



SENIOR SOFTBALL PLAYER PROFILE: JERRY BERG

-by Larry Wolfe

Jerry Berg was born and grew up in Brooklyn, New York, but to listen to him talk you'd think he was from....well, Brooklyn, New York! Jerry (don't call him Jerome unless you're mad at him) graduated from Alexander Hamilton High School in Brooklyn. Besides Jerry, other famous alumni of Alexander Hamilton High include former heavyweight boxing champion Floyd Patterson and sports announcer Howard Cosell.

Jerry grew up a big fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers of the 1940s and '50s. His favorite all-time Dodger was catcher Roy Campanella. As a youngster, Jerry was a self-described autograph fanatic and over time he collected in excess of 500 autographs of his favorite Dodger players as well as many other major league ballplayers. He had autographs of many players who would be future Hall of Famers, including such superstars as Joe DiMaggio, Duke Snider, Phil Rizzuto and, of course, "Campy" Campanella. Sadly, his autograph collection was lost during a relocation later in his life.

During the Korean War, rather than waiting to be drafted, Jerry decided to join the Air Force. He somehow passed his physical exam even though he was almost legally blind in his left eye. Upon reporting for duty, his first officer couldn't believe he passed. For his first three months of duty, Jerry was assigned to KP while they tried to figure out what to do with a "one-eyed" Air Force cadet! After stints as a typist, aerial map reader and other jobs, Jerry was transferred to a base in Rome, New York, where he says his primary duty was playing on the base baseball team.

After four years in the service, Jerry went to college on the G.I. Bill and graduated with an Electronics Engineering Degree from Brooklyn Polytechnic University. Founded in 1854, Polytechnic is the second oldest private engineering school in the United States. In addition to Jerry, Polytechnic graduates include several Nobel laureates, notable inventors and world class scientists.

After graduating from college, Jerry worked briefly for Bell Labs, and then had long and interesting careers with Grumman Aerospace, Hughes Aircraft and General Instrument Corporation. Many of his assignments were, and still are, classified; some fell under the “Top Secret” category. However, his assignments he can now talk about include the Apollo 11 first moon landing project, the Phoenix Missile program, the BOMARC Missile program and a covert project developing an air-to-air missile to intercept the high tech jet fighters developed by the Russians in the 1970s. The Phoenix Missiles were upgraded just prior to Desert Storm and were instrumental in protecting Navy carriers during that war. Jerry’s team worked with current Vice President Dick Cheney, who was then the first President Bush’s Secretary of Defense, on that project. BOMARC is an acronym for the BOeing Michigan Aeronautical Research Center. The BOMARC missiles were the first supersonic anti-aircraft missiles in the world. The BOMARC project was a joint U.S.-Canada effort developed to protect North America from the threat of Russian missiles and bombers in the 1960s and early ‘70s. Some of Jerry’s stories about his experiences sound like something out of a Cold War-era spy novel. No wonder he’s always looking over his shoulder with his one good eye!

Jerry and Bobbi, his lovely wife of 50 years, spent most of their early married life in Long Island, New York and Northridge, California. Jerry’s last position required a relocation to Tucson, Arizona, where he headed a department responsible for ensuring the Phoenix Missile performance. He and Bobbi lived in Tucson for 12 years before retiring to Sun Lakes in the year 2000.

Although Jerry hadn’t played any organized baseball or softball since he was in his twenties, he was lured back to the diamond and encouraged by fellow Sun Lakes players Larry Delaney, the late Tim Keohane and Rudy Lindquist to give it a try and stick with it. He says he’s enjoyed every minute of his Sun Lakes Senior Softball experience.

When asked about his best sports-related memory, Jerry immediately recalled the time his semi-pro team in Brooklyn played a championship game at old Ebbets Field, prior home of his beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. He was actually playing on the same field as his heroes, such as Campy, the Duke, Gil Hodges, Jackie Robinson, Hugh Casey and all the others! Old Ebbets Field was demolished in February 1960 after the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, but the memories will always live on.

Jerry does have other interests besides softball and the classified world of missiles and aerospace engineering. He enjoys playing golf, which he took up a few years ago, but complains that his softball swing messes up his golf swing! He also likes playing mah-jongg, a game invented by the Chinese 1500 years ago. Mah-jongg is a somewhat complex game requiring skill, strategy, calculation and some luck. Sounds kind of like the same requirements that an engineer needed to develop weaponry to keep America safe from the threat of Russian aircraft! Maybe that’s why Jerry is really good at that game....