



Former major league pitcher John Rheinecker, who graduated from Gibault Catholic High School in Waterloo, died Tuesday in St. Louis. ANN HEISENFELT - AP

SPORTS

Coaches remember former Gibault star, MLB pitcher John Rheinecker

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Gibault High School graduate John Rheinecker, a left-handed pitcher who spent parts of two seasons in the major leagues with the Texas Rangers, died Tuesday in St. Louis.

Rheinecker, a Hecker native, was 38.

A spokeswoman at the St. Louis County Medical Examiner's office said Rheinecker died at St. Anthony's Medical Center. She said the cause of death is unknown pending results of toxicology tests that will be completed in eight to 10 weeks.

After graduating from Gibault in 1997, Rheinecker played at Belleville Area College (now Southwestern Illinois) and Southwest Missouri State (now Missouri State). Rheinecker's coach at BAC, Neil Fiala, remembers Rheinecker making a huge impact on the team.

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"John, for us, for basically two years, was our No. 1 pitcher and our No. 4 hitter in the lineup," Fiala said. "He was, obviously, an all-star on the field. He was one of our hardest workers and was a great leader. He did the things we always want people to do."

Waterloo coach Mark Vogel said Rheinecker, who led Gibault to the Class A state tournament in 1997 under former coach Steve King, was a player he wouldn't allow to beat the Bulldogs.

GUESTBOOK: Express your condolences to the family of John Rheinecker

"My first recollection of John is when he played at Gibault and being a coach on the other side," Vogel said. "When you were in the other dugout, you had to game-plan for him. He was just such a good athlete both on the mound and at the plate. He was one of those rare

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Missouri State coach Keith Guttin, who just completed his 35th season with the Bears, said Rheinecker was "one of the most competitive players I have ever been around." He was also tough, Guttin said.

“

REALLY, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. THE BIGGEST THING IS HEARTFELT SORROW FOR HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS. PRAYERS FOR ALL OF THEM — EVERYBODY.

SWIC coach Neil Fiala

"His first year here (2000), he played the outfield when he wasn't pitching," Guttin said. "I remember we were playing against SIU (Carbondale) at home, and he and Dante Brinkley (a Belleville East graduate) crashed headlong — running as hard as they could — into each other chasing a ball in the outfield. Both had season-ending injuries. ... It was as bad a collision as I've seen.

"I think John, who had a fracture and a torn ligament in his knee, would have stayed in the game had I let him. He was one tough guy. John wanted to win."

Regarding Rheinecker's death, Fiala said: "It's one of those things you just don't know what to think. Really, you don't know what to say. The biggest thing is heartfelt sorrow for his family and friends. Prayers for all of them — everybody."

Rheinecker was selected by the Oakland A's in the first round (37th overall) of the 2001 draft. He was chosen by the Seattle Mariners in the 30th round of the 1998 draft, but instead of signing with the Mariners, Rheinecker returned to BAC for his sophomore season in 1999. He then transferred to Southwest Missouri State.

Fiala, who said he last spoke with Rheinecker "about six or seven months ago," remembers Rheinecker pitching in the sectional championship game in 1999.

“He was struggling in the first inning, and I had gone out (to the mound) to visit him once already,” Fiala said. “(The visit) isn’t official until you pass the foul line. I got about halfway to the foul line, and I said, ‘Nope.’ I turned around and walked back. He didn’t allow a hit the rest of the game.”

“He was a gamer. When it came down to nut-crunching time, he was a guy you wanted on the mound and even at the plate when he was hitting. He did a great job during that time.”



HE WAS ONE TOUGH GUY. JOHN WANTED TO WIN.

Missouri State coach Keith Guttin

Fiala also recalled a game when Rheinecker outpitched Jefferson College left-hander Mark Buehrle, who went on to a stellar big-league career in which he won 214 games with the Chicago White Sox, the Miami Marlins and the Toronto Blue Jays.

“We ended up winning the game,” said Fiala, adding that Rheinecker thrived on a plus-fastball and a big curveball. “John struck out like 11 or 12, and Buehrle struck out like eight or nine.”

Guttin said Rheinecker was quiet, but when he spoke, his teammates listened.

“He’s a guy you wanted on your team,” Guttin said. “He had your back. He was a good teammate. I wouldn’t say he was real loud or talkative. When he said something, people respected what he had to say because he wasn’t talking all the time. He backed it up.”

On March 31, 2006, the A’s traded Rheinecker to the Rangers along with infielder Freddie Bynum for pitcher Juan Dominguez. Rheinecker made his major-league debut with Texas less than a month later, on April 22, working four innings and allowing two runs on seven hits in a start against Tampa Bay. He took a no-decision.

Rheinecker’s first major-league victory came on May 29, 2006, against the Seattle Mariners. It was his 27th birthday, and he limited Seattle to no runs on four hits in 8 1/3 innings of the Rangers’ 2-0 victory. Rheinecker walked one and struck out six.

Rheinecker finished with an 8-9 record and 5.65 ERA in 44 games — 20 of them starts — in two seasons. He was 4-6 with a 5.86 ERA in 2006 and 4-3 with a 5.36 ERA in 2007.



I WAS GOING TO MAKE SOMEBODY ELSE ON THAT TEAM BEAT US BEFORE I LET JOHN (BEAT US). THAT’S HOW MUCH RESPECT I HAD FOR HIS TALENT.

Waterloo coach Mark Vogel

Thoracic outlet syndrome surgery cut short Rheinecker’s career. He also underwent arthroscopic surgery on his shoulder.

Rheinecker also played a handful of seasons with the Valmeyer Lakers and Waterloo Millers of the Mon-Clair League. In recent years, he worked at Gregson Trucking in Hecker.

“I really didn’t get to know John until about three years ago,” Vogel said. “After his pro career was over, he played for the Millers, and I was coaching for Vernie (Moehrs). I spent one summer with him, pretty well every summer. He had come back and you could tell he was (still) a good athlete. He was no longer pitching for the Millers, but he was DHing.”

Rheinecker is survived by his wife, Jamie, two children, two stepchildren, his mother, Donna, sisters Barbara, JoAnn and Lyn, brothers Jeff and Bob, and many aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins.

Visitation is scheduled for 2-8 p.m. Friday at Quernheim Funeral Home, 800 S. Market St. in Waterloo. The funeral is at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Augustine of Canterbury Catholic Church in Hecker. Burial will be in the church cemetery.

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