



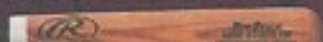
# SACRAMENTO

- Home
- Teams
- Equipment
- Training
- History
- Books & Other Media



**RAWLINGSGEAR.COM**  
The official online store of Rawlings Sporting Goods

40% OFF ENGRAVED WOODEN BATS  
June 1st - June 15th



History

**Time Travelin'**  
with Rick Cabral

1962

## FLYING HIGH WITH THE '62



### Bishop Armstrong's Diamond Nine Dominated Northern California

By Rick Cabral, Editor

*(Disclaimer: Cabral is a graduate of Christian Brothers High 1970 and played varsity baseball and football under coaches mentioned below.)*

When old time baseball people reminisce about the best high school baseball teams ever to play in Sacramento, the 1962 Bishop Armstrong team frequently springs to the top of the list. Six players from the squad made All-City, including the area's batting leader, and two of the top pitchers. The Sacramento Chamber of Commerce awarded its annual "Hall of Fame" award to one Falcon, designating him as the best baseball player in the area two consecutive years.

While assembling its dominating 22-2 record, the Falcons beat four conference champions. They beat all comers, beat them soundly, and sneaked by others when necessary. But what remains from that impressive season are the memories of a group of ballplayers who knew how to play the game the right way, without egos, and retain their tight kinship to this day.

In hindsight, the early '60s proved a pivotal time in our country's history. In May 1962 President Kennedy made the surprising announcement that we would land a man on the moon, while at the same time satellite television transmission was shrinking the globe, thanks to AT&T. Meantime, racial strife was bubbling in the south, as African Americans staged protests for the right to eat in the same restaurants as the white citizenry.

In 1962, baseball still reigned supreme as the National Pastime. The New York Yankee's Roger Maris reported to training camp the new single-season home run record holder, after breaking Babe Ruth's record of 60. Major League Baseball that year ushered in its second wave of expansion, as the Houston Colt .45s and New York Mets joined the National League, while the schedule was expanded from 154 to 162 games. And the San Francisco Giants would reach a pinnacle for the Willie Mays era.

America continued to offer hope, promise and prosperity in this period. Little did we know that the United States stood on the precipice of radical changes that would rock this country to its foundation. To quote a famous fictitious writer, "...the one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball."



McDermott  
Clubhouse

TOUCHING  
all the  
BASES  
Bob Schomer

By the late '50s, Bishop Armstrong had established itself as a Catholic co-educational upper division high school, located in the Oak Park area. Across town at 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Broadway, Christian Brothers High served as the lower division feeder school to Armstrong.

### A Chronology of CBS



NOTE: Christian Brothers has a confusing chronology in Sacramento. From 1876 to 1926 the Christian Brothers offered Central Valley residents an option for educating young men in a private, college-preparatory setting. The school underwent numerous name changes, including Christian Brothers College. From 1924, when it moved to 21st and Broadway, it was simply known as Christian Brothers School (CBS). In 1926, the Sacramento Catholic Diocese co-ventured a unique experiment when it opened Bishop Armstrong as an upper division school for males and females. Boys were taught by the Christian Brothers and girls were taught by the Sisters of Mercy to separate wings on campus. Meantime, CBS became an all-boys lower division school. In 1964 the Brothers sold the facility on Broadway to the diocese, and took full educational control of the Bishop Armstrong campus, which became an all-boys school. In 1968, the school adopted the name Christian Brothers High. In 1990, the school became Sacramento's first Catholic coeducational institution.

In 1960, when **Dick Sperbeck** took over as Armstrong's head varsity baseball coach the nucleus for his future star-studded '60 team was attending and playing baseball at CBS. The Gaels featured the strong play of pitcher/ infielder **Larry Marietti**, catcher **Burt Bonomi**, and infielders **Doug Crawford**, **Jim Fox** and **Bernie Church**.

**Mike Green** also was on the team. Of slight build (6'0" and 150 pounds), he was one of the few athletes who lived on campus as a "boarder," along with 80+ other boys whose parents or guardians paid approximately \$1,000 annually for their sons to attend, live and eat at Christian Brothers (CB). Green was a man on a mission. The Redding, Calif. native remembers his parents made an incredible sacrifice for their son's future. "They mortgaged everything they had to send me to CB with the hope that I was good enough to get an (athletic) scholarship to go on to college."

He reflects wistfully on his boarding experience at Christian Brothers. "About 90 percent of (the boarders) were there because their parents couldn't handle them. If they'd been living at home, probably, they would have been juvenile delinquents." Consequently, the school prefect Brother Arnold "ruled with an iron fist," Green remembers. "He had to or those boys (would) literally take over."

