

# Legendary Twilight League Player/Manager Gene Johnson, 76, Dies



Gene Johnson, a player and manager in the Greater Hartford Twilight League for 60 years, died on Monday at the age of 77. (John Woike / Hartford Courant)

By **Paul Doyle**

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**J**ust a few weeks before he died, Gene Johnson was traveling to his son's house in Rhode Island when he instructed the driver to pull over as they passed a golf course.

"Let's play golf," Gene said.

And he did, no matter that the 76-year-old Johnson's body was ravaged by an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer. They made it through just eight holes, but it was typical Gene Johnson — active and defiant, right to the end.

"Just like I knew my father would be," Jeff Johnson said Monday. "The strength he showed right through [Monday] morning was really something."

Gene Johnson, who spent decades as a player and coach in the Greater Hartford Twilight League, died Monday after a

brief battle with cancer. He was diagnosed July 25 and continued to manage his Foss Insurance team.

Johnson grew up in Hartford and Manchester and first played in the Twilight League while a student at Manchester High in 1953. He would chase his baseball dreams after graduating from high school in 1955, signing with the New York Giants before embarking on a seven-year minor league ride.

In 1960, he was playing in the Milwaukee Braves organization when he was demoted to a Class B team despite hitting above .330. Rather than report, he returned to Connecticut with his wife Helen and raised his family.

His professional career was ending, but his baseball life was just beginning. Johnson returned to the Twilight League and quickly established himself as one of the league's best hitters.

Within five years, he was a player-manager. He won numerous batting titles, sometimes hitting close .500, and was known as competitor on the field.

Johnson, a third baseman, played into his 50s and coached through this season. And even this season, Johnson manned right field when his team was short a player at the start of a game.

"He loved the game," Jeff said.

He was also closely associated with the game. Everyone in the Greater Hartford baseball community knew Johnson. His exploits on the field — and as a coach — were legendary.

"The amount of guys that he's coached ... I can't go anywhere without seeing somebody who knew my dad," Jeff said. "I can't go anywhere. It's always, 'You're Gene's kid.' ... It never bothered me. He was my first hero."

Dave Bidwell, who pitched for Johnson for years after being recruited by him in 1975, told the Courant in July, "Gene won the batting title that year at like .472, something ridiculous. He had the respect of the umpires. They would never call a third strike on him. It used to piss everybody off. Hey, he had that respect. He played the equivalent of Triple A, which they didn't have in 1960. But that's the level he was at, behind Eddie Mathews. He just mashed the ball."

Johnson, who lived in Vernon and worked in automobile sales, is survived by his wife Helen, 78, and children Mary Ellen, Jeni, Mike, Helen, and Jeff. He was predeceased by his son Ray.

He also leaves 14 grandchildren (seven boys, seven girls).

Calling hours are Thursday and Friday from 4-8 p.m. at Tierney Funeral Home in Manchester.

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