

Ray Unruh - HoF - 1998

A "Hall of Fame Biography" Series

RAY "JABO" UNRUH - - - Spanning

the Decades of Fastball

Endurance - - "The ability or strength to continue or last". This definition from the dictionary is an appropriate one to use in describing one Ray Unruh.

But to that definition must also be added terms like: "achieve"; "perform in an outstanding manner"; or just the simple word "STAR"

All of that describes Ray "Jabo" Unruh, a 1998 inductee into the International Softball Congress Hall of Fame, and an easy choice for the January, 2005 "Star of the I.S.C."

Well into his fifth decade of fastball, Ray Unruh remained competitive. Indeed his is a name respected for durability, stamina - - - and achievement. At the age of 66, he posted a .300 batting average and pitched his team to the championship of the Fastpitch League of Visalia, CA.

"And most of the players in the league were between the ages of 20 and 35," according to the veteran Unruh.

Nicknamed "Jabo" (after Ray Jablonski who played in the major leagues during his playing days) Unruh was a feared hitter during his long fastball career, which spanned the seasons of 1952 - 1996). Unruh recalls, "I was an aggressive player and I always tried to be competitive."

Durable is another word used to describe Unruh, as evidences by his long career. "I guess I was considered a power hitter who had very few strikeouts", he mused. The fact that for a brief time he held the ISC World Tournament record for most assists (1954) is an indication that he was more than just a power hitter.

Unruh played for the Dinuba (CA.) Condors as a member of three runner-up teams (International Softball League in 1954 and 1955 and International Softball Congress in 1958) in World Tournament competition. Selected to the All-World Tournament team in both 1954 and 1955, he tied with a teammate for the RBI title during the 1954 tournament.

"Jabo" Unruh also played for the Fresno, (CA) Rockbusters, the Clovis (CA) Cowboys, the Oxnard (CA) Bombers, Hoak Packers and Taft Merchants during his long career.

He was a member of thirteen state championship teams along the way and fondly recalls winning "the big prize - - the far West championships in Prescott, Arizona, where we won

consecutive titles and beat the champions, Gardena, with K.G. Fincher, in the championships.”

Unruh recalls a career highlight as being named the MVP in the 1958 California Area Tournament while lamenting that “In 1954 in the World Tournament, I lost the batting championship to Cleo Goyette by just one hit.”

The imposing 6’1” slugger was regarded as a quiet yet humorous player. His focus was on competition and his opponents were fearful when “Jabo” stepped to the plate. In recalling some of his teammates, he tags Les Harvey as a “natural comic”; recalls Brian Voigt as “throwing the best change-up in the game”; remembers Leroy Zimmerman as having “the best control I ever faced”; calls Bing Binston the “best comedian”; Joe Avila as “the best hitter I ever played with”; fondly remembers Herman Duinkerken as “a good friend whom I encouraged to get into world class fastpitch”; and tags Ralph Salazar as “one of the toughest pitchers I ever faced”.

Despite his durable and impressively long playing career, this talented player - - who played most positions but “mostly second base during world tournaments” - - was engaged in the sport at a level where emotions became a major part of his makeup.

Unruh recalls that, “I was emotional every time we won a game, but I remember being super emotional a couple of times during my career.” He notes those times as: “During the 1956 ISC World Tournament beating New Bedford and their pitcher Jim Boender 1 – 0 in a game where I drove in the only run” and “Losing 1 – 0 to the Long Beach Nitehawks in 1958 on a home run by Cleo Goyette in the final inning.

“I lived and breathed fastpitch during my career.” Unruh explains. When he was inducted into the ISC Hall of Fame in 1998, he described himself as “honored just to be nominated, and when I was chosen, I was overwhelmed to be in this select group - - because of my respect for the players who were previously selected to the Hall of Fame. It was a GREAT honor.”

He would like to be remembered as, “a player who gave 100 percent every game and as one who respected opposing players as well as my own teammates.”

“I would play every night if there was a game”, Unruh explained, “I just could not get enough.”

His achievements are impressive, but his love of the game and his ability to play it for so long, are the enduring marks of his storied fastball career. Unruh and his wife have lived in the foothills near Sangor, California, in Fresno County. True to his tenacious and durable playing career, the Unruhs have dry farmed 50 acres of hay and raise thoroughbred racing horses.

Endurance - - - stability - - - achievement - - - Ray “Jabo” Unruh!

By: Jeff Reich

Edited by Gordon Wise, ISC Information Officer