**Clark Aldrich** could have been one of those boys. Growing up in Oakland, and maladjusted to his mother's second marriage, Aldrich recalls arriving late for class at Christian Brothers. "I had a pompadour and Frisco jeans, and thought I was a pretty tough cookie," Aldrich recalls. Brother Richard, a first year teacher, was informing the class "This is the holy water."

Capitalizing on his grand entry, Clark wisecracked, "What's that? Water with the hell boiled out of it?" BOOM. "Next thing I know, I hit the wall." Slowly sliding toward the floor, he quickly realized he wasn't in public school anymore. "The Brothers were really great to me overall. I give credit to the Christian Brothers for really helping me in just growing up and being a better person."

Mike Green adjusted to being away from home by becoming pals with another member of the Gaels baseball team, **Larry Marietti**. Marietti was an only child who lived just a few blocks away from the Brothers' campus. Green frequently spent his weekends at the Marietti household, occasionally sleeping on the couch, and enjoying Pauline Marietti's incredible Italian cooking.

"There was always pasta, along with roast chicken or roast pork," Larry recalls, "and Mike would just scarf it up, since all he had was 'boarder' food." Mike drools at the memory of Mama Marietti's home-cooked ravioli. Larry's folks welcomed Mike Green as an extended member of their family, and as a result the two men formed a bond of love and friendship that exists between them today.

Green confides that once he left Redding he never really returned to his former hometown again, except for occasional stays. To keep tabs on her son, Mrs. Green subscribed to both the *Sacramento Union* and *Sacramento Bee*, and all four years she cut out every newspaper clipping that mentioned the team's performances in basketball and baseball.

The Gael nine teams of 1959 and 1960 were led **Ron Limeberger**, a "Brothers boy" from 1953 who was coaching his first baseball teams. Limeberger, who starred in basketball in high school, hadn't played baseball. Instead, he enjoyed working for the hometown Sacramento Solons, first as a visiting clubhouse attendant, and later as bat boy for the Solons. Not only did Ron come by his baseball knowledge at Edmonds Field, but he also learned about life (i.e. birds and bees) from the Solons' players, he once told this writer.

An old Army truck, with modular wooden side panels, would transport the Brothers boys from the school to their home ball field at William Land Park (Land Park Drive at 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue). The Land Park diamonds in those days were the center of the Sacramento baseball world, remembers **Ronnie King**, himself a Brothers boy who starred in baseball in the mid-40s and signed with Cleveland. Diamond One (today known as "Doc" Oliver Field) was home field not only for the Bishop Armstrong varsity but also Sacramento City College.

The Brothers' ball team played the same schedule as the Armstrong varsity, traveling in that Army truck up and down the Central Valley. Were they as dominant as they would become at Armstrong? "We won far more games than we lost," Marietti admits.

In the fall of 1960, the boys transitioned to the upper division Armstrong school and immediately noticed a different atmosphere. Whereas CB was located "downtown," the Armstrong campus had been built in the residential Oak Park neighborhood. While Brothers enjoyed a long established tradition dating back to the 1850s, Armstrong was entering just its fourth year. The most noticeable difference, of course, was the presence of girls on campus. "Brothers had all guys. Consequently, there was more camaraderie (at CB)."

remembers **Bernie Church**.

The Christian Brothers order was prevented from teaching females. Consequently, the Armstrong campus had been designed as a "co-institutional" campus, with girls attending classes in one wing (they were taught by the Sisters of Mercy) and the boys in the other. Marietti remembers that classes began at different times, and during morning prayer guys would stare out the windows watching the girls walking by on their side of the campus. "It was really weird." The only time they intermingled on campus was in the school cafeteria during lunch or after school.

By spring 1961, Dick Sperbeck was entering his second year as varsity baseball coach. A three-sport star at Marysville High and Yuba Junior College, he had received a full-ride scholarship to St. Mary's College, where he played basketball and baseball (mostly center field, some first base and a little pitching). After graduating from St. Mary's in 1955, Dick was drafted in the Army, where he made the football, basketball and baseball teams in the "special services" division; a rare feat. Sperbeck's body was made for sport. At 6'3" with a lean frame, close-cropped wheat-colored hair and piercing blue eyes, he embodied the classic All-American athlete.



Moore, Panatieri and Church relax in the black pickup used to transport Armstrong baseball equipment and players to Land Park.

Since Armstrong was independent and not part of a conference, Sperbeck was free to schedule any team he wanted. In reality, the challenge was to find teams with openings during the season. "We just played whoever we could schedule, since the other leagues were playing at the same time." Typically he scheduled schools from the Capital Athletic League and Metro League, when they had a bye in their schedule. In addition, Armstrong played teams from Lodi, Vallejo, Anderson and Marysville. "We would play anybody," Sperbeck said.

Clark Aldrich, the All-City football player (both junior and senior years) decided to assist Sperbeck that season as the team's manager. Clark had never played youth baseball, but when Sperbeck encouraged him to grab a bat during practice, he complied. It proved to be a rough adjustment.

