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## Remembering Al Stanek, ace pitcher, great family man and caring tutor

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Al Stanek during a visit to Wrigley Field in Chicago in 1963.

On an early spring evening in 2004, my wife and I arrived at Holyoke's Crosier Field with our grandson and his dad.

We awaited an old friend, and sure enough, he was right on time. As he walked toward us, he carried a bag of baseballs over his shoulder, with a bat in his left hand and a glove on his right. Yes, and he had a catcher's mitt in the bag, too.

"Come on, let's get to work," he said as he smiled and shook our grandson's hand.

They walked together to the pitcher's mound - kindred spirits, lefthanded all the way. One a 62-year old who had pitched in the major leagues, the other a 10-year-old who yearned to pitch in the Amherst Little League.

The kid needed help with his delivery, and he couldn't have found a better teacher.



"This is what I learned from my first coach," he said.

As he spoke, he went into a fluid windup, complete with a perfect follow-through.

"You need to follow through the right way, so you'll be in position if they hit a ground ball back to the mound," he explained.

The tutorial went on for some 45 minutes, with our grandson gradually getting the idea of facing home plate with a foot on the pitching rubber, then pivoting while lifting the right leg. He couldn't do it anywhere near as smoothly as his tutor did, but at least he could see how it's done - and done right.

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"It's called pitching mechanics," he said. "Hank Gonet knew all about it. I was lucky to have him as my coach at the Chicopee Boys Club."

Yes, that was Al Stanek, a great athlete and an even greater citizen. He was an outstanding teammate wherever he played, and now, there he was giving of his time to a rookie lefty who needed help. That little tutorial at Crosier Field told everything you'd need to know about this man.



Al, 74, passed away Tuesday night after a long illness. As his family and friends grieve, they can be assured that memories of him will burn brightly in local sports lore.

His accomplishments include a Western Mass. pitching record that will never be broken - 25 strikeouts in a nine-inning game. That can't be topped, because high schools now play seven innings.

He did it as a 16-year-old sophomore at Chicopee High School. Coach Bill Moge gave him the ball for his team's first game in the 1960 Western Mass. Tournament. In the tourney's first night game, he gave a dazzling performance under the lights at Holyoke's Mackenzie Stadium.

He struck out the side in the top of the ninth to complete a one-hitter in which only three Amherst batters put the ball in play (the two outs not by strikeout came on ground balls to second base).

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He won that stirring duel with Amherst ace Cliff Allen when Larry Skinner's two-out single in the last of the ninth drove in the only run. Allen lost 1-0 despite a two-hitter with 16 strikeouts. Even a performance like that couldn't beat Stanek.



There was nothing deceptive about Al that night. He just kept throwing his overpowering fastball.

"I was just letting it go. And I had pretty good control," he said after the game.

Pretty good? He walked two, and struck out the side seven times.

Chicopee didn't win the 1960 tournament, but his pitching served as prelude to three straight state championships. That run included a 21-0 record in 1962, his senior year.

For his high school career, he had a 37-5 pitching record, which included 21 double-digit strikeout games. In one 15-inning game, he fanned 24. In the 1962 Western Mass. final, he struck out 21.

He also excelled as Chicopee's cleanup hitter. As a senior, he had 29 RBI in 21 games.

Chicopee's unbeaten season put Stanek squarely in the spotlight, but he downplayed it by saying, "I'm getting a lot of publicity, but let's not forget that I have eight great teammates out there with me, and six more on the bench. There's a lot of baseball talent in Chicopee."

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He signed with the San Francisco Giants right after high school. As a bonus player, he spent the 1963 season in the big leagues on a team featuring future Hall of Famers Willie Mays, Juan Marichal, Willie McCovey, Orlando Cepeda and Gaylord Perry.

In 1964, he pitched for Triple A Tacoma, leading the league with 220 strikeouts in 223 innings. He had another solid season with Tacoma in 1965, and was told by management that he would have a shot at the big league rotation in 1966 spring training. However, his career was derailed by a shoulder injury incurred while he was serving an Army hitch in the winter of '66. He was never the same pitcher after that, but he did stay in pro ball through 1967.

At age 23, he came home to raise a family while working at Hamilton Standard in Windsor Locks. He stayed with the game he loved by pitching and then becoming player-manager for the Chicopee Falls Tigers of the Tri-County League.

In 2014, when the Western Massachusetts Baseball Hall of Fame was instituted, he was elected in its inaugural class.

"Al not only was one of the greatest pitchers ever in Western Mass., he was one of the greatest people. As good as he was as an athlete, he was even better as a person," said Dan Dulchinos, who served as coach Moge's assistant before going on to a 50-year career at Chicopee Comprehensive High School.



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Yes, Al Stanek was all of that - and a caring teacher of pitching mechanics, too.

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