

Royce Heath - HoF - 1984

Half a Century of Service to ISC - A Tribute to Royce Heath

"Once upon a time, many years ago, there was this kid from Texas who was bitten by a softball bug-and that old bug just won't let go of him."



That, in the words of Dixie Heath, describes the introduction of Royce Heath to the sport of fastpitch softball. And she should know! She has been married to him for over 54 years and has followed him through a career which has seen him devote a full half-century to the International Softball Congress.

Dixie Heath, an avid fastpitch player herself in years gone by, describes herself as "the girl across the road" who hooked the firstbaseman-manager during the 1940's where fastpitch was king of the summer sports in Texas with every town, large and small, boasted either a local team or one or more competitive leagues.

According to Heath's lifetime companion, "Royce teamed up with his older brother Marion "Son" Heath shortly after he got out of the service following World War II. Together, the Heath brothers piloted the

Arlington Merchants team. After a time Royce and "Son" separated with Royce forming his own team, ("Big Daddy's" - sponsored by a local liquor store-Royce insists that his mother 'understood' the need for a sponsor.) This led to several years of hot competition between their teams in leagues in Ft. Worth."

The Heath brothers had a legitimate claim to the game of fastpitch since their dad Andy was a lefthanded pitcher for many years.

Dixie is quick to point out that she always felt Royce to be a "much better manager than a player." Pressed to expand on that analysis, she explains that as a firstbaseman, Royce was always "a great fielder who could also hit the long ball-but he just couldn't run fast enough"-an indictment that Royce chuckles about but does not dispute.

Royce Heath was born in Venus, Texas. He graduated from Midlothian High School where he played "every sport they had"-which included football, track, and fastpitch softball. The rangy Texan explains that he didn't play basketball in high school only because "we didn't have a gym-so no basketball team."

As most young men who graduated in 1943, he found himself in military service very quickly. Serving in the U.S. Navy, he was a crewman on a mine-sweeper which took part in all the major battles in the South Pacific, including Okinawa and Iwo Jima. After the war ended, he came back to Texas and went to college, attending a school which is now part of University of Texas-Arlington.

And then the fastpitch career really took off! By 1948, Heath was a part of an Arlington Merchants team that captured an A.S.A. Metro Regional championship in what he remembers as his top thrill in the sport to that point in his life. That event also marked a turning point for the 23-year-old firstbaseman. With his team sporting only 10 players and NO manager, Heath was pressed into service to manage, and the rest is history.

International Softball Congress Executive Director, Ken Hackmeister, noted how singularly unique Heath's contribution to the organization has become. "Royce has achieved something which will likely never be duplicated-50 years of service to the ISC. When you think about it, that's an unbelievable accomplishment. No one in the organization is within 20 years of Royce's mark!"

ISC Executive Director Emeritus Milt Stark lauded Heath's service and longevity in the organization, "Royce Heath's exemplary service and his tenure as an ISC commissioner should be held up as the model for all present and future ISC commissioners. After all, he was an ISC commissioner before many of them were born! A true Texan, Royce takes time and thinks before he acts, stands up and says what he thinks, and uses good common sense in the solution of problems. These are the attributes that have been the bedrock of ISC philosophy for over half a century. In my 20 years as Executive Director, I frequently leaned on Royce for help and advice, and he never failed me. Royce Heath is my kind of man and my kind of commissioner."

Hackmeister paid tribute to Heath's contributions as they impacted the ISC Hall of

Fame. "Royce's passion within the ISC is the Hall of Fame where he has served as chairman for as long as anyone can remember. Under Royce's leadership, we have seen far more public awareness and interest in the ISC Hall of Fame. We have gone from an 'on field' induction ceremony at Opening Ceremonies to a more genteel ceremony at the much anticipated Hall of Fame Breakfast on Sunday morning at the World Tournament."