Locked in a tight ballgame against an always tough Lodi club, Sperbeck sent Aldrich in to pinch run. Clark didn't know the first thing about how to read the pitcher or steal a base, so when the coach gave the steal sign he just took off for second. Seeing the shortstop standing over the bag waiting with the ball, Aldrich's football instincts took over. He came in spikes high, clearing the infielder in the chest, while dislodging the ball. "I knocked the hell out of him," Aldrich recalls. "To me,

that was part of the game. I didn't understand that football and baseball weren't related." He eventually wound up at third and scored. Bishop Armstrong won the contest 2-1 over the future Central California Conference (CCC) champion.

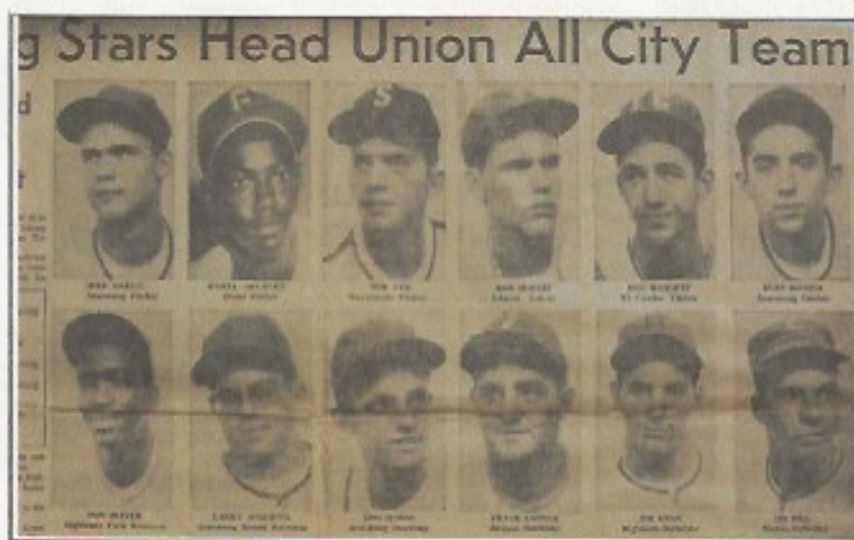
In another contest that season, Mike Green was pitching against **Tug McGraw** of Vallejo's Saint Vincent's in a battle between southpaws and parochial teams. When Aldrich was on deck, his good friend **Doug Crawford** advised him, "(McGraw's) throwing lots of curve balls. You've got to hang in there on the curve, so when the ball's coming at you, dig in." On the second pitch McGraw threw a high, tight fastball and Clark hung in there. The ball smacked him in the ear and knocked him out. Jim Fox, who was watching from first base, saw Aldrich lying there lifeless and thought he was dead. After he was revived, it took 15 stitches to repair the ear.



Clark Aldrich struts home as Johnson catcher calls for ball.

Later, Clark chided Crawford for the advice. "Thanks. You told me to dig in if I thought a curve was coming." Crawford had the last word: "That wasn't a curve ball, Clark."

Aldrich's lack of baseball experience proved the exception, as Bishop Armstrong otherwise fielded a team of talented individuals. When the season concluded, the Falcons had finished 16-4 and placed four players on both the Sacramento Union and Sacramento Bee-KFBK All-City teams. Senior shortstop **Don Semon** led the way, followed by three juniors: catcher Burt Bonomi, second baseman/pitcher Larry Marietti and first baseman/pitcher Mike Green, who finished 6-1, but also ranked second in the area with a .446 batting average. Unbeknown to his teammates, the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce that summer awarded Green its "Hall of Fame" award for baseball, an honor that went to the top players in all major sports, as well as coaches.



That summer, several major league teams competed for Don Semon's autograph on a professional contract. He eventually signed with Boston for what was then an area record bonus of \$55,000. Remembers Bonomi about his teammate Semon, "He could really hit the ball," "And he really had a great arm," claimed in Marietti during a joint interview.

While Semon's signing caught their attention, the boys fixed their sites on Junior American Legion competition for the Southside post. Southside that year was managed by **Joe Sypnicki** with **Bert Bonomi** as his assistant.

Bonomi, father of Armstrong catcher Burt (different first names, because pop Bonomi didn't want anyone calling his son "junior") had several years of professional experience, playing corner infield positions for the Fresno Cardinals in the Class C California League. In 1949, he took a job as player/coach for the Willows Cardinals of the Class D Far West League, traveling to Medford and Klamath Falls, Ore., Redding, Santa Rosa, Pittsburg and Vallejo. As with many low minor league players of that era, the grueling travel grind and time away from family forced him to give it up.

