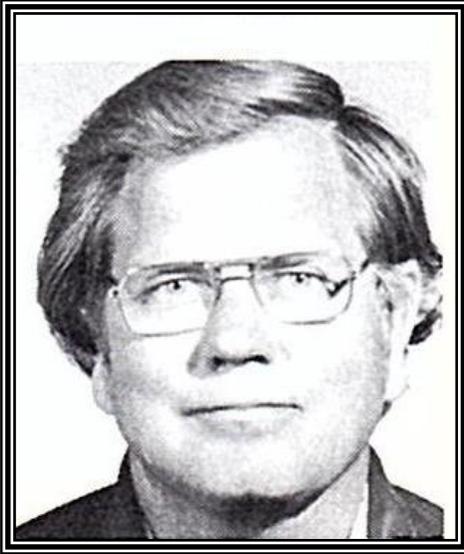


Karl Nielson - HoF - 1978

KARL NIELSON - - - From the Gridiron to the Diamond

By: Gordon L. Wise - - ISC Information Officer



The Irish have an old and wise saying, "It's an ill wind that doesn't blow somebody some good."

The "ill wind" that robbed KARL NIELSON of his football season in his senior year in high school resulted in the Mesa, Arizona, athlete shifting his interest to fastpitch - - - and a star-studded career was born.

That career led Nielson to the pinnacle of an ISC career, to a run as President of the ISC, and ultimately to a spot in the International Softball Congress Hall of Fame.

But let Karl Nielson himself tell of that fateful "ill wind":

"I enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1943 when I was just 15. Of course I lied about my age; my mother signed the papers attesting that I was really 17. I spent most of the next three years aboard the U.S.S. California in the South Pacific. We participated in seven invasions including

Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Leyte, Luzon, and Formosa. When I was discharged in 1946, I returned to Mesa and to my junior year in high school."

"It was great being back in school - - and playing football. I had a great season and was selected to the Arizona All-State team as an end. I was really looking forward to my senior year. I was promised that I could switch from end to running back."

"I had three teammates who had also gone into the service very early and, like myself, they were so eager for a great senior season on the gridiron."

But then the "ill wind" began to blow!!!

"Then before our senior year began, the coaches' association lowered the maximum age for athletic participation from 19 to 18 - - - and, just like that, we were forbidden from playing in our senior season!"

What to do? Where to turn for involvement in high level sports activity? Young Mr. Karl Nielson, meet fastpitch softball!!!! And he did!

His first fastpitch experience came during the 1946 season when he played for Worth's Sporting Goods in the men's major league in Phoenix. His play, including his pitching ability, brought him to the attention of the powerhouse Fike Plumbers team, which picked him up in 1947. He later played with another power team, Sharver Brothers Tillage. Playing on these strong teams, Nielson played second base and outfield and pitched as needed while backing up the legendary hurler Kenny Law. He was exposed to top level fastpitch competition, and he met Carrol Forbes! Such a meeting has changed the lives of many athletes and triggered a close relationship with the I.S.C. Such was the case with Karl Nielson, who describes Carrol Forbes as "the backbone of the sport and the I.S.C." He also began a diamond relationship with other I.S.C. pioneers.

"On those fine teams, I played with three other future I.S.C. Hall of Famers. They were pitcher Kenny Law; catcher Eddie "Spotts" Willis, and outfielder Joe Bob Neely."

Nielson went on to play in a combined total of 18 ISC World Tournaments/ASA National Tournaments. Included in that run was a spot on the Schaefer-Smith Insurance team which won the I.S.C. World Championship in 1970 in Kerman, California. From the time of his discharge from the Navy in 1946, Nielson played fastpitch for nearly 40 years, pitching his final game at the age of 55 in Prescott, Arizona.

Following the retirement of "Spotts" Willis, Carrol Forbes appointed Karl Nielson as an I.S.C. Area Commissioner, a position he held for 15 years. He was elected President of the International Softball Congress and served for three years in that position. He is proud of the fact that, "During that time I was able to expose the I.S.C. to the public broadcasting network and I got to do color commentary on those broadcasts."

Karl Nielson was inducted into the I.S.C. Hall of Fame in the Administrator category in 1978.

Reflecting on that Hall of Fame membership, Nielson points out, "Being inducted into the Hall of Fame is one of the true highlights of my life. I have also enjoyed seeing others from

my home state of Arizona inducted into the Hall, namely Jerry Wells, Gil Aragon, and Frank Trejo."

Looking back over his long association with the International Softball Congress, Nielson observed, "I have had a wonderful time working with men like Carrol Forbes, Milt Stark, Royce Heath, Tulie Stansel, Frank Porth, Stu Zink, Bill Snow, and Don Sarno just to name a few. I had the privilege of playing the game at a time when it was at its peak. I was blessed by getting to know so many fine people who became very important in my life".

Milt Stark, Executive Director Emeritus of the ISC, had nothing but praise for Nielson. In a recent interview, Stark described Nielson as "One of the most visionary presidents the ISC has had, especially in those early years --- he had many good ideas, but he was unable to implement some of them because of Carrol's (Forbes) firm hand. But he never quit trying, and some of his progressive ideas actually came to fruition. He was a leader in the move to enlarge the tournament from the 20-plus teams in the 60's and 70's to the eventual 48-team World Tournament. Karl played a major role in enticing the first elite ASA team to participate in the ISC World Tournament, that being the Aurora (IL) Sealmasters in 1980."

From his vantage point of over 50 years serving the ISC, Royce Heath has fond memories of his association with Karl Nielson, "I remember Karl as being so enthusiastic about fastpitch in all of his roles with the ISC. His work in helping to bring fastpitch to Arizona was a big step forward for the organization. He was always a great pleasure - - those were indeed the 'good old days'"

Nielson is also lavish in his praise of the sport of fastpitch, saying, "Fastpitch is a great part of my life. It was through the sport that I met my wife of 54 years. She has supported me 100% and we just about raised our seven children in a ballpark!"

Surely the football gridiron's loss was a marvelous gain for fastpitch softball and for the International Softball Congress. That "ill wind" was surely 'at his back' as Karl Nielson carved out some outstanding times in his chosen sport.