



Legion Baseball alum recalls valuable lessons learned

Chuck Lindstrom vividly recalls a moment 63 years ago when he stood on home plate at Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, N.Y., to be recognized as the American Legion Baseball Player of the Year. The honorable award was bestowed upon Lindstrom following the 1953 Legion World Series championship game in Miami, which his team, Winnetka (Ill.) Post 10, lost to against Yakima, Wash., Post 36.

Lindstrom would often joke with his late father, former New York Giants player and Hall of Famer Freddie Lindstrom, that he was recognized in Cooperstown before his father was by 22 years.

Following two seasons with Post 10 and college baseball at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., under the guidance of his father who was the coach, Lindstrom had a stint in the majors. At 21 years old he signed with the Chicago White

Sox in 1957 and made his MLB debut on Sept. 28, 1958, in a game against the Kansas City Athletics at Comiskey Park. It was the only major league game in which Lindstrom appeared – he was sent back down to the minors the following season. But that one MLB game resulted in him holding the record for the highest slugging percentage of 3.000 over an entire career in major league history and a 1.000 batting average.

At 24 years old, Lindstrom retired from professional baseball after seeing the “writing on the wall” that he was never going to star in the majors again. His love of baseball transitioned over to a successful 23-year baseball coaching career with Lincoln College in Illinois and other entrepreneurial endeavors. Lindstrom’s collection of memorabilia from his amateur and professional baseball career, as well as from his father’s, consists of photos of his Post 10 teammates, baseball cards of his father worth thousands of dollars, and autographed baseballs by MLB greats and Legion alumni such as Bob Feller. Lindstrom can even recall his father giving him an autographed baseball by Babe Ruth to play with as a young boy.

However, when it comes to Lindstrom’s most prized award, it has no relation to baseball – it’s of one bestowed upon his son, Charles. The Sgt. Charles W. Lindstrom Award is given annually to the “finest U.S. Air Force tactical weather forecaster” on behalf of Sgt. Lindstrom’s success in being the first allied weatherman to enter Iraq during Operation Desert Storm with the 101st Airborne Division.

The American Legion recently spoke with 79-year-old Lindstrom, who resides in Lincoln, Ill., about playing Legion Baseball, the influence his father had on his baseball career, and the positive impact baseball has had on his life.

The American Legion: How did you get involved with playing baseball for Post 10?

A: Back in the 1950s many of the Legion teams were also from the local high school. So the high school that I went to, which was New Trier High School north of Chicago, was the American Legion Winnetka Post (10). It worked out well because we would have our high school baseball season and then go into the summer playing Legion ball.

We had a small team; there were only 12 or 13 guys on the team. So we all rotated playing positions. I was a pitcher and catcher, mostly. And we only played games on weekends, but we practiced every day that we didn't play.

Q: What was it like playing in the 1953 World Series in Miami?

A: It was a great tournament; there was a lot of enthusiasm. And we went all the way to the national tournament undefeated, until those guys from Yakima, Washington, knocked us off (ending Post 10's 31-2 season). The (Chicago) Cubs were not known for going to the World Series, so when the papers had a chance for a local team to go to a national tournament, it became a big deal. Not only did the Chicago papers cover (the Legion World Series), my dad broadcasted the games for Chicago radio stations. So the games were aired in the Chicago area. It was a big deal. We didn't fare well against Yakima, but it was simply a very high-quality competition.

Q: Is there a highlight from the tournament that you can recall?

A: My dad was broadcasting, and I was somewhat wild as a pitcher. And we were playing against Medford (Ore.), and I think I had walked about nine or 10 people. And there was a guy on second base with one out, and I was trying to throw the ball over the plate. I could throw hard, and I had a good curve ball. And my dad said, "Chuck, Chuck! He's signaling third." I wasn't paying any attention to (the batter); I was just trying to throw the ball over the plate. So my father was doing a little coaching while he was announcing the game.

Q: What was your reaction to being named American Legion Player of the Year after your team lost the championship game?

A: I can remember it very, very well because we had played five days in a row. I had pitched three full games. I caught another game, and I played second base after I got knocked off the mound in the championship game. So when they made the announcement, the truth of the matter is, I was really too tired to even understand the magnitude of being awarded it. I felt honored because usually that goes to the team that wins, and we weren't the winner. So that was especially honoring.

Q: What do you think the Legion saw in you to honor you with the award?