Being a former pro, however, had its benefits, as Bonomi passed on pearls of baseball wisdom to his son. Early on, he taught Burt to bat left-handed. And he showed him the skill of bat control through endless hours of playing pepper in the backyard after work (Bert ran a juke box business). "Oh, man, we played lots of pepper," reflects **Burt Bonomi** today, who realizes that his father's batting drills helped make him into one of the area's finest hitters.

The older Bonomi literally forced Burt to learn the catcher's position. On the way to Burt's first American Legion practice, the father looked in the back seat and asked, "Where's your catcher's glove?"

Burt told him he left it at home.

"Why?" the father demanded to know.

The youngster explained he planned to try out for short stop.

"No, no, you're goin' to be catching," Bert Bonomi informed the son, while turning the car around to return home for the catcher's mitt. "Ronnie King (the Southside Legion coach that year) was one of the best catchers in the area, and you're going to learn from him." King takes credit for turning "Bab-o" (Bonomi's nickname) into being a catcher. "He had good feet," King recalls.

Bonomi may have had a familial advantage, but his passion for baseball was shared by the core players from that Armstrong team.

Marietti had to overcome huge disadvantages to having a great baseball career. First off, his father, Lawrence, immigrated from Lucca, Italy and had no experience with the American pastime. In addition, as a stocky kid who wore glasses on the ball field, Marietti had to learn little tips and secrets just to stay even with his teammates. In time, he learned to pitch, developed a good curve, and could always put the ball in play when it was turn at bat.

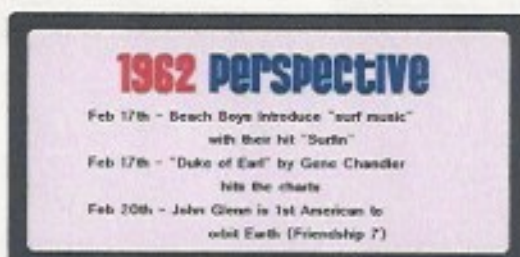
As a young teen in the mid-'50s, Marietti loved to watch the hometown Solons play. His mom would give him a buck fifty, and Larry would parlay that into an evening of glorious entertainment. Living only a few blocks from the ballpark, Marietti walked to Edmonds Field by heading toward the Tower Theatre, and cutting left on Burnett Way, which fed into the Solon's parking lot. Arriving during batting practice, Larry would join a group of boys who jumped on home run balls hit over the wall in batting practice. By tossing the ball in at the ticket window, the kids earned a general admission ticket and watched the game for free.

Larry would usually sit in the stands along the first base line, the shade side. Around the fifth inning, he would leave the ballpark, get his hand stamped, run across the street to Harvey's Hamburger stand, where he would order two cheeseburgers, fries and a Coke for 95 cents. Stuffed and satisfied, he returned to the ballpark, rejoined his friends in the stands, and around the seventh inning would buy himself a Carnation malt for forty cents. He would return home in the evening and deposit the remaining seventeen cents in his piggy bank. And do it again the next night.

Bernie Church also loved baseball, but he played whatever sport was in season. Growing up in Oak Park,

he attended Immaculate Conception parochial school. He played youth baseball at the Oak Park-Elmhurst Little League in its first year of operation, 1950. The Little League didn't own its own facility, so they would erect portable backstops in the parking lot of the State Fair Grounds (the "old" fairgrounds located at Broadway @ Stockton Blvd.). When the season was over, they'd take them down and store the backstops until next year.

Church came from a Catholic family with 14 children. Unlike his Armstrong teammates, he worked at a very young age, first delivering newspapers for the Sacramento Shopping News, and almost always had a job from that time on. Although he didn't star on the team, Church blossomed into an excellent high school coach at McClatchy High School, where he directed the varsity baseball team from 1973 through 1988 (and taught at the school for 36 years).



Entering that 1962 season, no one could have predicted the enormous success that awaited the boys from Armstrong. Since they didn't play in a conference, they weren't touted to claim a crown. But they did have three returning All-City players forming the nucleus of a terrific club. And they had a coach who ensured his team would be disciplined, prepared and in shape.

Dick Sperbeck coached the basketball team at Bishop Armstrong again that year. And he insisted that his baseball players work out with the team while the basketballers were training. "We knew were never going to make the team," laughs Larry Marietti. "It was to get our fat asses into shape." When practices turned to strategy, the coach dismissed the baseball players. But the training didn't stop there.

When the baseball season started, Sperbeck also found ways to expand their cardio-vascular workouts. During infield practice, if the team made mistakes, the coach told them to "Drop the gloves and run around the park," Marietti says, still shaking his head. "I don't remember leaving the practice field unless we had a solid practice. It was striving for perfection in practice so it could be replicated in the game."

Mike Green, who made All-City in basketball his senior season (the team went 22-8), concurs about Sperbeck's contribution to the baseball squad. "Discipline. You did it his way; if you didn't, he would sit your ass down. Or you would run until you just dropped. His ability to get the best out of you-and to win-was always there," says Green, who had filled out to 190 pounds his senior year. Interestingly, Sperbeck himself was in terrific shape during the '60s, having played basketball for the Perich Contractors semi-pro team in Sacramento.

