

Hall of Fame

Valentine's Day massacre

Jack Valentine gunned down opponents in the late 60s

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Jack Valentine knew all about his father's achievements in high school when they were playing catch in the back yard. He knew about his father's semi-pro baseball career in the army. He had heard the tales about his dad playing with major league players like Joe Garagiola, so you can imagine his disappointment when he faced his father one spring to tell him about his own failure on the baseball diamond.

Jack Valentine was only nine years old, but he was cut from his Little League roster. As it turned out, his dad knew just what to say.

Hall of Fame

"My father took me aside and told me that we were going to go home and work on all the different fundamentals of the game," said Valentine. "He told me that I was going to put the effort forth, and we'll see where it leads me. He told me that, next year, I'd be a little bigger because I wasn't that big at nine."

His father meant every word, and Valentine threw himself into his studies. Over the next 12 months, they practiced in the back yard. They started with fundamentals and focused on the mental approach to the game. Between lessons, the young Valentine would join pick-up games with older kids from the neighborhood. He spent every waking minute studying the game of baseball and waiting for another chance.

"I learned how to catch the ball, throw the ball, and not be afraid of the ball. That really helps," he said. "As I started to grow and get a little bit bigger, he taught me how to grip the ball for pitching and what wind-up to take. He taught me all the intricacies of pitching, and he loved the pitching part."

The following spring, Valentine was snatched up by the local league. On the mound, he was already surprising hitters with an unhittable knuckle-curveball and a changeup. At the plate, he was swatting long balls at an alarming rate, collecting four homeruns in one contest to draw an intentional walk with bases loaded on his fifth appearance at the plate.

Between organized games, Valentine continued to battle older kids in sandlot contests where he'd face athletes on the high school roster. He dominated Little League games, and his reputation kept growing by leaps and bounds. Former Blue Knight coach John Fontana remembers hearing about the young pitcher for years before he reached the high school field.

"He was a unique player. He was a really big star from the time he was in the Little League, so people knew all about him when he came to the high school," said the coach. "He could really hit, but when he came to us it was the pitching that really was incredible. He could throw a fast ball. He could throw the curve. He threw a

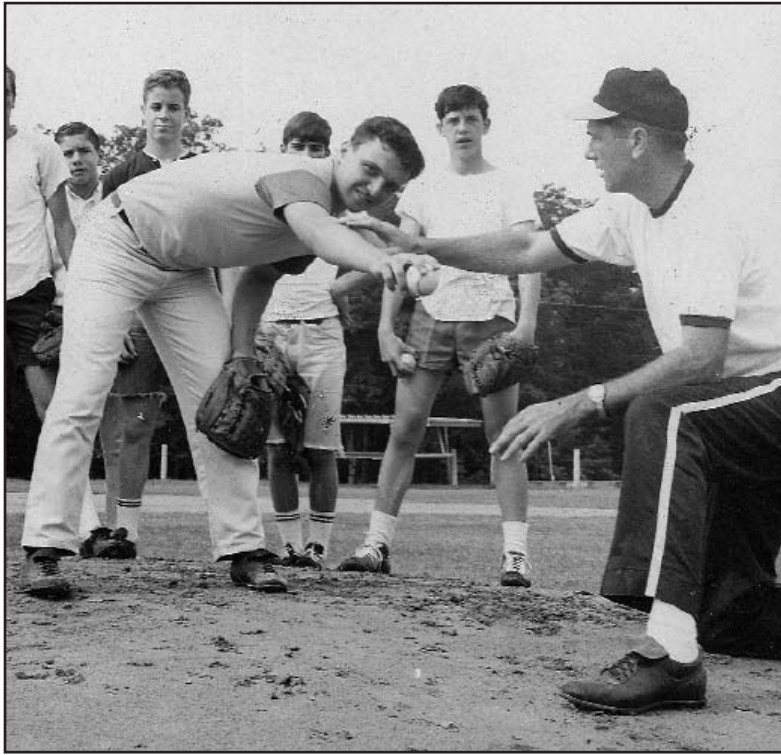


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN FONTANA

Jack Valentine gets some pointers from former Yankee pitcher Art Ditmar at a Blue Knight baseball camp in the late 1960s.

“
I only had one thing on my mind
when I stepped onto the mound,
and that was to throw a strike
and throw it as hard as I could.
I didn't fool around and try
to over-engineer the situation.
”

Jack Valentine,
Pitcher

knuckle ball. He was ahead of his time."

Valentine would stare down batters from his perch on the mound. Every pitch was thrown with his full effort, and it seemed that every one crossed the plate. If you were a batter, you had to swing because it was sure to be a strike either way.

"My father drilled into me that you had to be accurate. Anybody could throw hard. You have to be accurate with your pitches," said Valentine. "I only had one thing on my mind when I stepped onto the mound, and that was to throw a strike and throw it as hard as I could. I didn't fool around and try to over-engineer the situation. If I got into a tough situation, I'd try to shrug it off, smile, and do what I could do with the next pitch. Then, if he was able to get the bat on the ball, I had fielders. I wasn't afraid to let them catch the ball for me."

