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Ed Gebhart: A man long gone, but not forgotten

By Ed Gebhart, Times Columnist

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How many out there remember Bill Curry? William Jackson Curry, Jr. to be exact. Not too many, I would guess. After all it's been more than 60 years since he played for old Upper Chichester High School. Did I say "played?" Actually, he scintillated, dominated and left opponents in awe.

Thousands of young men have proudly carried their school colors over the generations. You'd have great difficulty coming up with a dozen who could match or even come close to equaling Mr. Curry on the gridiron, basketball court and baseball diamond. Consider: He was a unanimous first team All-Delco selection in all three sports, led the county in scoring in football and basketball, was named Most Valuable Player in the American Legion all-star baseball game when, among other things, he slammed a pitch off the deep left centerfield wall in

old Shibe Park. Not too much later he was signed to a professional contract by the old Philadelphia A's.

So why all the interest about Mr. Curry now? As you may have guessed, the news is not good. Thanks to Tanya and Jim Earner, Mr. Curry's stepson, we have learned that Mr. Curry passed away on May 29 of natural causes in Hot Springs, Ark. He was 81 and is survived by his wife, the former Joanne Burdette, and four children.

Mr. Curry spent two seasons as a catcher in the A's farm system and two more years in the Army where, as he used to say, he "never fired a rifle." He came home, landed a pretty good job at the old Reynolds Aluminum plant, got married and moved to Claymont where he used to terrorize local softball leagues.

When Reynolds moved its operations to Hot Springs in the late '70s, Mr. Curry accepted an offer to move with them. His children worked at the local country club during the summer, and Mr. Curry got a job cutting grass. This gave him golfing privileges, and to the surprise of no one, he became a pretty fair golfer.

Morris "Mo" DeFrank, now retired from a teaching and coaching job at Garnet Valley High School, was a sophomore quarterback during Chi's undefeated season of 1952.

"Hank" Pryor was Bill's running mate at halfback, "DeFrank said, "Talk about speed! If you were handing off the ball, you had better do it in a hurry or they'd run right past you. In practice, we'd do everything we could to catch Bill, and then he'd run right over you. There was no one game that stands out in my mind.

With Bill, it was every game.

“In basketball, there always was some controversy as to who was the first Delco player to score 1,000 points, Bill or Alonzo Lewis from Darby. I do know Bill averaged about 32 points a game as a senior and scored something like 1,200 points. And very very few of those points were on layups. The thing about Bill is that he made everything look so easy.

“There’s no doubt about it,” DeFrank said, “Bill Curry was one of the best ever to come out of Delaware County.”

Dr. Chis Panarello, who gave up a promising career as a prizefighter to become a dentist, was a tackle and center on that 1952 juggernaut. He, too, has fond memories of Mr. Curry.

“Bill not only made All-Delco but All-Scholastic,” he said. “He was a quarterback as a freshman; but our coach, Tony Apichella, soon learned that he had too much speed. He also had a great arm and fine hands. He could have been a standout at any position. In basketball, he not only led the county in scoring but he also set a scoring record in the old Kiwanis Club tournament. In baseball, he was a .400 hitter.

“I really feel he could have made it with the A’s but he got a little homesick. He wasn’t too crazy about being a catcher either. I told him to stick it out, that once they see how fast you are, you’ll be in centerfield.

“Our teammates used to wonder who was faster, Bill or Hank Pryor. One day after practice, we got them to run a 100-yard dash. I was holding one end of the tape at the finish line. They ran neck and neck all the way, but it looked to me that Pryor won by a quarter-inch.”

It takes a remarkable young man to excel in three sports. St. James High’s Dick Christy, for all his football magnificence, was pretty much a one trick pony. Kid brother Jim (football and baseball) was a better all-around athlete.

There were better football players to come out of the county, like the aforementioned Dick Christy; better basketball players, like Springfield’s Geoff Petrie; and better baseball players, like Chester’s Lew Krausse.

Put them all in one package and you’ll have some idea why Bill Curry, though long gone, still is not forgotten.

Ed Gebhart is a retired public relations executive. His column appears Sunday.

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