

Fighting to save fastpitch

Cecil Pittack has the drive, enthusiasm to do it

By George Vukelich
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MAY 12 1979

Most men Cecil Pittack's age throw a softball only at picnics and then only after they've thrown down a few cups at the beer keg first. They do it slowly. Pittack does it the hard way. Fast. And cold sober.

On one momentous day last year, Cec (rhymes with peace) Pittack, age 48, pitching for Chief Auto Parts of Madison, threw eight consecutive games in the Wisconsin State Fast Pitch Tournament at Eau Claire. He won all eight games, striking out 94 batters along the way. His team won the state championship.

To his wife, Judie, the performance came as no surprise.

"Cec," she says, "just has more bullheaded determination than anybody else out there."

Pittack, who stands 6-feet and weighs 210 ("He'll lose ten pounds during a tough game," Judie says) turned 49 last Saturday and he remains among the premier pitchers in Madison's premier softball company, the vaunted American League. The Major League.

The remarkable thing is not that Pittack has the pitching velocity of youngsters half his age. He has the enthusiasm too.

"I don't think I'm an 'Old Pro,'" he laughs. "I'm still learning the game."

Pittack allows that his boyish zest for "The Game" may be due to the fact that he came to it relatively late in life. It was in 1962, when as a career Navy man, he was assigned to the Great Lakes Training Center in Illinois.

"I was 32 years old," he recalls. "I had never thrown a softball in my life."

He took to it, like a sailor to water. His coach, a perceptive chief petty officer who is probably now an admiral, stuck two stakes in the ground, tied strings between them for a "strike zone" and Pittack practiced endlessly, firing for control. The rest, as they say, is history.

"It came naturally," he says. "I throw my softball the same way I throw my bowling ball."

After his discharge, he played fast pitch in California, and then his job—he is an accountant—brought him to Milwaukee, where he pitched for a number of teams.

"I watched fast pitch die in Milwaukee," he says. "I don't want to see it die in Madison."

It is slow pitch softball that is killing fast pitch almost everywhere. There should be room for both, but crowds of slow pitch teams are simply taking over the facilities and the priorities of the nation's recreation departments.

"Slow pitch is probably the easiest game to play there is," Pittack admits. "There's nothing to it." He doesn't say that slow pitch is also fun for thousands. It isn't fun for him or the dedicated men and women who play fast pitch.

"I would never play slow pitch," Pittack insists. "I'll stay with fast pitch even after I'm done throwing. As an umpire. As a manager. But we have to save the game first."

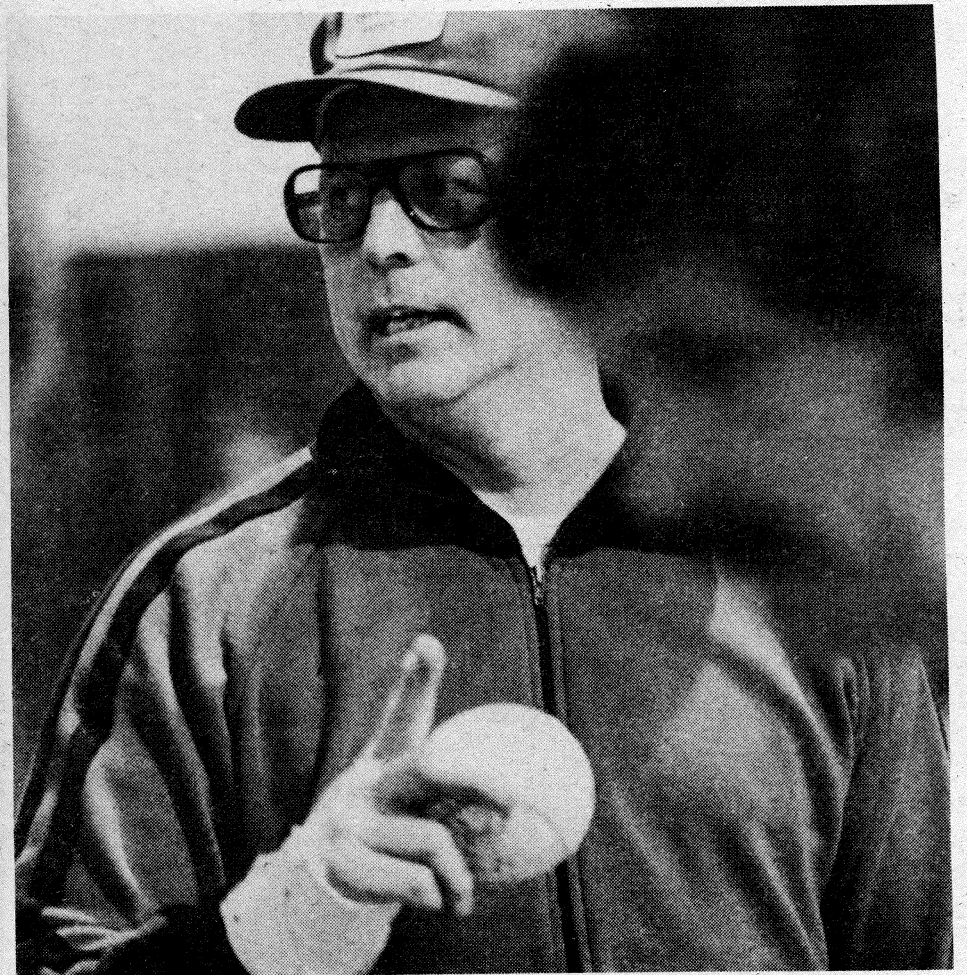
What will save The Game, Pittack feels, are good facilities where fast-pitch players can play and fans can watch in comfort. Along with a steady influx of young players, particularly young pitchers, learning the craft. Learning how to play. Learning how to pitch.

