

Baseball: My Dreams and Memories

By Frank G. Splitt

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Introduction – Reading and writing a review of Tyler Kepner's book, *K: A History of Baseball in Ten Pitches*, stirred up many baseball related memories in my life—prompting me to begin writing about my recollections in the spring of 2019.¹ This memoir builds on these recollections and so reveals a story worth the telling of baseball's impact on my life story of 90 years.

Early Years – Many pictures from the late 1930s and early 1940s, show me holding and/or throwing a ball of one kind or another. This brief history is focused on pitching a baseball with a circumference of 9-inches as opposed to a 16-inch 'Chicago' softball—that's another story.

In the mid-1920s my father played semipro baseball for Chicago Curtain Supply, loved the game and the Chicago Cubs. He introduced me to Cubs baseball as a 7-year old at a game during the summer of 1938. I still have a vivid memory of sitting in the crowded right-field bleachers when my dad left to get a beer (or two). After what seemed to be forever, I became frightened—thinking I was abandoned. I was incredibly relieved when he returned and with a soda for me. At that early age, I really did not understand the game or appreciate the fact that the Cubs had a championship team that would win the National League pennant and go on to play the New York Yankees in the World Series.

My earliest recollections of playing in any kind of ball game came about a year later after 3rd grade during the summer of 1939. The older kids on the block let me play in a game of "skush" that took place at the end of the block west of our home at 2012 Cortland Street on Chicago's northwest side. A rubber ball about 8 inches in circumference was pitched underhand to the hitter who hit the ball with a swinging fist. Improvised bases were located on the street to form the ball diamond. I have an indelible impression from that time of the flashy gold and green uniforms worn by members of the Iroquois, a neighborhood teenage 16-inch softball team, who watched us play.

Dad equipped me with my first glove, a tiny Coca-Cola advertising give away. An upgrade followed a year or two later when he threw a ringer at a Saint Bartholomew Church Carnival—selecting a glove model named after Frank Demaree who played right field for Cubs on that memorable afternoon in 1938. That glove was to be a constant companion over the next few summers. I often played catch with my dad who made a point of the need to field short hops. I carried my glove with me along with a black taped ball—asking anyone and everyone if they wanted to play catch.

The year 1942 is memorable on many accounts, none the least of which was the fact that America was at war and not doing too well at that. On the brighter side, my dad's sister, my beloved Aunt Mae, gifted me with Paul Gallico's just published book *The Pride of the Yankees*, the life story of the legionary Lou Gehrig. I read the book with intense interest. Sometime later that year, she took me downtown to the *Chicago Theater* to see the movie of the same title starring Gary Cooper. That did it, not only did Lou Gehrig become my hero, but I really got into baseball with the beginning of related dreams of playing baseball and living life like he did.

High School Years – I began to pitch a baseball in competition in 1945 at age at 14. This was just after my freshman year at Saint Philip High School on Jackson Boulevard in Chicago, a school without a baseball team. The Chicago Park District junior league provided the opportunity at Hermosa Park located at the corner of Kilbourn and Lyndale Avenues on Chicago's northwest side. Our 'uniforms' consisted of Old Timer's League T-shirts. I have memories of playing catch with Chuck Hockstetter, who played first-base for Kelvyn Park High School and lived nearby. He and Nick Paragud, the team's shortstop, were selected as Chicago North-side All Stars— playing a game at Wrigley Field against the South-side All

Stars that I watched with Joe Hafenscher, my friend and Hermosa Park teammate. Chuck went on to play for the bearded House of David barnstorming baseball team.

At the time, Joe and I were over-the-top Cub fans, using our *Chicago Herald American* paper-route earnings to pay for grandstand seats and a hot dog for as many Cub games as we could afford that pennant winning 1945 season. I have clear memories of two games: a win by Hank Wyse on a very cold spring afternoon and the first game pitched (and won) by the just acquired Yankee ace Hank Borowy.

Another notable baseball related memory comes from April 13, 1946 when a few of my Hermosa Park teammates and I witnessed a fatal plane crash close to our baseball diamond located at the southwest corner of Hermosa Park. The plane, a 2-seat variant of the P-51 Mustang, crashed about 75 yards, or so, from where we were practicing. My position was near home plate on the baseball diamond. We were shielded from the explosive impact of the crash by a railroad embankment that ran in a north-south direction several yards to the west of the diamond's left-field foul line.

Fr. Tobin, my St. Philip High School homeroom Biology teacher, invited me to tell the story of the crash to my sophomore classmates. I recall telling them that the plane was apparently stunting and flying upside down before the crash demolished the plane, killing the pilot and his passenger while setting homes on fire and injuring eight residents. It was said that the plane's engine was buried eight feet into the ground.²

In 1947, Harvey Duncan, the Hermosa Park supervisor, moved me up to the park's senior-level team for that and the 1948 summer baseball seasons. Since my high-school didn't have a baseball team, the move would prove crucial. It provided me with experience playing with and pitching against seasoned high-school ballplayers. Hermosa Park's senior team was mostly composed of members of the Kelvyn Park High School team that was led by Harry Olson, their catcher and captain, and Gordon Pitts, their standout basketball player and pitcher who was free with tips.

