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Cal State Fullerton remembers baseball standout Ryan Owens, 39

Ryan Owens' picture fills the scoreboard during his memorial service at Goodwin Field at Cal State Fullerton Monday, Feb 26, 2018. Ryan Owens, 39, passed after a brief illness followed by cardiac arrest in early February. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **CONTRIBUTING WRITER** |

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By Lou Ponsi

Ryan Owens was an outstanding baseball player.

Donning Cal State Fullerton's navy blue and orange baseball uniform from 1997 to 1999, Owens distinguished himself as a player who could hit for power and for average. He could run, field and throw.

On Feb. 10, Owens, a husband and father of two, died of complications from the flu. He was 39.

The hundreds who filled the seats around the baseball diamond at Cal State Fullerton's Goodwin Field on Monday evening to celebrate his life heard anecdote after anecdote showing that Owens' accomplishments on the ball field paled in comparison to the mark he made as a teammate, coach, brother, son, husband, father and friend.

Owens parents, Glen and Janice, former Titan teammates and coaches, current Titan ballplayers and the baseball team from Sonora High School were among the attendees.

Chad Owens, Ryan's older brother, told the gathering about his baby brother's big heart and ability to tell a good story.

He talked about Ryan's loyalty, determination and infectious smile.

"He would be at your side no matter what," Owens said. "Ryan's love and passion for others knew no bounds. Whether he was coaching kids in the game that he loved, visiting my grandma multiple times a week to make sure she was OK, spending time with his kids, or just being around friends and family."

Owens was a four-year varsity player at Sonora and a member of the Raiders' 1995 CIF championship team.

Then-Cal State Fullerton assistant coach Rick Vanderhook recruited Owens, who went on to become one of the best ball players in Titan history.

"He was diligent about what he did and how he worked" Vanderhook, now head coach, said at the memorial. "He was a super athlete."

Owens' team-leading 23 home runs and 85 RBI in 1999 were instrumental to the Titans reaching the College World Series.

At Cal State Fullerton he ranks 10th in career home runs (34), RBI (163) and slugging percentage (.581).

The third baseman also played for the USA Baseball Collegiate National Team.

"When he used to run from first to third on a ground ball, he was like a gazelle running around the bases," Vanderhook said. "Ryan had a fire. He had a passion. Kids don't have that as much anymore."

George Horton, the Titans' head coach from 1997-2007, said he knew Owens was special from the first time he saw him.

"It was more about how he played the game than his numbers and stats," Horton said.

Owens was drafted in the seventh round by the Arizona Diamondbacks and advanced to AAA with the Minnesota Twins and Colorado Rockies organizations.

Owens, father of Lexi, 13, and Austin, 11, retired from baseball in 2006.

He married Brooke Fessler in 2013.

Owens coached his son in youth baseball, operating a hitting clinic and was an assistant baseball coach at Fullerton Union and Brea Olinda high schools.

Marc Jimenez, Owens' best friend since kindergarten, fought back tears as he talked about his friend's ability to inspire everyone around him.

"There was never any malice in his heart," Jimenez said. "He was all love and he was just gold. If heaven is anything I imagine it to be, he's up there right now with a baseball bat in one hand and a glove in the other, smiling down on all of us, saying 'it's going to be all right.'"