

Milt Stark - HoF - 1981

Milt Stark Tribute - By: Antone Clark

Only a catcher would dare to follow a legend.



It takes one who has mastered the art of the game while wearing the tools of ignorance to dare to refine the work of those who have almost immortal status. Milt Stark has done just that.

Milt is retiring this year as executive director of the International Softball Congress and leaves a legacy in his 20 years of leadership that only one who has been a catcher would attempt to pull off.

Stark just happened to be the one who replaced ISC founder Carrol Forbes in 1982 and he managed the transition well enough to put his own stamp on the game that fuels his life. Still he sees his predecessor as "one of the wisest men I have ever known."

Stark never tried to be the next Carrol Forbes, he was just confident enough to be himself. "He (Carrol) was a very plain and gentle man with great native intelligence. He was a very good example of what the ISC Executive Director should be. I have been honored to have followed in his footsteps."

Born on an oil company lease in 1932 near Fellows, CA., Milt caught the fastpitch bug early in his life watching a team in his hometown of Taft that won the 1948 National Softball Congress (NSC) title; and he mixed the sport into his arsenal of activity and has never left it alone since.

Like many that recognize it for what it is--a lifestyle--Stark defines himself as much by the people he has played with and against as he does what he has done as an executive. He rattles off ISC Hall of Famers that he has caught like a mother does the names of her children. There is Les Haney from the Taft team he loved in his youth, there was Dutch Elbers who he caught for two seasons while in the service, then there were four other ISC Hall of Famers including Don Sarno, K.G. Fincher, Bob Todd and George Pearson and others who were named Outstanding Pitcher in ISC world tournaments including Art Bunge, and Ed Klecker. He also caught Bob Wills, the MVP in the 1972 ISC World Tournament.

"I consider Wills to be the best player from my era, mainly because of his great versatility. He pitched, he played the outfield and he could play first base. He was a lefthander who could bat leadoff or in the cleanup spot. He was a sprinter, played split end at Cal Berkeley and was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers; so you know he could run! I have to name four players from the 'modern' era. They are Bill 'Whip' Boyer, Tim Wahl, Michael White and Chad 'Corky' Corcoran - an outfielder, a catcher, a pitcher and an infielder. I would have paid major league baseball ticket prices to see any one of them play."

Stark retired as a player and manager in 1981 and then became executive director of the ISC the next year. He has been involved in softball administration for 38 years, 28 years with the ISC.

A resident of Anaheim Hills, Ca., Stark says the ISC has changed a lot under his watch. He points to a larger board of directors and a number of specialists on the management team that make a difference as well as a growing and budding youth program and player rep system. He also takes pride in the fact that ISC fastpitch has a greater presence across the border in Canada and that his personal goal of bringing the ISC championships to Canada has been a reality. Four ISC World Tournaments have been played in Canada, and a fifth will be held in Ontario's communities of Kitchener and Waterloo next year.

The growth of the ISC aside, after 20 years as Executive Director, Milt still has the heart of a player.

"As a player, I would like to be remembered as one who played with 100 percent effort at all times and as one who probably played beyond his physical ability simply through the determination to succeed and to win," Stark said. He notes that as a player he was not a great hitter, but became efficient anyway by making himself hard to strike

out. With two strikes he would always open his stance, choke up on the bat and hit the ball to the opposite field.

His greatest thrill as a player came in 1964 when he scored the winning run in the bottom of the ninth of the first final game of the ISC World Tournament in Rock Island, IL. It was his first series, and his team, the Downey (Ca.) Impalas, was in the losers' bracket and had to beat the Etiwanda Bombers twice to win the title. Stark led off the ninth and with two strikes on him choked up and blooped a single to right and then two outs later scored on a double by Bob Osborn to score the winning run. Downey then beat Etiwanda 3-2 in the final to win the ISC World Championship. He played in 10 more ISC World Tournaments, nine with the 10-time ISC World Champion Long Beach (Ca.) Nitehawks. During that run Long Beach won three world championships, and Stark was named to two ISC All-World teams.

His scientific approach to the game showed in the way he caught and managed. He made himself into a very good defensive catcher who made few errors and who would throw out a high percentage of potential base stealers. He insists his greatest value, however, was in knowing the strengths and weaknesses of opposing hitters and pitchers. Spoken like a true catcher.

"Catching is a tough position, because you have to be mentally in sync with your pitcher. If you're not, you'll hear about it. A catcher has to be, not only a very physical player, but mentally tough too. You have to earn the respect of your pitchers. That's the big thing. It's the biggest challenge on the field," Stark said. His approach to the game fits like a glove into his management style. He was relentless in pushing the ISC forward, sometimes pushing for things that others didn't espouse---like increasing the number of teams in the ISC World Tournament from 40 to 48.

Much of what he learned about the game he now plays a supervisory role in, he learned out of the school of hard knocks. As a baseball player at Whittier College---who did not give up playing fastpitch much to the chagrin of his coach---he learned about catching and strategy from Wallace "Chief" Newman. He said the baseball skills that Newman refined in him helped him become a better fastpitch player. Ironically Stark was recruited to play football at Whittier by former Washington Redskins Coach George Allen, but didn't play there for personal reasons.

In stepping down as only the second director of the ISC ever, Stark still insists it's clear what the game needs in the future. "I have said it before and I will say it again. The number one priority and major focus in our sport and within our organization should be on the development of young players by providing opportunities for them to play the game competitively. I also believe that we need to encourage more individuals who play the game to stay active after they can no longer play, whether it be in coaching, managing, umpiring, sponsoring, participating in clinics for young players or in administrative work. If one has found satisfaction in playing the game, he can find even more in putting effort back into the game."

Even in the midst of all of his work with fastpitch, Stark has managed to build a family life and career. A retired English teacher, he has four children and eight grandchildren. His middle son, Matt, was a first-round draft choice of the Toronto Blue Jays and the ninth player picked in the 1983 draft. He made it to the big leagues in 1987 but injured his arm and had to have rotator cuff surgery. He is still active in playing and managing in Mexico. His position? Catcher, of course.

When he is allowed to have hobbies other than softball, he and his wife Diana love to travel. They love Hawaii but have also been to Alaska, Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico and several other Caribbean islands and Europe. Milt is also an avid collector of fine wines, books, video and DVD movies and recorded music. He also views himself as an avid deep-sea fisherman and considers a 302-pound yellow fin tuna that he caught a few years ago as his proudest catch.

His catching mentality even shows in his personal life. He admits that his wife is the perfect match for him. She teaches computers and has been trying to teach him for several years. She loves to cook, keeps a beautifully decorated home as well as a "tip-top" garden.

"We want to travel more, and spend more time with our grandchildren," Stark says.