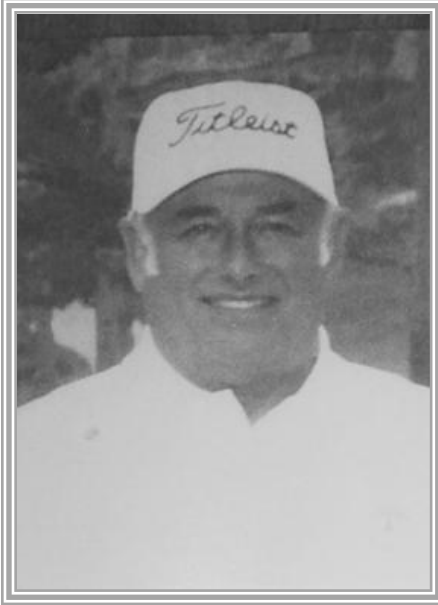


Joe Avila - HoF - 2010

Joe Avila, Hanford's Hall of Famer - By Josh Butters jbutters@HanfordSentinel.com



Joe Avila has a life full of fond memories from a sport that he always found time for.

He worked full-time, went to school full-time and later coached football at Hanford High while having success at a world-class level in fast-pitch softball.

While the best major league pitchers can throw about 95 miles an hour to a batter that is about 60 feet, Avila had success hitting pitches at the same speed from about 15 feet closer, which heavily cuts down on a player's time to react.

Not only did he have less time, he also would see riseballs, which don't happen in baseball.

Avila, a Hanford resident and Laton High grad who owns his own business selling insurance, will be inducted next weekend into the International Softball Congress' Hall of Fame before this year's world tournament in Midland, Michigan.

This year's inductees will be introduced at the opening ceremonies Aug. 14 before being inducted into its Hall of Fame during a breakfast ceremony Aug. 15.

Though the tournament isn't what it once was, Avila is looking forward to seeing the tournament again.

"It had a lot of class to it," Avila said. "They had broadcasters. The media would do and do interviews."

Before owning a television was widespread and youths in Hanford were able to participate in Little League, fast-pitch softball caught the eyes and attention of the area. Hanford was home to the 1949 world champion Hanford Kings and a look through the ISC's guide shows world champs from Fresno, Dinuba, Hanford and Taft.

Avila played on a revival of the Kings in the 60s and remembers crowds of more than 3,000 coming to see the Kings play, with people paying 50 cents each to watch. "There was no competition back in those days," Avila said. "Everybody would come out to watch us."

He was spotted out of high school after being seen by the school's bus driver and a custodian to play for the Armona Merchants in 1961 by Butch Cardoza. The team played in the Hanford Open Division then the Valley Travel League starting in 1964.

Avila played games every night after work, sometimes more than one in a day with games in different towns. They'd play a game in Dinuba or Hanford then drive to Fresno to play another game the same night.

"When you get good at something," Avila said. "You keep playing and find time for it."

From there, he played on multiple teams throughout the years, including the California Condors, the Dinuba Condors, the Clovis Cowboys, Sal's Winchells and R.K.T and had successful stints at the world stage. Avila was a part of teams that were ranked No. 1 in the world and played in the world tournament championship.

During one four-year span, Avila played on teams that finished 7th, 2nd, 3rd and 5th. In 1973, Avila's team had won every tournament it entered and went into the world championships 88-0, winning its way through the double elimination bracket without a loss. In the finals, his Cowboys led 2-1 in the fifth inning and were just two innings away from the tournament championship.

A line drive went off their pitcher Herman Duinkerken's ankle and he was taken out after he had pitched the entire tournament. Backup Ralph Salazar had dropped a 50-pound sledgehammer on one of his toes and told by his doctor to not even go to the tournament. After he warmed up, Avila noticed blood coming out of his shoe from the toe.

"I asked him if he was OK and he told me to give him the ball," Avila said. "He was about 6-4 and 280 pounds so I gave him the ball."

The Lakewood Jets scored a run then went to win the game in the 13th inning to give the Cowboys their first loss. After a 30-minute break between games, the Jets won the final game to win the title.

"He just didn't have it that day," Avila said. "We gave it our all."

But even with the narrow defeat, Avila can recall stories of a sport that diminished over the years.

He's one of just a few players to ever record four hits a single ISC world tournament game and was a two-time all-American.

The year his Cowboys played in the championship game against the Jets, Avila was the varsity head football coach at Hanford and missed the first weekend of the tournament because of two-a-day practices.

"I told them if they were still in it after the first weekend, I'd fly back for the tournament," Avila said. "They kept winning so I had a ticket waiting for me at the Fresno airport."

If it wasn't for an at-bat minimum, Avila thinks he would have made all-American that year with what he did once he got there. He scored one of his team's two runs in his first game of the tournament against a team from Las Vegas after leading off with a bunt single. The next night, he scored two of the teams runs in a 4-0 victory.

Avila hung it up in 1978 after breaking his ankle, which forced him to wear a cast that went almost all the way up to his hip. After that, any running made it a good chance for Avila to pull his hamstring.

When Avila participated, about 64 teams would participate in the tournament's open division. There were teams from every state and multiple from California. Some leagues in California were so tough, Avila recalls, that some Southern California leagues got an automatic bid to go along to bids for the Southern California, Northern California and state champions.

He remembers a former player that had spent 10 years playing for the New York Yankees being recruited to play for a local softball team after he retired. That player quit halfway through the second game of a doubleheader because he had struck out every at bat and didn't want to be embarrassed any longer.

Now with youth baseball leagues more prevalent, players don't get fundamentals of softball pitching that made hitting so tough in Avila's playing time. And there's less interest. While the Valley Travel League had multiple teams that won world titles, now there isn't a single league in the state of California. And there's just one team playing. They don't have a hometown. It's an all-star team that goes to tournaments around the country to prepare. Now Avila sees that pitchers get away with things that pitchers could do in the 1960s or 70s like swing back or take a foot off the rubber. Even with those advantages, pitching isn't as dominant.

"They still get rocked," Avila said. "If our pitchers were able to do that kind of stuff, they'd strike every batter out."

A quick runner, Avila started making his mark after being told to start hitting left-handed instead of his normal right.

"I found out which was my dominant eye," Avila said. "I could always see the way the ball would spin. If I knew it was a riser, I'd swing a ball width above where it was. If it was a diver, I'd do it a ball lower."

At Laton High, he set a state record in his division in the 440-yard dash and still holds records at Reedley College.

In baseball, he still holds the Tigers' single season stolen base record and the football team's record for most receptions in a single game (18). He had a coach bet a case on beer that they had a lineman (Avila) that could outrun any of the running backs.

Hitting lefty also got him to first base quicker, having a shorter length to run. "In softball, it's an even bigger advantage than baseball," Avila said. "If a ball bounced twice, I was safe."

Though the glory of fast-pitch softball is past, Avila's last goal in the sport is to try and get more of his former teammates that deserve recognition into the Hall of Fame. They're guys, Avila said, that were there before him and some that were at the same time in the valley.

"This area had a lot of great softball teams," Avila said. "I can't tell you how many great memories I have of it."