a "hard-nosed athlete who was always warm and friendly OFF the field".

Leslie is quick to note the benefits along the way. "The thing I enjoyed most during my fast pitch career was the comradeship with the players, competing with and against the best players in the

world and most of all the CHALLENGE of not taking my bat back to the dugout when hitting against all of those great pitchers.”

And one of those great pitchers is K.G. Fincher, who Leslie cites among those who helped him, “I want to thank K.G. Fincher, my best friend, and one of the best right-handed pitchers ever, for helping to create all of the wonderful things that happened to me while playing in the ISC and being inducted into the ISC Hall of Fame in 1997”

And Don Leslie recognizes another benefactor, “I thank my Lord Jesus Christ for blessing me with all of the tools that made me the fierce competitor that I was.”

The Hall of Famer is grateful to the I.S.C. as he proclaims: “I would like to thank the ISC for providing the atmosphere and the opportunity for a young boy who learned how to hit a ball by having someone try and throw a tennis ball by him while trying to hit it with a broom stick!”

A fierce competitor with a legion of friends, a lifetime of memories, and enough awards, trophies, and accolades to pack a barn - - that is DON LESLIE, infielder and hitter par excellence, and a member of the ISC Hall of Fame.

By Gordon Wise