

Red" Meairs - HoF - 1988



His devotion is legendary. His commitment 100 percent. So claim his former players and friends who know him best. Drop the name "Red" or "Nitehawks" in Long Beach, California, and fastpitch softball old timers have instant recall.

However, mention one name without the other, and those knowledgeable old timers will likely scold such rudeness. In a career that spanned over 30 years, Irvin "Red" Meairs and the Long Beach Nitehawks men's fastpitch softball team were linked as one. Their marriage never faltering right up until the team folded in 1988.

Devotion. Red's strongest attribute, say Nitehawks players. "This was his team, his players, his family," said Bob Todd, a 15-year Nitehawks pitcher. "If you played for the Nitehawks you were part of Red and Connie's family. Red's devotion and love of the game and for the Nitehawk players was beyond that of anyone I ever knew."

Connie, "Red's greatest love," said Todd of Red's wife. "She worked as hard for the Hawks as anybody. She put in so many hours in the concession stand without complaining. Connie should be in the wife's Hall of Fame."

Irvin "Red" Meairs, of reddish hair and ruddy complexion, was born and raised in Long Beach. And outside of a 3-½ year hitch in the Navy, he never strayed far from his roots. He grew up on Belmont Street, just three blocks from his life-long Bennett Street home.

The only child of Dora and Irvin Meairs, Red was hooked on sports at an early age, largely due to the support of his parents, he said. Red attended Woodrow Wilson High School where he starred in baseball and basketball. And on game days his folks were in the stands. "My dad was a mechanic and owned his own shop," said Red. "He would close down the shop and he and my mother would come to the game. Dad wore dress clothes under his work clothes and he came to the games all dressed up to watch me play.

"As a 6-foot-2 forward / guard and a "pretty fair shooter," along with his range at shortstop, Long Beach City College came calling after his graduation from Woodrow Wilson in 1941.

His All-Southern California college baseball honors alerted the Los Angeles Dodgers and he signed for a \$500 bonus in 1943. "Big money in those days," Red said. But professional baseball was short lived. He returned home and hooked up with the Long Beach Rockets, a semi-pro baseball team.

A local Navy recruiter noticed Meairs in the Rockets' Sunday baseball games and convinced him to enlist. "A Navy recruiter recruited Bob Lemon (of major league baseball fame) and I to join up and play baseball and basketball at the Los Alamitos (Naval Station), said Red. "Lem and I grew up together.

I had it made in the Navy. All I did was play baseball and basketball. And he played with some of the best. "Johnny Mize, Marv Felderman, School Boy Rowe and Ted Williams," he said. It was Mize who gave Red his chewing tobacco habit. "I drank a lot of water and was always thirsty during games," Red said. "One day Mize told me to come to his locker. He gave me some Beach Nut chewing tobacco and said 'chew this and it will cut down on your water.' I never got thirsty after that," said Red.

After his Navy stint, Red returned to Long Beach and the Rockets. He continued to play baseball, with little thought of fastpitch softball until the Long Beach post office convinced him to play in the city league. He was soon hooked. The post office hired him full time, and he played softball during the week, and baseball and basketball on the weekends. "Three sports kept me going," said Red.

But when the post office asked him to join the bowling team, Connie balked. "I went all over with him (sports)," said Connie. "When he told me the post office wanted him to bowl, I said, 'if you do I'm leaving you. Three sports is enough.' "

His softball play soon caught the eye of Nitehawks' manager, Joe Rodgers. "He asked me to try out for the team," said Red. "I made it as a sub, that's how I got started." Little did Red envision how that start would end. "Those were fantastic times," he said. "Joe Rodgers was a

great guy, a real showman. He would get wild once in a while. One time he took an umpire's watch and threw it up in the stands. He was fiery and the fans loved him."

Admitting to not remembering dates and names, 79-year-old Red says his fastpitch softball career with the Nitehawks began around the early 1950s, as best he can remember. As a ball player Red's strength was his versatility, said Milt Stark, former Nitehawks catcher. "He was a valuable utility player as he could play all the infield positions," said Stark.

