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## Atlanta St. shooting victim remembered as skilled Gainesville athlete, good friend

Smith was pitcher on Red Elephants' 1978 state title team

Times staff reports

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Mario Bush drove back from Stockbridge to his childhood home on Atlanta Street as soon as he saw the news on social media.

Studying every stain and marking on the sidewalk at the Atlanta Street Apartments, Bush walked around the scene where his friend Phillip Ronald Smith had lain earlier.

Smith, 55, was found unresponsive outside the apartments around 11:30 p.m. Monday at the Atlanta Street Apartments, according to Gainesville Police spokesman Kevin Holbrook.

"I came home to investigate, too, and see what's going on," Bush said.

Police and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation are treating Smith's death as a homicide, believing that he died from a gunshot wound.

Friends and family at the apartment complex and at nearby Peppers Market said Smith had no enemies and was no stranger to the area.

"He didn't ever bother nobody," cousin Mark

Carruth said.

In his earlier years, Smith played varsity baseball at Gainesville High School. He pitched a no-hitter during the AA playoffs supported by his 90 mph fastball and curveball in Gainesville's 1978 championship season.

Former Gainesville baseball coach Don Brewer, who worked with Smith at The American Legion, recalled Smith as "always smiling, and he always played hard."

The speed of his fastball even in high school wreaked havoc on opposing batters.

"Lots of times he wasn't really sure where it was going," Brewer said, adding that

Smith was drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers. "But a left-handed (pitcher) that can throw in the low 90s that has a few control problems is still hard to hit, because no one wants to dig in."

Former teammate and current Buford baseball coach Tony Wolfe echoed Brewer's comments, remembering Smith's talent paired with his friendly nature.

"He's probably as gifted in terms of the quality of arm as anybody that I've played with or coached," Wolfe said. "He was exceptional."

At Pepper's Market, Carruth and others said they were shocked by the shooting. Willie Stevens said he considered Smith to be a big brother.

"I can't believe somebody would do something like that," Stevens said.

Carruth said Smith suffered knee problems after high school, while many expected he would play professional ball. He said he last saw his cousin six hours before Smith was found by police.

Carruth said he and the family planned on printing T-shirts with his name and face on them.

"You know, just to let him know that, hey, you're gonna be missed, cousin," Carruth said.

Anyone with information about the shooting is asked to call the criminal investigations division at 770-534-5254.

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