None of the star players from that '62 club, however, remembers learning the fine points of hitting, fielding or pitching from their coach. By that point in their careers, they had picked up the necessary skills to excel from youth leagues.

"I think when Dick took over baseball it probably wasn't a passion to do it," offers Marietti. "Sometimes you felt you probably knew more about the particular situation than he did," he says somewhat sheepishly, almost expecting to hear the coach's whistle, commanding another lap around Land Park. "But once he realized the talent and potential he had, then he got in to it. He developed a desire to do well and coach well."

Sperbeck found other ways to prepare his players and make them more competitive. Burt Bonomi remembers his coach endlessly going over defensive plays, preparing for any game situation. For instance, Sperbeck taught a unique defense for the double steal that depended almost entirely on his catcher's agility and smarts. Normally, with runners on first and third, when the runner at first feints like he is stealing second, but instead stops in the base path to draw the throw, the runner at third sprints home to score before the throw arrives. It's a play Armstrong base runners used to perfection during the '62 season. And Sperbeck had drawn up the perfect defense for it.

Instead of employing the conventional tactic of having the catcher throw the ball to second, or to a cutoff (such as the second baseman cutting in between second base and pitcher's mound), Sperbeck taught Bonomi to run directly at the back runner who was halting a throw while watching the runner at third (with the pitcher covering home), until the catcher finally tagged the back runner. "That's the way to stop the double steal," Sperbeck laughs. "No one ever used that against us. We never had to use that defense that year." But it did come up later in the American Legion season.

Church reminds that coaching has evolved a great deal in 50 years. "Conditioning, filling out the lineup, doing your discipline...that was pretty much coaching in those days," he says. "Now you have four guys on a staff, somebody's in charge of infielders, you have hitting coaches.



Left-hander Mike Green at bat

Coaching is a lot different now than it was then. If you had the best players (then) you won."

And Armstrong had the players.

In addition to the three returning All-City players (catcher Bonomi, infielder/pitchers Green and Marietti), the team had some talented juniors join the squad. Left-handed hitting **Gene Cervantes** patrolled center field. **Carl Boyer** had a rocket for an arm, and pitched in key spots. **Joe Gill**, a reserve outfielder, shared time in the field with fellow junior **Rich Elorduy**. "I was just happy to be on the team because there were some good players (at BA)," remembers Gill. "I didn't realize (at the time) how many great athletes there were. I just wanted to go out and play."

The roster was filled out by seniors **John McCarthy** at third base, **Clark Aldrich** in left field, and reserve players **Glen Borges**, **Don Bradley**, **Mike Hauser**, **Ken Pierson** and **Don Pintar**.



Backed from left: Mike Green, Jim Gill, Jim Fox, Ken Pierson, Carl Boyer, Bruce Church, Mike Hauser, Don Bradley, MVP Coach Dick Sperbeck, Gene Cervantes, John Borges, Mike Elorduy, Don Pintar, Larry Abbott, Rich Elorduy, Mike McCarthy, Mike Hauser.

A pair of seniors would also blossom in the '62 season. **Doug Crawford** was moved from third base to shortstop to fill the vacancy left by the graduated Semon. "(Doug) had a great arm at shortstop," Gill recalls. "He was 6'3", which was a little unusual at that time to (have a shortstop) that tall. He had power and could hit, too." So could senior **Jim Fox**, who was known for taking a swing so violent that the bat slammed into his back on the follow through, while the ball often found a hole in the outfield.

## 1962 perspective

Mar 2nd: Wilt Chamberlain scores a record 100 points in an NBA game, breaking his record of 73 set just two months earlier. The record stands today.

The Armstrong lineup opened the season in this order: Green batted first and being a speed demon, could leg out infield hits. He was once timed from home to first base in the 3.3 - 3.4 second range, (compared to Mickey Mantle, who is often credited with posting one of the fastest times at 3.1 seconds). Cervantes followed him, and could face a single or drop a bunt when needed. Marietti played second when he didn't pitch and batted third, an RBI producer. "Bab-o" Bonomi batted clean up and was notorious for going the other way with "goppers" to left center. Jim Fox usually batted fifth and held down first base when Green pitched, or played outfield. Crawford hit after him. The bottom of the batting order was fluid with spot starters like Church getting action at second base or Aldrich in left field.

The Armstrong nine was designed around pitching and defense. It was an extension of Sperbeck's philosophy that scoring runs was difficult. "We had good hitters, but even you're best hitter has a one in three chance of getting a hit. Runs are hard to score. I played for one run, here or there. I'd just as soon hit and move a runner over, and not be thinking about (the big inning)."

