

Mike Waldner column: Bob Flynn was a baseball legend in a baseball town

By Mike Waldner, Columnist

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Bob Flynn, center, when he signed his \$90,000 bonus contract with the A's, then of Kansas City. The two men with him are scouts Al Zarilla (left) and Art Lilly.



Bob Flynn at 2014 El Segundo Little League opening day.

He would

call every six months or so.

"Hi, Mike, Bob Flynn," he would say. "How you doing?"

He left the message on the answering machine when no one was home.

"Nothing important," he would say as he signed off. "Give me a call when you get a chance."

The last message was a month or so ago when he said, "I'll be up your way in a little while. Let's get together for lunch."

It's not going to happen. Robert Joseph Flynn, 73, died last week in his sleep at home in Oceanside. He had not been well for a while, something he did not mention often. When he did, he did not dwell on it.

In a town that is serious about its baseball, Bob Flynn is an El Segundo baseball legend. Stories extolling his prodigious feats abound. He threw the ball harder and hit it farther than anyone else from Little League days to El Segundo High into pro ball.

The pantheon of El Segundo sports stars includes such stars as George Brett (baseball Hall of Fame), Pete Beathard (Rose Bowl Hall of Fame), Roy Saari (swimming world record holder) and Keith Erickson (member of the NBA champion Lakers). There are those in the small town in the shadow of LAX who insist Flynn belongs at the head of the line.

He lived large, thoroughly enjoying the ride and later reminiscing, even though his career did not lead, as expected, to the majors.

Have you watched "Bull Durham" or any of the other movies about wild and crazy minor-league baseball players?

Flynn did not have to watch them. He lived them.

There's the story of his rookie year as a pro with Visalia in the then Class D California League.

He is said to have walked into a Cadillac dealership to look at the new cars. A salesman was less than welcoming when he spotted the teenager wearing jeans and a dirty white T-shirt.

Flynn, the brash \$90,000 bonus baby, reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of 100s, pointed to a car and said, "I'll take that one."

We first crossed paths, young columnist interviewing young ballplayer, late in his career, which ran from 1960, when he was 18, to 1966.

A story he told that day etched in my memory is his account of almost making the then-Kansas City Athletics the previous spring. He was a late cut by A's manager Eddie Lopat.

This was long before teams employed psychologists and what they call mind coaches to help prospects deal with the emotional trauma of a high-stress profession.

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Lopat was a street-smart New York native who relied on finesse when he pitched for the Yankees. He was not a good match for a fun-loving California kid.

Flynn's disappointment at being sent back to the minors was too much for him to handle. He took his frustration out on his locker. The locker won the short battle.

"I broke my hand," Flynn said.

He was a righty.

"I broke my left hand," he said.

He had a sheepish grin.

"That shows I'm maturing," he said.

One of his problems was the A's could not decide if he was fish or fowl. Was he a hard-throwing pitcher? Was he a power-hitting outfielder? If management was conflicted, how about the psyche of the young player?

Flynn played when bullpens were one relief man expected to pitch two or three innings a couple times a week and several mop-up guys who were not especially valued.

In this era of deep bullpens full of specialists, they would figure out how to harness his fastball and have him in the majors within three years.

An elbow problem also contributed to him hitting the wall in baseball. This was long before modern surgery and the bionic pitchers of today.

Before moving with wife Dee in the past year to Oceanside, Flynn lived in Fallbrook. He was working on a book about his career with old El Segundo friend Steve Winnerstrom. He'd call from his barn with an update. It was fun for him to share the stories he was collecting.

He might mention he most recent phone conversation with his old buddy Ken Harrelson, who played nine years in the majors.

He might retell the story of the time one spring when Mickey Mantle, the great Yankee Hall of Fame slugger famed for his “tape-measure” home runs, watched him take batting practice.

Duly impressed, Mantle encouraged him to concentrate on hitting.

Flynn never wallowed in self-pity. He created a post-baseball career for himself as owner-operator of Flynn Rubbish Hauling in El Segundo.

He did not talk about what might have been. He just reminisced. His memories were good memories. While he may have been his own worst enemy during his pro baseball years, they never sucked the little kid out of him.

I'll miss our conversations, Bob.

Clearing out the mini-notebook:

Scouting report >> Lakers coach Byron Scott, the pride of Morningside High, believes Steph Curry, who is saluted for his remarkable ability to shoot the basketball, “is an underrated defender.” ...

Local stuff >> Bob Clayton and Roger Moore had an early Father's Day when Cal State Bakersfield played at UCLA in the NCAA baseball regional. Clayton played at the former Aviation High (it closed in 1982). Moore played at Redondo High. They were teammates at Cal State Dominguez Hills. Check the Bakersfield roster and you find Clayton's son Kris (Mira Costa) while Moore's son Kris (Mater Dei) is a Bruin. ...

Bottom line >> Relative to his time, Elgin Baylor, one of the greatest Lakers of them all, dominated games in a physical manner similar to how LeBron James does now.

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