**Joseph Albert Vilk Jr.: Vilk another hidden diamond gem: Newspaper Obituary and Death Notice**

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**Deceased Name: Joseph Albert Vilk Jr.: Vilk another hidden diamond gem**

Fayette County has been blessed with some great baseball talent through the years. Another hidden diamond gem is German Township's Joe Vilk.

Vilk who was born in Footedale, was an outstanding right-hander for the Uhlans. To quote the Uniontown Evening Standard, "The 5-foot-10 Vilk was regarded as one of the foremost hurlers on scholastic nines of the district."

He was one of the first area players to sign a minor league contract in 1950. The 19-year old inked a pact offered to him by Rex Greaves, a scout for the St. Louis Browns.

Vilk tuned up for the minor league by continuing to pitch in the County League.

On July 31, 1950 Vilk pitching with the Buffington team chucked a no hitter blanking Filbert 5-0. Vilk struck out 10 batters and did not yield a walk. Three Filbert batters reached first base on errors.

Vilk pitched the 1951 season with the Iola, KS Indians in the Class D Kansas-Oklahoma-Missouri League. Iola manager Floyd Temple reported that Vilk was seriously injured when hit behind the left ear with a pitched ball on August 25. Vilk had one seven and lost seven, pitched 179 innings and fanned 107 batters prior to suffering the concussion.

For the years 1950-51-52 Iola didn't have a working agreement with any Major League Baseball team. The Iola team kept the Indians mascot and was an independent entry in the final three years of the league's existence.

In 1952 Vilk fashioned one of the best seasons in KOM League history. That season Vilk established league records for games pitched with 48, victories with 26 and innings pitched with 287. He notched 14 wins in a row that season.

Vilk a fan favorite in Iola was named an honorary member of the Iola fire department and given a badge and fireman's helmet in honor of outstanding season.

Pitcher Jerry Gleason recalled that 1952 season.

"Joe Vilk was our main pitcher," Gleason said. "Paul Weeks was our shortstop and he set the league record in stolen bases. One night it rained and our manager, Woody Fair, told Paul not to steal. Paul did it anyway. He stole second, third and home. He said it was well worth it even though he was fined."

Iola was the final KOM League regular season champion. In 1952, which was the last year of the league, the Indians went 79-47. That was after a 38-84 run in 1951 finishing last in the league. Paul Weeks led the league in stolen bases, 103, and Vilk was the top pitcher of the league at 26-6. Iola's attendance for that final season was 42,327.

Health issues plagued Vilk after that 1952 campaign. Vilk was rejected by the Army three times for health issues.

In February of 1953 Vilk wrote to fans in Iola that he might be forced to retire from baseball because of ill health. Vilk explained that he was suffering from a heart condition which stems from a childhood disease. "I'm losing weight," he said, "and I'm giving up baseball for good. It's too much of a strain on my heart."

Vilk did not give up the game and pitched for Fayetteville of the Class B Carolina League in 1953, a farm team of the Philadelphia Athletics. He finished with a 9-18 record and a 4.52 ERA.

"I've lost eight times by one run," Vilk reported.

Vilk also played in the outfield for Fayetteville and made 117 plate appearances and batted .342.

Health issues cropped up again for Vilk. In August of 1954 he wrote to fans in Iola.

"I just want to let my friends in Iola know that I am getting along very nicely after my heart operation. I was operated on June 2 at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh.

"I guess I am one of the few lucky people who's heart stopped beating and was brought back to life.

"They had to massage my heart for an hour and a half.

"I lost 60 pounds during my illness, but am beginning to pick it up again.

"I expect to return to baseball in 1955 with Savannah in the Class A South Atlantic league."

Vilk did return to minor league action in 1955, he played for three teams: Olean in the Pony League, Lafayette in the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League, both those leagues were Class D ball. He wound up with Portsmouth of the Class B Piedmont League. Vilk's combined record in 1955 was 1-2.

In four years in the minors, Vilk ended up with a career record of 44-33 with a 3.52 ERA.

Vilk resided and worked in Cleveland after his minor league career ended, but he wasn't quite through with baseball. Bernie Magerko and some other Fayette County League players convinced Vilk with a little bit of a cash incentive to pitch in the playoffs for Revere. Vilk pitched for a few more seasons in the County League and even tossed another no-hitter on May 2, 1954. Pitching for Bute, Vilk blanked Monarch, 5-0, fanning 12.

Joseph Albert Vilk Jr. was living in Akron, Ohio when he entered the Cleveland Clinic. He passed away there on July 15, 1979 at the age of 48.

George Von Benko's "Memory Lane" column appears in the Monday editions of the Herald-Standard. He also hosts a sports talk show on WMBS-AM radio from 10 a.m. to noon on Saturdays.

Author: George Von Benko  
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