Pittack figures it takes two or three years to become a good player. And about the same time to become a good pitcher, "who can get the ball to the catcher." But it takes 10 years or so for a fast pitch player to reach peak performance, particularly a pitcher.

"It takes dedication," Pittack says. "Not everybody wants to give it that."

It is the search for the young "dedicated players" that drove Pittack to join the legendary Willie Taylor (beloved by countless grade school phy ed classes in the city) in teaching The Fine Points of Fast Pitch at an annual clinic held indoors before the season.

"Willie's the one who really got it going," Pittack says. "He called me to help out about four or five years ago and we've been doing the pit-



— Photos by Keith Wessel

'It takes dedication,' Cec says of fast-pitch softball.

ching clinic ever since. We used to pay for it out of our own pockets. This is the first year the Recreation Department has sponsored it and we hope they keep doing it."

The clinic, which runs for eight weeks, has been starting in March, but Pittack would like to see it start in February.

"There's a lot to teach," he says. "There's a lot of students."

This year 220 persons turned out at Marquette School for the first week, and half of them were women. Pittack would rather teach someone who has never pitched a softball before.

"You get pitchers in their 20s," he says. "They've been throwing and developing their own styles, it's hard to teach them new. It's hard for them to unlearn the old."

A pitcher only needs about three pitches to "get by" according to Pittack. A rise ball. A drop ball. And a variation off one or the other. Pittack throws about six pitches: two variations on the rise ball—up and out on a right-handed hitter, and straight and up on a right-handed hitter. His rise ball jumps a foot or so. He can make it jump up to four feet.

His four variations on the drop ball are: down and out, down and in, a change-up and a straight drop.

"I don't throw a curve, he says. "The better hitters who came from baseball, they hit it a mile."

At the Pitching Clinic, the emphasis is on fundamentals: Throw the ball easy. Throw the ball underhand. To the plate. To first base. To second base. To third base. Underhand.

"The worst thing you can do," Pittack warns, "is to throw overhand. Even warming up. That uses a whole different set of muscles."

He gave me that Dynie Mansfield look.

"Throwing overhand," he grinned, "is very unnatural."

Pittack loves to teach, but he loves to play too and he says he'll play as long as he can.

"I don't think my arm will give out," he says, "but I do think my legs will. A pitcher pounds his legs pretty good out there. Then I'll be managing. Or umping. In fast pitch."

But that's not this year in Pittack's game plan. This year, his old Chief's team is playing for Fanny's in that tough American League. Only five other teams are in that league this year: The Farm Tavern, Mr. Robert's, Joker's Wild, Madtown Flyers, WTSO.

"We're survivors," Pittack laments. "Poole's, which did so much for Madison fast pitch with its tournaments and generous donations to the Olbrich softball complex—Poole's doesn't have a team this year."

He glanced over at me like a rise ball was coming.

"And that Geoff Poole," he smiled, "every time I pitched him, he always got a piece of the ball."

With fast pitch being driven out of diamond time, Pittack hopes that other sponsors and backers will take up where Poole's left off. His own sponsor, Fanny's, along with others, has purchased land adjacent to Middleton's Golf Green and is preparing three diamonds, with lighting, for use this season by the Madison Major League teams.

Is it realistic to expect that fast pitch will survive in Madison when it is failing almost everywhere else?

"A lot of crazy ideas survive in Madison," Cecil Pittack says. "We're working on it. We're concentrating on it."

"And when Cec concentrates," Judie Pittack says with a smile, "I could break a leg up in the stands and he would never hear me."



Taylor and Pittack confer at pitching clinic.