The Wright Junior College Years – I enrolled at Chicago's Wright Junior College in the fall of 1948 with my good friend Dick Carsello. My aim was to become a Chemical Engineer, that is, if I was not able to play professional baseball. If the truth be told I was really trying to pursue my youthful dream of being a major-league pitcher.

The experience playing with the Hermosa Park teams paid off when I tried out for and made Wright's baseball team early in 1949 along with Hank Antolak, a friend and fellow graduate of St. Philip High School, The spring of 1949 was the second semester of my freshman year.

I tried out as a pitcher. It was not an auspicious occasion. We were asked to long toss across the width of the gym and, as a consequence, I was cut by the captain of the previous year's team who accused me of throwing curve balls. With no high school pitching background shown on his chart, it was an easy cut. I was not trying to throw a curveball but I must've put a lot of rotation on the ball because of my wrist action. I spoke to Mr. Gilson, the baseball coach and asked for another chance which he gave me. I became the number-two starter that year behind veteran sophomore Don Larsen, a fireballing left-hander. Hank became the 3rd-baseman and two-time captain of our Wright team. Of note is the fact that Hank and I were the only players on the team that did not play high-school baseball.

As a measure of my determination, I set up a gym in our attic featuring a York barbell set, a homemade inclined bench, hand grippers, and a baseball-sized steel ball bearing. All this equipment was used with a view toward improving my overall body strength with special focus on my right arm and wrist.

The next year found our Wright team to be really quite good as we became the 1950 co-champions of the Illinois Junior College Baseball Conference. I was the lead pitcher and was scouted by a Mr. Komanges who had pitched in the Chicago White Sox organization. He told my father that I could be a right-handed Billy Pierce, the left-handed ace of the Chicago White Sox pitching staff at the time—hyperbole readily accepted by my dad.

The Post Wright Junior College Years – After Wright's season ended, a tryout was arranged by Mr. Komanges who drove me and my father to Comiskey Park where we arrived before a night game in mid-June 1950. There he introduced us to the White Sox manager, pitching Hall-of-Famer Ted Lyons who told me to suit up. I was to show my stuff to former Sox pitching great Johnny Rigney.

Mr. Rigney took me onto the field where I “pitched” to a Sox catcher while he stood behind me on the mound—dwarfing me at well over 6 feet and close to 200 pounds. He must have seen what I was often told by my catchers, particularly Gil Lande, that I had a great curve ball and a live but not overpowering fastball. Although radar guns were not available until after 1954, I am sure my fastball was nowhere near 90 mph. I don't recall throwing a four-seam fastball too often. I gripped the ball with my index finger along one of the long seams, to the right would give me an in-shoot to a right handed batter while to the left of the seam I would get an out-shoot that came in on a left-handed batter. A slow curve and knuckleball provided the rest of my stuff – all used to set up the batter for my fast downward breaking curveball. Also, there were no smartphone cameras to capture the event with a video or even a photo (unbelievable in today's age).

All seemed to go well, however there was a major complication with regard the White Sox tryout. Based on our Wright transcripts, with outstanding grades in Mathematical Analysis and Calculus, both Dick Carsello and I had been offered and had accepted Arthur J. Schmitt Academic Scholarships in Electrical Engineering at the Fournier Institute of Technology in Lemont Illinois. The scholarships would cover room, board, tuition, books, and uniforms—allowing us to complete our last two years of college free of charge. All of this took place after an interview by Fournier's president, Fr. Eugene Hoffman that occurred weeks before the tryout.

It was a sad day in my father's life when I told him that I had previously accepted the Fourier scholarship, was now committed to that decision, and would not sign a minor-league contract. As a matter of fact, both Dick and I were already taking summer courses at the Illinois Institute of Technology so as to help us “catch up” with our future ten classmates and go on to form the 12-man Fournier Class of 1952.

Although much to the chagrin of my father, in retrospect, it was ‘no-brainer’ decision to accept the scholarship as it came to shape my destiny to be an Electrical Engineer and not a professional baseball player. In all honesty, the decision might have been unconsciously influenced by the physical size of Lyons, Rigney, and the other players I saw in the White Sox locker room. At that time I was just a skinny 152 pounder with a fairly whippy right arm and a snappy wrist.

It was really the end of my dreams of a baseball career as I was quite sure that I did not have the physical attributes and major league stuff to be a right-handed Billy Pierce. Although I experienced some pain in admitting this to myself, it was time to focus on finishing my last two years of college. It was only after many years that I came to know that I made the right choice in not pursuing a futile objective.

