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FEATURED

Dave Rosenfield, synonymous with baseball in Hampton Roads, dies at 87

By David Hall
The Virginian-Pilot
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Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

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Norfolk Tides general manager Dave Rosenfield, photographed at Harbor Park on Tuesday, April 12, 2005.

VIRGINIA BEACH

He lived a long life of accomplishment on his own terms, and now minor league baseball is without one of its legendary figures for the first time in more than 60 years.

Longtime Norfolk Tides executive Dave Rosenfield died late Tuesday at a Norfolk hospital from complications following a heart attack suffered at home on Feb. 18. He was 87.

A four-time International League Executive of the Year and the 2004 King of Baseball, Rosenfield was the Tides' general manager from 1963 to 2012, helping usher minor league baseball from an era when all that mattered was the game on the field into today's activity-filled, family-friendly night out.

Rosenfield, who claimed to have invented the now-ubiquitous "Turn Back The Clock Night" that features low-priced hot dogs and sodas at Harbor Park, remained on Norfolk's staff as an executive vice president after stepping back from the club's day-to-day operations in 2012.

He was a member of the International League and Hampton Roads sports halls of fame and last year was voted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame.

The 2016 season was Rosenfield's 61st working in minor league baseball. He served as a color commentator on broadcasts of the Tides' home games through the end of last season, and he reported to the office most mornings until recently.

"Our entire organization is devastated at this news," Tides President Ken Young, who is out of the country, said in a statement. "Dave was instrumental to the success of the Tides for over 50 years, and baseball in Hampton Roads won't ever be the same without him."

In August 2015, Rosenfield was diagnosed with cancer that had spread to his bones. He scaled back his work with the Tides for several weeks to undergo treatment, but within a few months had resumed going to the ballpark most days.

Shortly after his initial diagnosis, the plain-talking Rosenfield said he planned to remain "very positive" as he fought the disease. But he made his feelings about it clear.

"I'm not too thrilled with the whole thing," he said. "But life's tough."

Rosenfield was viewed by some as a polarizing figure. He could be curt, even with wayward children at the ballpark. In his 2012 memoir, "Baseball: One Helluva Life," Rosenfield defended his lifelong direct approach with people.

"You may like me, or you may not," he wrote in a chapter called "Who I Am." "That's OK with me, and this book probably won't change your opinion of me. But I have tried to live my life with integrity and by doing what I think is the right thing.

"Whether people agree with me or if they don't, you'll have to search long and far to find anyone who can honestly say that I screwed them over. And I think that's a pretty good epitaph for anyone to have."

In the book, the once tremendously overweight Rosenfield detailed how he believed he had no business living as long as he did. He ate his way to a peak weight of 380 pounds and at one time smoked four packs of cigarettes a day. Rosenfield loved bacon and often ate cold hot dogs straight out of the package, adding salt and mustard.

Another favorite snack was raw hamburger meat on a cracker.

Exercise was never on the menu.

"The fact I'm still on this side of the grass is amazing," Rosenfield wrote in the book, which was co-authored by John Traub. "I've never eaten right. I've never gotten proper rest. No credit to me. I guess I have exceedingly good genes. If there's a hereafter and I see my folks, I will thank them."

Born in El Paso, Texas, in 1929, Rosenfield moved with his family to Los Angeles when he was 3. He went to UCLA on a baseball scholarship and later signed with the Philadelphia Phillies before joining the Navy in 1951.

Rosenfield was hired as GM of the California League's Bakersfield Boosters in 1956. He spent the 1961 season as GM of the Topeka (Kan.) Reds before joining the Tidewater Tides as assistant GM a year later. The Tidewater Tides became the Norfolk Tides under Rosenfield's watch in 1993.

During his time in Los Angeles, Rosenfield befriended several notable show business figures, including actors Billy Barty and John Carradine and singer Kay Starr. He once delivered flowers to Dean Martin's house.

Rosenfield knew virtually everyone in baseball, and many of his relationships spanned decades.

After a Tides game in 2014, the name of former New York Giants player Fred Merkle was brought up in manager Ron Johnson's office. In 1908, Merkle famously committed a baserunning blunder that badly hurt the Giants' pennant hopes.

When Merkle's name was mentioned, Rosenfield said, "I knew Fred Merkle. Dated his daughter."

No one in the room was especially surprised.

Joe Gregory, who succeeded Rosenfield as the Tides' GM, said that every year at baseball's Winter Meetings – a gathering of front office executives from throughout minor and major league baseball – nearly everyone he ran into would start a conversation with, "How's Rosey?"

"There wouldn't be pro baseball here without Rosey," Gregory said. "He kept baseball here for over 50 years, where a lot of teams have come and gone in pro baseball. Back before the boom of minor league baseball throughout the country, Rosey was here as a caretaker. It was in good hands."

Other Tides employees shared similar sentiments in Rosenfield's book.

"It is very difficult to sum up the substantial impact that Dave Rosenfield has had on my life," said Heather McKeating, the team's longtime director of community relations.

Traub interviewed baseball people who had come into contact with Rosenfield over the years for the book.

"He's a magnet; either you like him or you don't," said Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle, who managed the Tides in 1992 and '93. "He's honest to a fault."

Indeed, Rosenfield often spoke without a filter and could be entertainingly indelicate.

During his Virginia Sports Hall of Fame induction speech last April, before a racially diverse audience, Rosenfield mentioned that his paternal grandfather was a Confederate captain during the Civil War.

“We didn’t lose,” he said. “We’re just still waiting for supplies.”

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Bobby Valentine, the former Texas Rangers, New York Mets and Boston Red Sox manager, described to Traub coming to manage the Tides in 1994 after Texas had fired him. He said Rosenfield helped him through a tough time.

Rosenfield “became my mentor, both personally and professionally,” Valentine said. “He became kind of a father/guidance figure. He was a real great support system.”

Hurdle and Valentine were among the many people from around the game who reached out to Rosenfield after he was diagnosed with cancer.

When Hurdle made an appearance in Norfolk in January 2016, he said he considered Rosenfield to be like a second father. The skipper marveled at his friend’s longevity.

“I don’t know if you can count on one hand the number of people who have been in baseball in one spot for 50 years,” Hurdle said. “It’s crazy: 50 in one spot. And the lives he’s touched, the people he’s impacted, the work he’s done and the way he’s seen the franchise evolve over the years – pretty significant.”

Rosenfield even got a jolt of national attention when he turned up as an animated character on a 1990 episode of “The Simpsons” as the owner of the Capital City Capitals. (The episode was co-written by former Tides play-by-play announcer Ken Levine.)

When Rosenfield was named King of Baseball, which is awarded annually by minor league baseball to one person for his or her service to the game, his reputation within the industry was solidified nationally.

“He was on ‘The Simpsons’ as a baseball executive,” Gregory said. “I mean, if you’re going to make ‘The Simpsons,’ you’ve got to do something right.”

Rosenfield is survived by his wife of 25 years, Charmaine, and an adult son, Marc.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with Dave’s family as we mourn the passing of a minor league baseball icon,” Young said.

Rosenfield summed up his career upon learning in January 2016 that he’d be inducted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame .

“I’m always surprised about honors,” Rosenfield said. “This has never been like a job to me. It’s been just a whole bunch of fun.”

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