Reflecting on Heath's impact on broadening the reach of the Hall of Fame, Hackmeister continued, "Royce has taken us from the days when only ISC commissioners submitted Hall of Fame nominations to today when anyone can nominate a qualified individual. We have gone from no formal process to a more efficient process with clearly defined rules and criteria and a formal nomination form. We're now working on having all Hall of Fame inductees' biographies posted permanently on the ISC web site."

Heath's involvement with the International Softball Congress came through personal contact with ISC Founder Carrol Forbes. Heath remembers being approached by Forbes with an invitation to breakfast. That meeting resulted in Heath's 1949 team being invited to play in the Northwest Texas tournament of the National Softball Congress (where they finished in second place). It also resulted in the energetic Heath being directed by Forbes to "organize a tournament in your area."

By the 1953 season, Carrol Forbes had installed the young Texan as a Commissioner, and thus the 2002 season marks the 50th year of Royce Heath's service—a mark that has never before been reached by an ISC Commissioner. (Executive Director Emeritus Milt Stark would be next in line at 39 years).

Appointed to chair the ISC Hall of Fame Committee in 1978, Heath has been at the helm of the prestigious "hall" through its years of development into a fixture of the organization, with a permanent location in Kimberly, Wisconsin, and a high-profile induction ceremony. That ceremony, conducted on the field during opening night of ISC tournaments for many years, was shifted indoors to its present position as the highlight of the traditional Sunday breakfast about 15 years ago. According to Heath, "We were doing the induction on the field in Kimberly, and just as we started, a downpour of rain washed things out. We re-scheduled it for the next morning at the breakfast, and we liked what we saw, so it became a permanent thing."

Just about everyone who has experienced that occasion will agree that the move was a great thing for the "hall" and for the ISC.

Reflecting on highlights of his involvement with the Hall of Fame, Heath quickly notes with pride his experience of "getting to provide a Hall of Fame ring for every living member of the hall." He is also pleased that the Committee and the voters are taking a closer look at some of the players who excelled in the early years of the ISC and rewarding some of them with a "hall" berth. Heath is quick to praise the work of ISC Historian Art Cashion in providing historical material on many of these oldtime stars.

Pressed for his feelings regarding changes over the years, Heath pinpointed the professionalism of the perfected athletes of today; compared them with the more local and area teams of his earlier seasons and mused that he was "not sure whether that's a good thing." Looking back over his decades with the game, he remembers playing until the mid-1970's and managing until the late 1980's with an individual highlight being the thrill of winning the Ft. Madison, Iowa, invitational tournament at a time when it was the 'granddaddy of the 4th of July tournaments.' It was at this event where he first met ISC legends Frank Porth and Charlie Smith. Perhaps surprising to many, Heath also had a 20-year career as an umpire, with one year of service calling balls and strikes in an ISC World Tournament in Rock Island, Illinois.

From his vantage point, Heath selected Jimmy Moore as the best righthanded pitcher he ever saw with Ty Stofflet getting his nod as the best lefty. He anointed Brian Rothrock as the finest hitter in his years with the game, and chose the Home Savings team (Aurora, Ill.) of 1980 as his pick as the finest team of his more than a half-century of experience with fastpitch.

Royce and Dixie value highly the many friends they have made in the game and recall that "for many years, we could travel ANYWHERE in the country and hardly miss a day in which we could visit with some friends from softball."

Although contemplating Emeritus Commissioner status with the ISC, where he has long functioned as the organizations' unofficial 'chaplain,' Heath remains active in his community and his church. He is in his second term on the City Council of his hometown of Iredell; serves as Master of the local Masonic Lodge; and is an active member of the United Methodist Church where he is on the church's Administrative Board and serves as a member of the church's "prayer warriors."

This writer has always loved the stalwart man from Texas with the soft drawl, the ready smile, and found him to be a man who always has something good to say about anybody.

As Ken Hackmeister puts it, "When I reach Royce's age, I just hope I can be as healthy, motivated, and productive as he is. He is an amazing individual."

Amen, brother!!

By Gordon L. Wise-ISC Information Officer