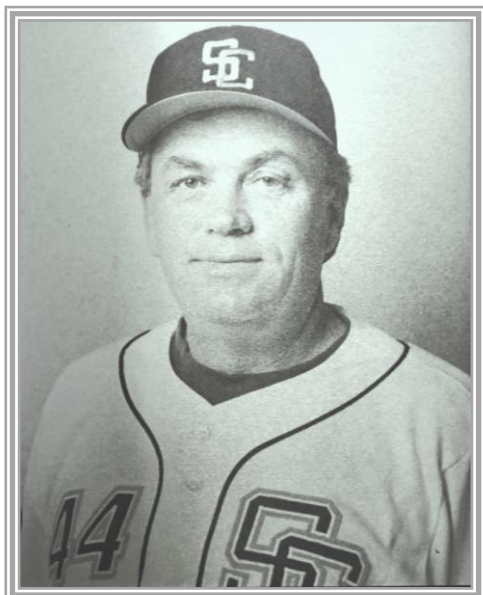


Russell Boice - HoF - 1996

Russell Boice, "gone but never forgotten" By Bob Otto/Yucaipa, CA



Summer is Bob Welby's favorite time of year. A time to rekindle his love affair with fastpitch softball and renew ball diamond friendships. The sound of a bat punishing a ball, or a ball "thwacking" into a catcher's mitt is joyful music to his ears.

But for the first time in a fastpitch career that spans five decades, Welby's summer joy is tainted with sadness, sadness traced to a phone call he will never forget.

A grim messenger shattered his world early Christmas morning, 1998, with the news that his good friend, Russell Boice, had died of a heart attack. "I spoke with Russ the day he died," said Welby, "and he said he felt great, (then) I was awakened early Christmas Day and told of Russ' death. I woke my wife JoAnne and we both held each other and cried." But Welby's own grieving had to be put on hold.

Tragically, when Russell died, it was the second heart shattering loss his two sons, Bubba and Smokey, suffered. Their mother, Judith Ann Boice, had died just 10 months earlier from cancer. "It was so heart breaking," said Welby, who spoke the eulogy at Russell's funeral. "As you can imagine, the boys suffered and have taken the loss of their mother and father very, very, very hard. They cried together for many months," said Welby.

But through it all, Bubba, 23, and Smokey, 15, have forged an especially strong bond, choosing to live together alone, but under the guidance of their grandparents, JoAnn and Martin Arnold. Bubba works at Shreve Motor Cores, where Russell was the General Manager, while Smokey continues his high school education and plays on his school's hockey and soccer teams.

"They've become a lot closer," says JoAnn Arnold, "There's eight years difference, Bubba has become very protective of his younger brother and would give his right arm for Dustin (Smokey).

She says when the boys turn the corner of their street to go home it is a painful reminder; the reason they want to sell the home as quickly as possible and move closer toward their grandparents.

They were a close family," says JoAnn. "My daughter Judy didn't work, so they sat down for dinner every night together as a family, traveled to sports together...they were one, great, great family."

As the days and months have passed by since Russell's death, Welby has had time to reflect, time to ask "Why? why did this happen to a good man just 53-years-old with two young boys?" "The only way JoAnne and I have been able to live with the loss of our dear friend was that it was the will of God and we have prayed together a lot," said Welby. "I remember him as a good husband and a great father...his family always came first."

And now he says it's the memories that he clings to, memories starting in the late 1950s on the ball diamonds of St. Louis where Welby and Boice first met.

Meeting first as foes, the two men soon became fast friends, on and off the diamond. Ironically, their careers have paralleled each other. Both were third basemen; both aspired to manage and coach; and both moved rapidly into fastpitch leadership roles.

Boice, who described himself as a "good fielder, but not a good hitter," soon became a big hit as one of the sport's greatest managers, winning several national and international championships in the International Softball Congress, Amateur Softball Association, and International Softball Federation.

"Russell's greatest satisfaction was managing the St. Louis Budweiser Kings to a fourth (1982) and second place finish (1983) in the ISC World Tournament," said Welby. "Russ was the manager and I was the coach. It was neat being associated with Russ. He always kept everybody loose with his one-liners."

Welby has a favorite that still makes him chuckle. "Russ used to say to a former St. Louis great who had a few bucks, but was very thrifty: 'Eddie, you'll never see a U-Haul hooked up to a hearse, you can't take it with you'," said Welby. And there was the daily phone calls, always filled with Russell's good humor.

"Russ would call me every day," said Welby. "And he would always say, 'Bobby where have you been? Let's call Milt (Milt Stark, ISC Executive Director) and raise some hell!' Then he would ask, 'What was that 800 number you gave me?', knowing full well Milt didn't want that number made public - it's for (ISC) commissioners. Russ would call all over the world at the drop of a hat - he loved to talk softball with anyone."

The two friends continued their parallel course, rising to the pinnacle of their profession in 1994. Welby was elected ISC President, and Boice captured his long sought after ISC World Tournament championship by guiding the Green Bay All Car Roadrunners to the title at Prince Edward Island.

"It was a proud moment for me when Russ' team won and I was on the field for the presentation of the championship trophy," said Welby. "It was the ultimate achievement for Russ."

But it wasn't one-liners that shot Boice to the top of his profession. "Russ was a great student of the game," said Welby. "He had the uncanny ability of bringing together a bunch of all-stars and molding them into a winning team. He was a player's manager and kept everybody happy. "Russ had the quickest and brightest mind in fastpitch softball, only equaled by the great Tom Wagner," said Welby. "On one USA team (International Softball Federation) Tom managed and Russ coached. On another, Russ managed and Tom coached. They got along great, no ego problems with those two. I don't know Russell's statistics (won/loss record) but I guarantee it is over 80%."

Boice had been selected to once again manage the USA team in the Pan American games in Winnipeg, Canada (July 29-Aug. 8). At the USA Softball Men's National Team Festival in Midland, Mich. (try outs to determine the Pan Am team) May 20-23, he was missed.

"Not having Russell in Midland was very sad for all of the players, for everybody," said Welby. "But they all played hard in his honor and it turned out to be the best softball festival to date. Each player had Russell's initials (RMB) embroidered on their hats. It was very moving for the players."

When Welby left the Festival he had two hats for Bubba and Smokey, embroidered with their dad's RMB initials. But his concern for the boys goes much deeper. Welby started the Russell Boice Children's Trust Fund, which the boys' grandparents manage. "I have received donations from all over the softball world," said Welby. "It has been very successful for the boys."

"Bob setting up the boy's Trust Fund...God, love him," said JoAnn Arnold. "We've only had to take out \$900 for a house payment. We are hoping that it will help with Dustin's college education."

Tournaments throughout North America will honor Boice this season. June 18-20 he will be honored at the Decatur, Ill. Shoot-Out with a special presentation Saturday night. Both Bubba and Smokey are expected to attend. The Pioneer Days tournament in Salt Lake City will also pay tribute July 9-10.

And Welby has made certain his friend's name will live on forever in Missouri fastpitch. "The Missouri ISC Area Tournament will forever be called the Russell Boice Memorial ISC Area Tournament," said Welby. "Russell is gone, but he will never be forgotten."