Valentine was never cut from a roster again. In fact, he was always one of the first ones selected. By the time he was 14, he had earned a spot on the local American Legion baseball team. He was facing varsity players and college freshmen, but Valentine never blinked. At 14, he earned a

starting spot as a right fielder, and he worked his way into the pitching rotation the following summer.

"I was playing with 19-year-old kids, and that was natural for me because I was always playing older kids in sandlot games," he said. "I remember that the game was a lot faster—I was just a year or two out of Little League—and I had to learn a few different things. It was a different experience playing with those college-level guys. You had different coaches, and you were always learning different things. It was just great, and I loved it."

By the time he reached the high school, Valentine was already a proven player. It was an easy selection for varsity coaches. Valentine dominated on the mound, setting five school records that still stand after more than four decades. He set the standard as a starting pitcher with 25 varsity starts. He shattered the record for strikeouts (288) in three seasons with the Blue Knights. His accuracy was unparalleled with the fewest walks per inning in a single season (12 walks, 106 innings in 1969) and for a career (50 walks, 199 innings). He raised the bar for durability with 15 complete games



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Baseball

- Inducted into SHS baseball hall of fame (1982).
- All-Conference (1968, 1969).
- Team MVP (1969).
- CAREER STATISTICS—Overall record 22-4, 199.7 innings, 288 strikeouts.
- Earned 3 varsity letters (1967, 68, 69).
- 1 no-hitter (1969).
- Hit .370 as a junior and .276 as a senior.
- American Legion baseball player (1965-70).

- Holds SHS record for most career starts (25).
- Holds SHS record for complete games (15).
- Holds SHS record for most strikeouts (288).
- Holds SHS record for fewest walks/inning in a single season (12/106 in 1969).
- Holds SHS record for fewest walks/inning in a career (50/199).

when high school games stretched nine innings instead of seven.

"I don't think I ever had anybody that went out onto the field of play with as much confidence as he had," said Fontana. "Where he got it, I don't know. He was just so confident out there. He didn't care who he was pitching against. He thought he was the best. 'Go on up there. See if you can hit me.' He was that kind of guy."

On the other hand, he still had critics across the state. When Southington drew a postseason match-up against Trumbull in Valentine's senior season, Fontana heard the negative predictions filter into his office. Sure, Valentine could dominate hitters in Southington's weaker conference, but a Fairfield County team? No way.

"It wasn't just me. It was Southington High School," said Valentine. "We had a reputation in all sports of being at the top of our game. Everybody always set their sights on Southington High School. If they set them on me, that's fine. I was having success. It didn't affect me whatsoever. I just went out and did my thing."

Fontana remembers the game vividly. Valentine struggled at times with the strike zone, but he just reached into his bag of tricks. The precision pitcher walked more batters than any other time in his high school career, but Trumbull batters still couldn't make contact.

"He just shut them right down," said Fontana. "I was looking out, and all I could see was the ball fluttering. He was throwing knuckle balls at them."

Trumbull batters never knew what hit them. When the dust cleared the Knights had won the game, and their all-star pitcher had earned his first no-hitter in a game that nobody thought he could win.

"The funny thing is that, in nine innings, I had something like seven walks," Valentine said. "I don't know what happened, but the ball was moving all over the place. It was just one of those days.

Accolades rained down on the

Southington pitcher. He was selected to the all-conference roster in 1968 and 1969. He was named as Southington's most valuable player in his senior season. Valentine could have played at the next level. He could have gone on to the college ranks for a chance at the pros, but the Southington ace walked away from the game.

"I regret it a little bit, but I went on and did things with the family," he said. "It was a little bit harder to go on and do it than it is today. There were fewer teams. There were fewer guys on all the rosters, but that's no excuse."

Fontana said that, even without a college career, a coaching career, or a professional contract, Valentine ranks among the best to step onto a Southington field. It was no surprise that Valentine was inducted into the inaugural class of the local baseball hall of fame in 1982.

"We don't know how good he could have been," said Fontana. "I think people get caught up with all those guys that signed major league contracts. They might put Jack Valentine on the back burner, but he could have played at college. He could have been a great star. But his father had a good business, and he didn't really care about going on to college."

His efforts didn't escape the notice of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee. His statistics speak for themselves, and his school records are untouchable. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Valentine will be inducted into the local hall in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"It surprises me, and it humbles me a little bit. You've got professional ball players. You've got guys that have coached college teams. You've got great teams, and it really brings you down to earth," said Valentine. "I just want to be remembered as somebody that put that uniform on for Southington and went out and played every game and tried my best. All I ever wanted to do is win, regardless of my own achievement. All I wanted to do was win."