"We had a great defense up the middle," remembers Bonomi, also nicknamed "the Old Pro" for his savvy instincts behind the plate. "Our pitchers threw strikes and never walked anybody. Consequently, teams didn't have big innings against us."

Aldrich remembers one defensive play that showcased Crawford's arm. Aldrich was playing left field at Land Park, and a fly ball was struck well over his head. He chased it down near the bushes, wheeled and found Crawford waiting for the cutoff throw. "When Doug received the ball, the runner was rounding third," Aldrich remembers. "Crawford threw the ball no more than 10 feet off the ground, one hopped it to Bab-o and got the runner at home. He just gunned him."

Another thing this Armstrong team possessed was the individual athlete's desire to excel. Ron King remembers driving by Land Park Diamond Number One and seeing Marietti, Fox and others frequently

working out.

In Marietti's case, it was part love of the game and part fear. The fear stemmed from childhood at parochial school, when he was always the last kid chosen to play ball. During an eye exam they found he needed glasses. "All of a sudden, I became a pretty good player. Then I became captain. I could hit the ball well, catch. That started the whole ballgame there." But the motivation to overcome the stereotypical image of the squat body build and the nerdy look drove him mercilessly.

"You looked around, and you never saw anybody with my type of build and wearing glasses (on a high school baseball diamond). And my glasses were thick with those black horned-rims. Man, I looked the role (nerdy type)."

In the case of "Foxy," it was simply an obsession with hitting. Jim Fox was relentless in his baseball workouts, he says, because he was "just trying to make the team" despite the .323 batting average compiled over his junior season. He learned from several

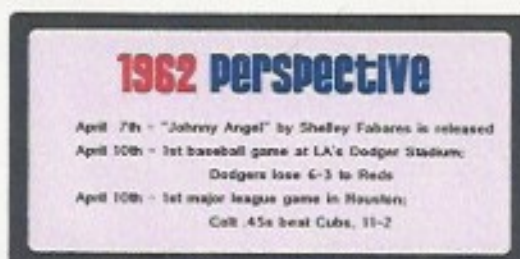


instructors, including Limeberger (who in his first year coached Jim and in his last year at CB coached Jim's son Andy Fox, who forged a nine-year MLB career), Legion coaches Ronnie King and Bert Bonomi, and Billy Rieco, whose main mission at the Department Park & Recreation was manicuring Land Park Diamond One.

Sperbeck reflects that many times after practice the guys asked him to stick around so they could take extra hitting. "These guys loved the game. They'd stay out long after practice. Jim Fox wanted to hit all day." After the shadows had lengthened into darkness, Sperbeck would have to cajole his players to wrap it up because he knew dinner was on the table, long past getting cold.

In the first game of the season, Armstrong charged out of the chute, winning 12-1 against Sacramento High. The Brothers Boys bats came alive as they lit up Stan Vivaldi, Sac High's pitcher. Vivaldi attended CB in his freshman year and played on the baseball team, so he knew the BA players well. Larry Marietti started on the mound for the Falcons. "He was a smart pitcher and a great hitter, too," Vivaldi offers today. The Falcons next beat El Camino 6-0, then squeezed past Encina 4-3 at Land Park. Later in summer, several Encina players would supplement an already talent-laden Southside Legion team, forming a state power.

Then the Falcons went on a tear, winning the next six games all by shutouts. During that run they beat Marysville twice (behind Green's pitching, including a 2-hit, 13 strikeout performance the second game), Vallejo, Anderson (where Boyer shined on the mound), Grant and Stagg of Stockton. By mid-March, Bishop Armstrong had jumped out to a 9-0 record.



By then, the Flying Falcons were routinely attracting large crowds at their home diamond. At Land Park folks were right on top of the action, standing behind the backstop and sitting in the stands, while overflow crowds poured along the sidelines for a glimpse of greatness during Armstrong's home games.

Next the Armstrong team traveled south to face 1961 CCC Champion, Lodi High, which they had defeated the previous year on a one-hitter by Mike Green. But in this first meeting between the teams in '62, the Falcons fell for the first time in 10 games, losing 6-4. Marietti took the loss on the hill.

The team rebounded in the next game by beating Hiram Johnson High 4-1. Johnson senior **Tom Harris** remembers, "We had them in that game. But they were obviously the best team around. They always came back (to win) in the last inning," said Harris, who had played with Bonomi in youth leagues in the Fruitridge district.

One of the secrets to Armstrong's success was

team chemistry. "Everybody always got along," remembers Bonomi. "We all liked each other."

Adds Marietti, "Not only as ball players, but we were all good friends. It was the camaraderie."

"And there were no egos on that team," Bonomi emphasizes.