A: I played every position, even if I walked nine guys and hit three. Whatever it may be, it mattered that you still stuck with it and battled. The award wasn't to acknowledge that you struck out 35 players; it was a matter that you did all the things that The American Legion stood for. It was a recognition of what I was doing was in keeping with what The American Legion program was trying to promote. That's what the real honor was.

Q: Did you enjoy your trip to Cooperstown, which you earned from being named Player of the Year?

A: Cooperstown was a place that I had heard of. We were always in hopes that my dad would make that trip and be inducted into the Hall of Fame. When it actually happened, and I went to Cooperstown, I can remember very well being at home plate (on Doubleday Field) with Lou Brissie Jr. (then-national Legion Baseball director) and receiving the (Player of the Year) plaque. It was really neat. There you were with the shrine of baseball on home plate at Doubleday Field. That's pretty big time.

Q: What lessons did you take away from playing Legion Baseball?

A: The lessons I took out of our Legion program is that you learned how to compete, and you learned how to make the best out of what you had. And you learned tenacity, you learned hard work. We were disciplined; we were taught to focus on what we were doing. And all those things became invaluable and they became very important as I became an athletic director and college coach.

I will also say that I was fortunate that I not only had American Legion Baseball, but I also had my dad, who was a very good baseball player and also a fine guy.

Q: What impact did your father have on your baseball career?

A: He signed a professional baseball contract when he was 16 years old (playing third base for the New York Giants). My dad retired from professional baseball in 1936, the year I

was born. He to this day is the youngest player to ever play in a World Series (1924) when he was 18 years old. When I came out of The American Legion program I had a chance to go to several California schools (for college). I said why would I go out there when I had the best baseball coach in the world that I sit with at dinner every night. I decided to go to Northwestern where my dad was a coach. It was just his knowledge of the game, his insight on how you play the game, all those things had a very strong impact on my own personal philosophy, and my philosophy as a coach and athletic director.

Q: You hold an MLB record for the single game you played in. What happened in the game?

A: When I signed with the White Sox at that time, if you signed a bonus contract of \$4,000 or more, then you had to be a member of the major league roster. Which meant they had to take somebody off the roster to make room for you. It was a pretty big deal. You also were on that roster for three years. Most of the time you sat on the bench, but it just so happened that in 1958 in that game I was told I was going to be the catcher. It wasn't until the fourth or fifth inning that I went in and caught the remainder of the game.

(At bat), the first time I was up I walked and the second time I was up in the eighth inning I had a 3-1 count and I was given a tip from the catcher who knew this was my first (MLB) game and said, "I would be looking for a fast ball if I were you." I said, "I appreciate that but I'm already looking for one!" I got a fastball and hit it off the top of the wall in right center field and got a triple. After the game it was exciting, and probably the most excited person was my mom. We went to a steakhouse in Chicago but to be perfectly honest I wasn't overly excited because I didn't think

it would be the only time I was going to play.

It's amazing the number of people who follow baseball and are so taken back by the fact that I have the record of 1.000 batting average and 3.000 slugging average and only got one hit. To this day, I get an average of three requests for autographs a year.

Q: Why did you leave the league soon thereafter?

A: In 1959 I was optioned to Charleston, S.C. After that season I basically saw the writing was on the wall that I was going to be in the minor league for a number of years, and I chose not to do that. I left but then I came back. When I quit my dad said to me, "I'm not going to tell you what to do, but give it some thought." About two weeks after quitting I decided to go back. But then left again. To be a good (professional baseball) athlete in those days, my dad would say you had to have a hide like an alligator. But I wasn't quite of that makeup.

Q: What part of your baseball career has been the most meaningful to you?

A: It's a picture of my Lincoln College baseball players who came back to a gathering last year because they had put together the funds to name the baseball part of the new gymnasium after me. I have likened that to the time at the (Hilton) Orrington Hotel in Evanston, Ill., in which my dad retired and there was a retirement ceremony for him. In the ballroom of the Orrington there was about 400 people. The greatest thing to him was the fact that all of these people came back to pay tribute to the positive influence he had on them, primarily during his time as the Northwestern baseball coach. Even though he only won one championship, his

influence on all of his players was profound. He was not a guy that you win at all cost; he was a guy that you did it the right way and that's the way you should lead your life.

Q: Overall, what did you enjoy most about playing Legion Baseball?

A: It gave me the opportunity to play good, high-quality, competitive baseball. If you play Legion Baseball, it means you have to practice, you have to work on physical skills, and you have to develop as an athlete. You are dedicating yourself to an organized higher form of competition. Legion Baseball teaches the philosophy of sports, of competition, and that's the critical thing much more than winning or losing.