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SPORTS

Norm Harding, star at Rogers and Whitworth, dies at 79

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Four members of the 1960 Whitworth College team, coached by Paul Merkel, pose with their national champion awards in this Spokesman-Review archive photo. They are, from left to right, Dale Roberts, Ray Washburn, Ron Lince and Norm Harding. Original outline: Whitworth's Loot: Four members of the Whitworth college baseball team which won the NAIA brown last week in Sioux City are shown today at the Sportswriters and Broadcasters luncheon at the Press club. Shown with some of the tourney trophies are (left to right): Dale Roberts, holding the award given to coach Paul Merkel; Ray Washburn, most valuable

player,; Ron Lince, with Washburn's trophy for the all-tournament team, and Ron Lince and Norm Harding, with the championship trophy. In front is the blue and white pennant representing the NAIA title. 1960 photo. Photo Archive/The Spokesman-Review. (SR)

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“The Natural” was miscast. Norm Harding should have played the lead role in the 1984 baseball movie.

Harding, a 1957 graduate of Rogers High School and one of the more gifted “natural” athletes to come out of Spokane, died Saturday. He was 79.

Football, basketball, baseball? Yep. He won awards and championships. Bowling? He was a 300 bowler. Handball? Oh, yeah. Fishing? Bass fishing tournaments, for sure.

“Whatever Norm got into it was 100 miles an hour,” said Dan Fry, a longtime friend. “He tried to be the best he could be at whatever he did.”

An All-City League standout in football, basketball and baseball as a junior and senior at Rogers, and All-State in football in 1956, Harding accepted a scholarship to play quarterback in football at Washington State; he also planned to play baseball.

The story goes that the Cougars’ first-year football coach, Jim Sutherland, had penciled Harding in at quarterback and was so confident of his skills that he moved another pretty good quarterback, fellow named Keith Lincoln, to running back. Because spring practice was part of the Cougars’ football program, Sutherland wouldn’t release Harding to play baseball.



So he left and headed to Whitworth, whose baseball coach, the late Paul Merkel, had talked to him earlier about staying home and playing for the Pirates.

Merkel's daughter, Linda Merkel Walline, remembers the time in her book "Rain Delayed," which recounts the Pirates' trip through the NAIA Baseball World Series to the 1960 national championship.

"Through the years," writes Walline, "my Dad had learned to be opportunistic, but he may also have seen a little bit of himself in Norm, remembering too well the sting of disappointment he felt in not being able to play collegiate baseball himself."

So Merkel and football coach Sam Adams got together and told Norm he could play both at Whitworth. The Pirates didn't need a quarterback, they needed a running back. And Merkel didn't need a pitcher, but he needed a shortstop.

"Norm was a natural athlete and a hard worker and he wanted to win," writes Walline. "Those were the qualities that Coach Merkel looked for in his ballplayers. Natural talent was great, but heart was what he valued the most."

The year 1960 was the highlight of Harding's stellar Whitworth career. In June, the Pirates won the NAIA baseball championship, Harding batting .300 and earning all-tournament honorable mention. Then in the fall, the unbeaten Evergreen Conference champion football team advanced to the NAIA semifinals.

In 2003, he was inducted into the Whitworth Heritage Gallery Athletic Hall of Fame in both sports.

"According to Norm," wrote Walline, "he never would have gotten to college without the influence and assistance of Coach Merkel," who had watched him regularly from the bleachers during Harding's high school and American Legion seasons.



His skills on the diamond earned him a minor league contract with the New York Yankees, said Fry.

“He played two years,” Fry said. “One year when he came back (to Spokane) he was playing handball and hit the wall. It tore up his shoulder and ended his pro career.

“He always said, ‘The Yankees own me. One day I’ll be back.’”

Harding turned to softball, where he had a career that earned him a spot in the Inland Empire Softball Hall of Fame, and even played some professional softball in Canada with a Spokane team.

Harding, a retired railroad lineman, battled emphysema for years, once telling Fry “the best decision I ever made in my life was when I stopped smoking.”

“That was about 17 years ago,” Fry added. “But it was too late.”

Among Harding’s survivors are his wife of 35 years, Kim, and seven children.

Services are pending.

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Tags: Norm Harding, rogers high school, Spokane, Whitworth University