After games, Marietti remembers the guys gathering over at the Leaning Tower of Picoa on Stockton Blvd. Bonomi says they also patronized El Chico #2, a pizza joint on Freeport Boulevard (which was co-owned and managed by Ron Limeberger's brother, Bill). On Friday nights, Church recalls the guys attending the "frat dances" held at Governor's Hall on the State Fair Grounds. But that was as much frivolity as they permitted in the season. To a man, their first love was playing winning baseball.

For their next game, Sperbeck took his club down the Peninsula to play the Stanford freshman team. The Falcons players were awestruck as they descended on the hallowed grounds of Sunken Diamond. Back then, the field was configured differently; the berm behind the outfield fence was in fair territory, making it a mammoth shot for a home run.

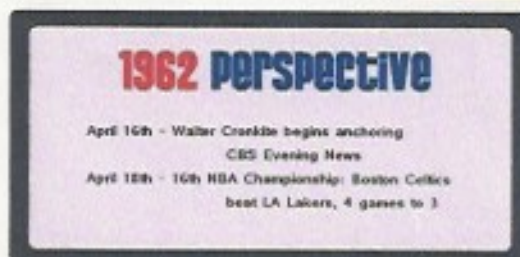
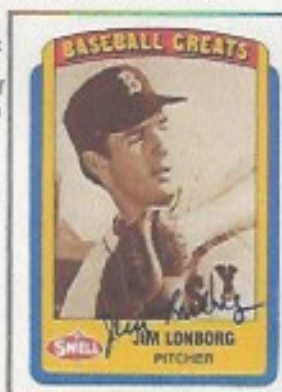
Jim Lonborg, the future Cy Young Award Winner for the 1967 Boston Red Sox pitched for Stanford

that day, but the Central Valley boys had never heard of the SoCal phenom. In one at bat, Jim Fox launched a long drive off Lonborg that sailed into deep right center and bounced against the berm. A slow-footed "loper," Fox managed only a double. Cracked Bernie Church, "If I could hit like Jimmy, and he could run like me, we could have had an inside-the-park home run that day."

Sperbeck remembers the Stanford game as the one time all year Marietti just didn't have it on the mound. He replaced him with junior Carl Boyer and the results were immediate. "He mowed them down; struck out 10 in the last four innings. (Boyer) just reared back and threw fast balls. I'm sure he was throwing around 90," Sperbeck marvels at the memo. "If we had started him, we might have beaten (Stanford)." Instead, they lost 6-4 to the Stanford Frosh. After the game, the scouts who had come to watch Lonborg approached Sperbeck, wanting to know "Who is that guy (Boyer)?"

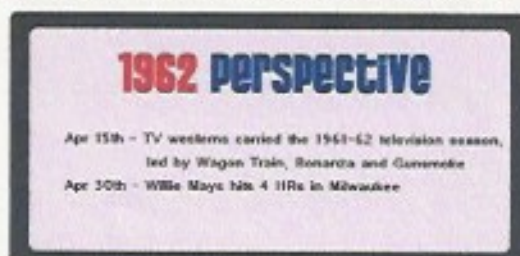


El Chico #2 Restaurant



The Falcons next played McClatchy at Land Park. Boyer started, but fell into trouble in the seventh and was relieved by Marietti and then Cervantes. The Falcons pitchers allowed three runs and McClatchy tied the game. Jim Fox and Rich Flordoy each collected multiple hits, including a triple apiece. In the eighth, Sperbeck brought in Doug Crawford from shortstop to pitch and he kept them from scoring. In the bottom of that frame, Crawford came to bat with the bases loaded and was plunked, bringing in the winning run, 5-4.

Not only had they righted the ship, but the Falcons began a new winning streak that ended only when the 1962 season was over. They next shutout Sac High and Oroville in consecutive games, pounded Highlands 13-3, slipped by El Camino 2-1, and shutout Vallejo 4-0 on Marietti's 2-hit pitching and hitting (3 for 3 with a home run) Gene Cervantes tripled in the contest and Jim Fox singled twice.



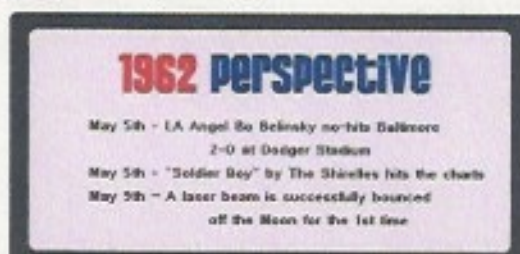
In early May, Armstrong owned an impressive 16-2 mark and was looking forward to hosting and exacting revenge on its nemesis Lodi. The *Catholic Herald* reported it was a contest "charged with fireworks from beginning to end, as the Falcons matched hits with seven and errorless ball with the Lodi Flames." Mike Green was pitching, and by this point in the season, had established himself as the premier left-hander in the area, perhaps in all of Northern California.