Semipro Years – Not finished was my baseball “career” as I would get still another chance to pitch. It came via my then very good friend Hank Antolak. So it was in the summer of 1951 that I began to pitch for Pops Grabowski's Rak's Appliance team in the Midwest Semipro League. Our home field was located in Hanson Park at the southwest corner of Fullerton and Long Avenues on Chicago's northwest side.

Across from the baseball diamond on Long Avenue was St. Stanislaus Catholic Church and across the diamond on Fullerton Avenue was a tavern where Pops paid me with an after-game ‘egg-in-my-beer’ and an occasional \$20 from his gambling winnings. As I recall in was during the 1953 and 1954 seasons, Pops asked me to pitch two days in a row—promising to relieve me if I could not finish. He relieved once and so did Hank Antolak. It took almost a whole week to recover from those extremely taxing efforts.

A frequent “guest” on our bench was the father of New York Yankee star Bill “Moose” Skowron Moose and his younger brother, our sometime right fielder. Moose was Hank's St. Stanislaus grammar school classmate and lifelong friend. He attended Weber High School where he played football and basketball

with Ed Spera, my Annunciation Grammar school classmate and captain of our 1944 Chicago Catholic League 16-inch softball championship team. Ed once dated my sister Valerie. It certainly is a small world.

Hank and I were both married in 1952, but we still went on to play for Pops through the 1953 and 1954 seasons. However, that was not the end of my ball playing. In 1955 the Lobos, a neighborhood 16-inch softball team that I organized in 1946 and captained in its formative years, won the Illinois State 16-inch Softball Championship. It was then captained by Joe Hafenscher who got me out of retirement to wind up pitching and winning a championship game against the tournament-favored Portage Park Tom Thumbs under the lights at Hinkley Park in Park Ridge, Illinois on September 8, 1955. That was my last ball game.

Postscript – The fall of 1954, found me working as a television engineer at the Admiral Corporation and just accepted in Northwestern University’s Graduate School. This acceptance came only after meeting a stringent requirement imposed by Northwestern officials because they did not consider the Fournier Institute of Technology to be an accredited institution. The requirement was to receive an A grade in three specified graduate courses and agree not to receive the related 9-credit hours. Thus began my journey to an MSEE in 1957 and a PhD. in Electrical and Computer Engineering in 1963.

Hank graduated from the School of Dentistry at the University of Illinois and joined the U.S. Navy as a dental officer in the fall of 1954—playing 3rd base for the Great Lakes Naval Training Station for several seasons. I found it ironic that Hank was now playing for the team that gave me considerable trouble in starts against them in 1949 and 1950. After his Navy service, Hank established a successful dental practice in Westchester, Illinois that included challenging work in orthodontics. As of this writing, he is retired and living in Florida. We are still sharing memories of our baseball years.

Dick Carsello and Joe Hafenscher went on to lead very productive lives. Dick, a father of nine, retired from Motorola in 2000 as Vice President of Paging Operations representing Motorola and the U.S. Telcom industry in establishing the Third Generation Cellular Standards used at the time. Joe, a father of four, retired as the Chair of the Department of Social Studies and a highly regarded teacher after thirty-one years of service at Willowbrook High School in Villa Park, Illinois. Dick and Joe remained my fast friends until their passing in 2006 and 2013 respectively.

Finally, I spoke with Wright teammate Gil Lande toward the end of October 2020. Gil played centerfield and caught me a few times. He signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates and played in their farm system until he was sent overseas during the Korean War. He was wounded twice in the back but nevertheless, signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers when he returned to the U.S.—playing with the Dodgers’ Kentucky farm team in the Mountain States League. His teammate Johnny Podres went on to become a major league pitching great. To his misfortune Gil was never able to regain his prodigious hitting ability. He scouted for the Chicago Cubs after winding down a successful career as an insurance adjuster. About 10 years ago, Gil wrote the following note on his Christmas card: "I still think the Cubs could have used you!" He floored me at the end our conversation—telling me that he spoke to Sandy Koufax about the pitcher he caught while in college who had a good curve ball and great movement on his fastball.