And that value was put to test in the 1958 ISC World Tournament. As the back up catcher for Stan White, Red was called into action when White was injured. He caught all the games, helping the team win the World Championship. "His greatest accomplishment as a player," said Stark. "The Nitehawks won the championship and Red was named to the ISC All-World team."

After his playing career, Red took over leadership of the team. That led to three more ISC World Championships (1968, 1971 and 1975), with the final title fondly remembered. "That one is special," said Red. "We weren't supposed to win it, but we did. We didn't play that good during the year, but we peaked at the right time."

Along with three world championships under his management, the Nitehawks also claimed six Western Softball Congress titles. Of critical importance, because said Red, escaping southern California for an ISC World Tournament appearance was "treacherous." "Every time we won the WSC it was great because the winner went (to the World Tournament) and didn't play in the playoffs," said Red. "You had to win the league because the teams were great. Lakewood (Jets) was always good.

The playoffs could be dangerous; there were so many good teams. Lose once and you're gone." But the Nitehawks didn't lose much under Red. No records of wins and losses were kept, he said. But he's quick to add that he doesn't recall losing too many games. Just too much talent for that to happen.

"We always had great pitching," he said. "Don Sarno was one of the greatest of all time. We had Roger Teske, Bob Todd, Bob Wills, Jack Randall, Leroy Zimmerman," said Red before running out of names. "Joe Rodgers started it. He always went out and got the good pitching for us." An ideology Red continued. And the best players in southern California wanted to be Nitehawks. "I idolized them as a lot of players in the Congress did," said Steve Minor, who was a Nitehawk for three years. "My first year as a Nitehawk was 1979.

Definitely some of my best memories in my long career were as a Nitehawk." But attracting top players, and keeping the team in the black was trying, say Red and Connie.

With no major sponsor, raising money was a year round occupation. Connie ran the concession stand at Joe Rodgers Field. Red helped, but for ten months out of the year he scoured Long Beach selling advertising for his annual Nitehawks program. Like a door-to-door salesman, Red called on Long Beach businesses. "I would leave the post office early afternoon and go door to door because it was harder for them to say no," said Red. "Red and Connie were so dedicated to the Nitehawks," said Minor. "They worked endless hours in that trailer selling food just to get a few bucks to keep the organization above water."

But with each passing year, it became more difficult. "It came to a point where it ceased to be a joy," said Connie. "Every season, I said, 'this is it', but fans and friends made it exhilarating and kept me coming back." But the end finally did come in 1988. "I told Connie this is it. It got to hard," said Red. "It had been over 30 years. It was time we quit." His one disappointment is that "no one wanted to take it over," he said.

Reluctantly the black and red Nitehawk colors were retired. But the dedicated man wasn't forgotten. In 1988 Red was inducted into the ISC Hall of Fame, and the City of Long Beach presented him with a proclamation naming him as one of its outstanding citizens.

With his newfound freedom, Red took up golfing ("never had time when we had the team," he said.) and scores in the 90 to 100s. Both Red and Connie still profess their love for fastpitch softball, but with the sport dying in Long Beach, they've become avid Long Beach State fans, attending the school's football, baseball, basketball and volleyball games. "We still love men's fastpitch softball but there's just a little city league left," said Red. "We are fans at Long Beach State."

Looking back over the years, he hedges at naming special Nitehawks players. But with some nudging, admits a few stood above the distinguished crowd.

He says Don Sarno had the best change up he had ever seen. That Bob Wills could pitch and hit and "run like a deer." Lucky Humiston was a "good hitter and outfielder," and Don Sears was a "great shortstop and hitter. Sears had great range and hardly ever made an error." He says the most underrated Nitehawk was Darrell Kam who "took a while to develop, but once he did he was one of the best second basemen around." He says Lou Novikoff was the comedic one and as roommates kept him laughing with his antics.

A tour of the Meairs' Bennett Street home reveals that fastpitch softball remains close to them. The 1975 ISC championship trophy, over five feet tall, stands prominently in the hallway.

ISC Guide books, Nitehawks programs, plaques, commendations, hats and many championship trophies can be found throughout the house. Even Red's Nitehawks jacket, still a crisp black and red, remains in excellent condition.

Mears, a dedicated Nitehawks man? With a 100 percent commitment.