

BASEBALL NOVEMBER 7, 2015

# Fred Besana, former major-leaguer and area coach, dies at 85

## HIGHLIGHTS

He played for Lincoln High School and Placer Junior College

His stint in the major leagues with Baltimore was 25 days

He coached at Roseville and Oakmont high schools, American River College

BY MARK MCDERMOTT

*Special to The Bee*

Fred Besana struck out Willie McCovey with the bases loaded in the 1959 Pacific Coast League All-Star Game. He went toe-to-toe against Ernie Banks in a spring training game. And, he walked Mickey Mantle and gave up a hit to Yogi Berra.

Besana, who attended Lincoln High School and Placer Junior College, stared down some of the best players in baseball history.

Besana died Saturday from heart complications. He was 85.

"Fred was a great person and a true friend of mine for 48 years and a friend and coach to many, many more from the Sacramento area," former coach and umpire Roy Hamlin said.

Besana's confrontations against Hall of Fame members are just a small sample of the memories of one of the finest left-handed pitchers in the Sacramento area.

He made his Major League debut on April 18, 1956, with the Baltimore Orioles, pitching two scoreless innings of relief against the Boston Red Sox.

Orioles manager Paul Richards originally planned to use his lefty strictly in relief. But with left-hander Bill Wight hit hard in spring training and in two regular-season starts, Richards decided to give his rookie a start. Besana allowed three runs in the first inning, worked into the seventh inning and beat the Washington Senators 7-3.

Even with Richards' backing, Besana's stay in Baltimore was short. He made two starts and five relief appearances and compiled a 1-0 record and 5.29 ERA in 17 2/3 innings of work. No reason was given for his re-assignment to the minor leagues.

"They didn't have to," Besana said in an interview in 2013. "I knew. I was so damn wild I couldn't get the ball over the plate."

When asked about his time in the Big Leagues, Besana, who in his 80s still looked like he could pitch an inning or two said, "I can't tell you much. I wasn't there very long."

He could, however, say tell plenty about how he got there.

## He got his start at Lincoln High School

Besana was a tall, lanky left-hander who grew up in the rural farming town of Lincoln. He learned to pitch throwing stones at the family barn. In his 1947 senior season at Lincoln High, he struck out 107 batters in 65 innings and led the Zebras to the Sacramento County League championship.

While pitching for Lincoln High, the 17-year-old twice shut out Elk Grove High and out-duelled Richie Myers, who signed with the Chicago Cubs as a shortstop and broke into the majors three days after Besana. In their first encounter, both pitchers threw no-hitters, but

Besana prevailed 1-0.

“When we played Elk Grove at home, it was such a big deal that the whole town shut down and all the grammar school kids were let out of class for the day to go to the game,” Besana said.

Besana next pitched for Placer Junior College, now Sierra College. In his second season, he led the Spartans to a league title and the Northern California best-of-three championship series against San Mateo, whose top pitcher was former Sacramento Solons right-hander Bud Watkins.

Besana won the opener 1-0, but his team lost 4-2 in Game 2. In the decisive third game, he took the mound against Watkins, who became a minor-league teammate of Besana’s with the Vancouver Mounties in 1958. San Mateo won the game 3-2 in 16 innings, despite Besana pitching 13 innings and hitting a two-run home run.

In 1950, Besana signed with the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League for \$5,000, with the stipulation he would collect an additional \$5,000 if his contract was sold to a major-league team. After attending spring training with the Oaks, he was assigned to the Sweetwater (Texas) Swatters of the Class D Longhorn League. He made five starts, went 3-1 with a 4.64 ERA and was promoted to the Albuquerque (N.M.) Dukes of the West Texas-New Mexico League. At Class C Albuquerque, he was 15-11 with a 5.23 ERA. He pitched a combined 205 innings that season.

Besana spent the next four years in the Air Force, and though his patriotic duty kept him off the professional diamond, it didn’t keep him off the mound.

“I joined the Air Force instead of getting drafted into the Army,” Besana said. “I spent most of my four-year military service in the Midwest. I spent my first two years at Clarksville Base in Tennessee, right there on the border of Tennessee and Kentucky, and my final two years at Travis AFB3. All I ever did was play baseball and basketball.”