Notes & Images

1. Splitt, Frank G., “Tyler Kemper’s K: A Veritable Time Machine,” *Amazon*, May 1, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RJA745OEKNZAY/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0385541015

2. “Plane Sets Homes Afire,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 14, 1946, page 1. file:///C:/Users/Frank/AppData/Local/Temp/PLANE_SETS_HOMES_AFIRE_2_ARE_.pdf



Chicago Curtain Supply Semipro team, circa mid-1920s,
Second baseman Frank Splitt, Sr., top row center



Frank Splitt the pitcher: Left, for the Hermosa Park Old Timer's league Senior Team, circa 1947, Right, for Wright Junior College, circa 1950

1950 Co-Champs
Illinois Junior College Baseball Conference



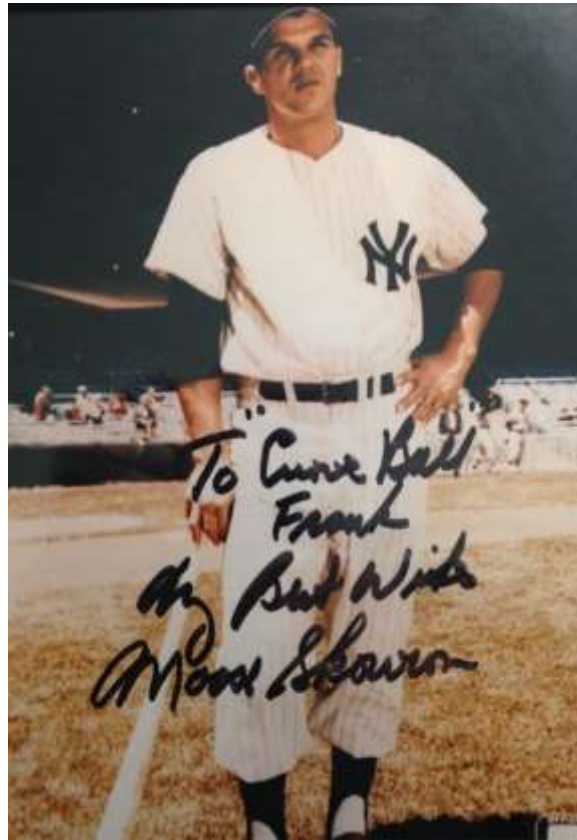
Front row, left to right: Julian Kahn, Art Karneck, Bob Baumann, Don Neubauer, Weston Parker, Hank Sroka, Steve Primis, and Chuck Cameron, manager. Second row: Ray Cunniff, Sandy Peller, Dick Hurwitz, Gil Lande, Howie Sorenson, Bob Ruttenberg, Cherrill Consoli, John Grams, Burton Stern, and Bill Sprinz. Third Row: Bob Dilla, Gene Mecklenburg, Vic Griseto, Nick DiGioia, Bud Nohava, Captain Hank Antolak, Frank Splitt, Bob Barut, and Marvin Mazzucchelli.



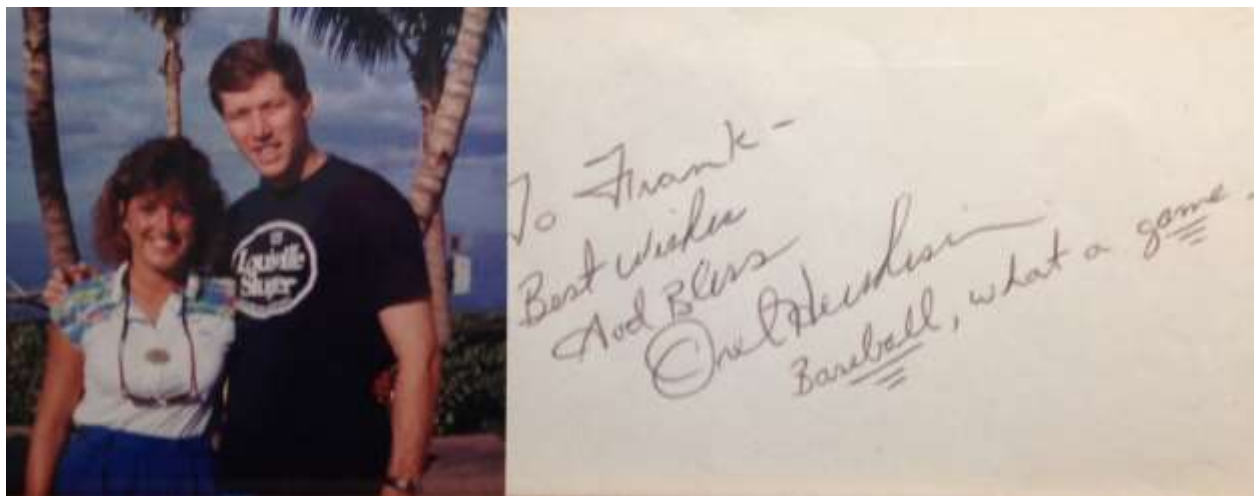
Hank Antolak and Frank Splitt friends and Rak's Appliance teammates at Chicago's Hanson Park, circa 1954



The author (center) with Frank Splitt, Sr. and Mae A. Splitt at Northwestern University Commencement, 1963



Bill "Moose" Skowron, New York Yankee first baseman, 1954—62,
Eight-time American League All Star



Anne Splitt White with Los Angeles Dodger pitching great Orel Herershiser, Maui, Hawaii, circa 1992.

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