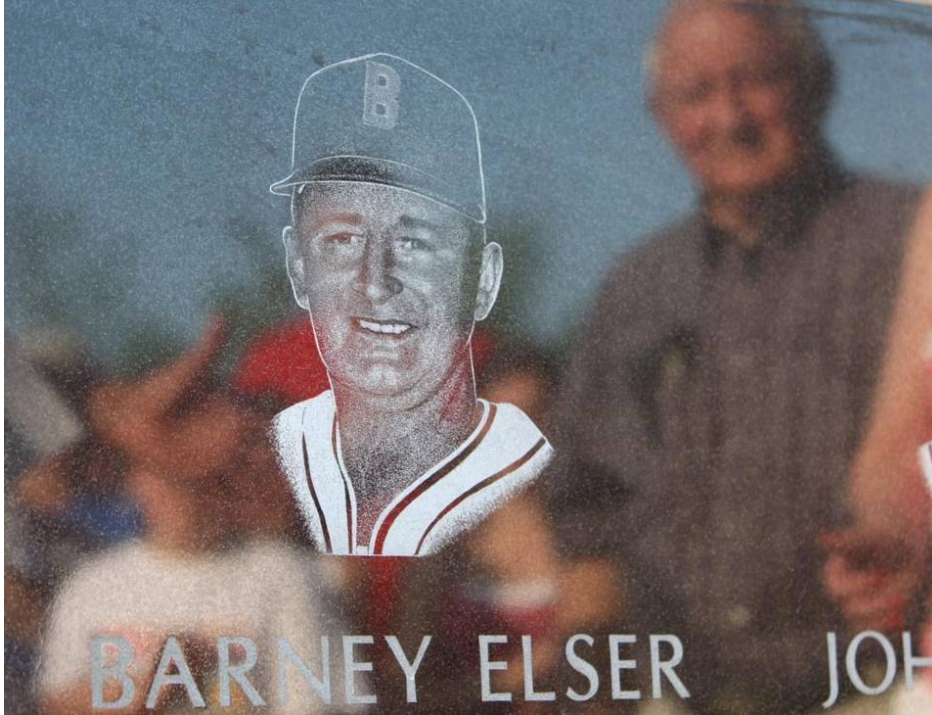


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Barney Elser, the 'heart and soul of Belleville baseball,' dies at 85



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Barney Elser is reflected in a plaque honoring him and fellow Hilgard coach John Schmidt. **Zia Nizami** - znizami@bnd.com

Barney Elser, "the heart and soul of Belleville Hilgards baseball," died Monday at the age of 85 following a lengthy illness.

Elser was an outstanding high school and amateur player and spent time with the minor league affiliates of the Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox and St. Louis Cardinals. But he was known best for his 23 years as manager of the Belleville American Legion Baseball team.

From 1963 to 1985, the Elser-led Hilgards produced a .693 winning percentage (486-215), state championships in 1968 and 1975, and a second-place state finish in 1972.

"I played a lot of baseball through high schools, the Hilgards, two different universities, and the Mon-Clair League, and Barney was by far the best manager I ever played for," said Barry Frazier, a first baseman and right fielder under Elser in 1975 and 1976. "Even if we didn't necessarily have the best athletes on the field, he gave us a tremendous advantage.

"It wasn't just the way he managed the game — and he was very good — it was the way he instilled confidence in you as a team."

The Elser years of Hilgard baseball also produced countless stories of the manager's fiery nature and inspirational methods. Frazier recalled one mid-season game at Citizens Park in Belleville in particular.

“BARNEY WAS ALL BELLEVILLE. FOR ALL THOSE YEARS HE MANAGED IN THE AMERICAN LEGION PROGRAM THERE, IT WAS VERY FITTING THAT THEY'D PUT HIS NAME UP ON THE BALL FIELD. I WAS VERY PLEASED WHEN THEY DID THAT.

Whitey Herzog, Hall of Fame manager

East St. Louis was beating the Hilgards handily and Elser had seen enough from both his team and the umpires.

A series of foul balls exhausted the home plate umpire's supply, so he turned to a simmering home team dugout for a fresh supply.

"I think Barney wanted to shock the team and shock the umpires so he stomped out of the dugout with an entire box of balls and fired them, one by one, at the umpire," said Frazier, the Hilgards' right fielder that season. "The umpire was hiding behind one of those old puffy chest protectors.

"It was the funniest thing I've ever seen on a baseball field."

The stunt may have been calculated, Frazier said. It set off a Hilgards' streak that carried them all the way to an American Legion state championship.

"We were hovering right about .500 at the time then went something like 25-3 after that," Frazier said.

Belleville Post 58 made Elser the first inductee into its Hilgard Hall of Fame and every year since has presented the Barney Elser Award to the player who "best exemplifies the spirit of Hilgards' baseball."

Whitey Herzog Field, the current home of Belleville American Legion and Althoff High School baseball, includes a large granite monument to Elser and long-time assistant John Schmidt on the back wall of the brick grandstand.

“EVEN IF WE DIDN'T NECESSARILY HAVE THE BEST ATHLETES ON THE FIELD, HE GAVE US A TREMENDOUS ADVANTAGE. IT WASN'T JUST THE WAY HE MANAGED THE GAME — AND HE WAS VERY GOOD — IT WAS THE WAY HE INSTILLED CONFIDENCE IN YOU AS A TEAM.

Barry Frazier, member of Hilgards' 1975 state championship team

"Together, Barney and John inspired winning baseball on and off the field to hundreds of Belleville's finest young men who wore the Belleville Hilgards' uniform with great pride," the plaque reads.

The street that connects Citizens Park to the the field complex also is named Barney Elser Drive in his honor.

"Barney was all Belleville," Herzog said by phone Monday afternoon. "For all those years he managed in the American Legion program there, it was very fitting that they'd put his name up on the ball field. I was very pleased when they did that.

"He was a great friend to me and great for that community."

Prior to coaching, Elser had an outstanding career as a player.

He was one of the stars on a Belleville Township High School team that won state championships in 1947 and 1949.

As a sophomore at BTHS in 1947, Elser hit three doubles in the state championship game, a record that still stands. He went on to play eight seasons of professional baseball in the Cardinals, Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox minor league systems.

Elser was a contemporary of Herzog as both worked their way through the high school and summer leagues of southern Illinois and the metro-east in the last 1940s.

“

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Whitey Herzog

The Hall of Fame manager, who led the St. Louis Cardinals to three National League pennants and a World Series championship in 1982, has often referred to Elser as one of the best amateur players he ever saw.

"I played for a team that Barney was on at the time," said Herzog, who had an eight-year major league playing career before managing. "Barney was a 14-year-old playing the County League and he led the league in hitting. At 14 years old, I never saw such a ballplayer."

"He signed with the Cubbies, and I don't know if he got big or lost range or what happened because he was a hell of a shortstop. Looking back, I thought he was a much better player than I ever was."

In 1958, after two years in the United States Army, Elser returned home to become an all-star infielder in the Mon-Clair and Clinton County Leagues. He was a charter member of the Mon-Clair Hall of Fame, inducted in 1984.

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