### **Despite being in Air Force, he kept pitching**

When one of the Clarksville, Tenn., area’s semi-pro baseball teams learned there was a pro pitcher on the base, it didn’t take long for the owner of the Hartsville Sun approached the base commander and suggested a regular weekend pass for Besana would be good for both the base and the town. The commander agreed and Besana joined the team.

Not everyone agreed with the commander’s decision.

“Once, a young, snot-nosed lieutenant put me in for being AWOL, citing I missed guard duty,” Besana said. “He told everyone when I got back from playing ball he was going to throw me in the brig. The lieutenant was called in the commander’s office. After that, I never had a problem with him again.”

Once the local ball clubs got a first-hand look at the hard-throwing Besana, the bidding war began.

“I was getting 10 bucks a game to pitch for Hartsville,” Besana said. “When we played the Clarksville Moose, I was approached by one of their team’s representatives and offered 10 bucks not to pitch that day, and if I’d pitch for them, they’d pay me \$25 a game. I couldn’t pass on that deal. So, the next day I became a Moose.”

Besana said there was never a dull moment on the weekends, playing in some of the most out-of-the way places imaginable.

“We played a game in Harlem, Kentucky,” Besana recalled. “I mean this place was way, way back in the woods. There were moonshine stills all over the place. And the ballpark wasn’t much to speak of either. I remember rounding third, heading for home and plowing over the

catcher. When I sat down in the dugout, this hillbilly in farmer's overalls walks up to me and says, 'That's my son you knocked down boy, and I don't want to see that happen again.' As he walked away, he pulled back his coat to show me he was packing a pistol."

While at Travis AFB in 1953 and 1954, Besana pitched for the Marysville Giants of the semi-pro Valley League. Games were played on Wednesday nights and a weekend afternoon. He struck out 18 batters in a game twice.

### **Big-league stint with Baltimore was 25 days**

When Besana's four-year stint with the Air Force was up, he rejoined the Oaks at the end of the 1954 season. His absence from the professional game showed, and in 27 2/3 innings, he was 0-4 with 6.83 ERA. In 1955, however, pitched 146 innings, went 6-10 with a 3.75 ERA and Baltimore bought his contract.

Besana started the 1956 season in Baltimore, but after 25 days in the big leagues, the Orioles sent him to Triple-A Vancouver. With the Mounties, he was 1-13 with a 6.62 ERA, and he was searching for a new employer in 1957.

The next season, Besana joined the unaffiliated Amarillo Gold Sox of the Western League. After he went 10-3, the Orioles purchased his contract again and assigned him to Knoxville of the South Atlantic League to finish the season. Though, he accumulated was 23-25 at Knoxville (1-4), Louisville (11-12 in 1958) and Vancouver (11-9 in 1959-60), he never reached the major-leagues again.

Besana retired from baseball in 1960, he said, because "I had had enough, baseball just wasn't fun anymore." Instead, he completed his college courses and fulfilled his teaching credential requirements at Sacramento State.

But the itch to play returned in 1961. Besana played for the Spokane Indians/Montreal Royals, the Los Angeles Dodgers' Triple-A club in the PCL. After the season, he called it quits for good. In his eight minor-league seasons, he had a 58-63 record and 4.33 ERA in 1,051 2/3 innings.

After his professional career, Besana taught and coached junior varsity basketball and baseball at Roseville High School from 1962-64. During the fall of 1965, he became Oakmont High School's first baseball coach.

In 1966, he joined the American River College teaching staff and was named the baseball coach. He coached until 1985 and taught until his retirement in 1990.

Besana says his only regret in baseball was never facing his idol, Hall of Famer Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox.

He came close once.

"During that 1956 season with Baltimore, I was pitching against Boston and Williams was coming up," Besana said. "I was doing everything I could to stay in the game. And, while on his way to the plate, he was called back to the dugout for a pinch hitter. Something about a heel injury, so it was said.

"I always thought it was because I was so wild Boston was afraid that I'd hit him. All I ever wanted was to be able to tell my son and grandson Ted Williams hit one off me that's still going."

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