

Kevin Herlihy - HoF - 1993

Kevin Herlihy, master of the game. A tribute from Trevor Rowse.

Kevin Herlihy changed the history of softball, much as Brian Wareham (Auckland) had done in the 1950s and Bill Massey (Hutt Valley) in the 1960s.

Kevin went even further, winning gold medals in the world championships of 1976 and 1984 and US national titles, like his pitching colleagues Michael White and Owen "The Fog" Walford.

The big man was special. He could have won earlier world titles if New Zealand had developed the batting as it had the fielding. Leading the pitching statistics meant nothing with the team scoreless.

National softball history was also changed when Kevins witched from the champion Miramar and Wellington sides to Waikato. Hutt Valley and Railways had totally dominated the domestic game for eight years when Massey was the champion.

Miramar and Wellington would have had an even longer reign and the game would have suffered. There were national titles for Cambridge and Waikato, but neither side could match the brilliance of their pitcher. At some times there was not even a catcher who could cope with the speed and control.

If he had been in Wellington the domination would have left even Hutt Valley in the cold.

At one stage in the Waikato, a top player suffered injuries when catching to Kevin, even when he was told where the ball would be delivered. It is not easy, or natural, to hold your glove by your knees when the ball is moving right at your throat. It took the ever-reliable Barry Bone to keep his nerve and learn the job, but the years without someone like his Miramar catcher Peter Priddey were not so productive.

Players would return from the nationals with tales of woe, but "I got a hit off Kevin Herlihy" was a common cry. It was a badge of honour, even if it was sometimes a matter of the ball hitting the bat.

Kevin loved the gruff US catchers, capable of telling him what to do. Most of his career in

New Zealand saw him making the calls.

"If batters concentrated on the first and second strikes as much as they do the third, my life would be much harder," Kevin said. "Only a few manage it, but the US players are always dangerous."

He was a droll comedian, a slow mover going on the diamond, and coming off, but once there something transformed him. The batter became the adversary and he played his games of control, rising and dropping pitches, swerving the ball near the bat and out again, varying pace and pitching action. It was all designed to un-nerve even the noted hitters.

But there was no derision, no boasting, no hint of "gotcha" in his play. He respected the game and those who were playing.

One of his complaints, and there were few, was that others were given credit for good works, hospital visiting and school talks, but he did not. It was not his style to call the television station, or even the radio. He also knew that if he had done the same feats for the AllBlacks or the cricket team that he would have been a hero.

I was pleased when he told me that my articles about him had given him the greatest pleasure, even though we hardly ever talked. He pitched and I watched.

The credit and the applause came from softball people all over the world. They knew that they had seen a master craftsman in action, someone who worked harder and harder to be perfect. And, if they were batters, they mixed that with frustration.

Kevin Herlihy was a legend, a genius and a great competitor who did more than most to take New Zealand to the top of the softball world.

His name will live in New Zealand sporting annals as the Babe Ruth of our game.