In reminiscing about his southpaw, Sperbeck recalls "He had tremendous location. He was pinpoint; he put it exactly where he wanted." That sentiment was echoed by everyone who remembers watching Green pitch, including his catcher, Bert Bonomi, who said he seldom had to move the glove. Tom Harris of Johnson recalls that "Green didn't throw particularly hard, but the ball was always down." Added Ronnie King, who scouted for Pittsburgh in those days, "(Green) was a typical left-handed pitcher; he could sink the ball. But he had great control."

In the game against Lodi, he needed precise control, plus a reservoir of stamina. With the home team down 1-0 in the seventh inning, Doug Crawford singled to tie the game. As they went to extra innings, Green continued shutting down the Lodi lineup, often by strikeout. When he walked off the mound after the 12th inning, Sperbeck told him that he was done for the day.

It wasn't an issue. The home team scored when Crawford tripled and was driven home with the winning run, as the Falcons eked out a 2-1 victory. Green had struck out 20 batters and walked only three in going the distance while upping his record to 7-0 for the year.



Game 20 featured a rematch with Grant and this time different members of the Falcon lineup contributed to a 9-2 victory. Carl Boyer pitched and won his third game without a loss, while Gene Cervantes continued his hot hitting with three singles and 3 RBI. Fox, Green and Bonomi also contributed a pair of hits, while Bonomi threw out three base runners in the contest. "Bab-o could really throw," Gill recalls. "He would pick guys off first base, all the time. Boom-guy's gone. Second base, too. Bert could really play." Gill should know, as he coached the Christian Brothers High varsity from 1993-2006.

In the next to last game of the season, Armstrong hosted Highlands, which they had beaten easily 13-3 in April. With no score in the first inning, Sperbeck sensed this might not be an easy victory and one run could be the difference. Early on, he noticed that Highlands' left-handed pitcher took an old-fashioned "double-pump" windup before delivering the ball to the plate. When Mike Green reached third base, Sperbeck decided to try to steal a run. "Mike was big league fast and stole a lot of bases that year (18)," the coach remembers. He signaled for Green to steal home and the senior timed his jump perfectly, sliding safely under the catcher's tag.

Baseball purists had two issues with the steal play. First off, at the plate was the left-handed hitting Bonomi. A steal of home is usually attempted when a right-handed batter is at the plate, since it helps to obscure the catcher's vision of the runner barreling home.

Secondly, Green was the team's top pitcher. Traditionalists would argue (and apparently they did with Sperbeck after the game), that he took a chance with Green's safety, as a slide at home can result in a serious injury to the runner.

Regardless of the objections, Green slid in safely at home, providing Armstrong with one run. "It was the only run we scored until extra innings," Sperbeck remembers. The Falcons won the game in the 11th, providing Green with the area's best pitching record of 9-0.

Bishop Armstrong closed out the season with Marietti on the mound, and the fiery Italian spun a gem, shutting out Notre Del Rio on five hits and securing his ninth victory against two losses. The Falcons had concluded their season with the area's best record: 22-2.

Around graduation time, the statistics were tallied and Armstrong flooded the lists. Jim Fox, the unsung left-handed hitter, had finished with the area's top batting average at .482, a validation of his intense work ethic. Marietti led the area with most RBI (24). Green once again shined at the plate with a .416 batting average (fifth in the area), while posting the glistening 9-0 pitching record, with 127 strikeouts (second most) and the area's lowest ERA, a paltry 0.28.

Sacramento Bee-KFBK Baseball All Stars								
Player	Pos.	Age	Class	Ht.	Wt.	Bats	Throws	School
Mike Green	P-Inf.	17	Sr.	6-1	180	Left	Left	Armstrong
Milt Jackson	P	18	Sr.	6-3	170	Right	Right	Grant
Stan Vivaldi	P	17	Sr.	5-10	150	Right	Right	Sacramento
Bert Bonomi	C	17	Sr.	5-9	160	Left	Right	Armstrong
Terry Lee	Inf.	17	Sr.	6-2	190	Right	Right	McCluskey
Larry Marietti	Inf-P	17	Sr.	5-10	168	Right	Right	Armstrong
Johnny Gonzales	Inf.	18	Jr.	5-4	130	Right	Right	Sacramento
Doug Crawford	Inf.	17	Sr.	6-3	154	Right	Right	Armstrong
Bob Belsey	Inf.	18	Sr.	6-1	185	Right	Right	El Camino
Mike Roberts	Inf.	16	Jr.	5-8	155	Right	Right	La Sierra
Jim Fox	Of.	17	Sr.	6-1	195	Left	Left	Armstrong
Gene Cervantes	Of.	15	Jr.	5-10	160	Left	Right	Armstrong
Tom Harris	Of-P	17	Sr.	6-1	185	Right	Right	Johnson
Tom Crumley	Of.	16	Jr.	6-0	139	Left	Left	Marshall

Six members of the Armstrong nine made All-City in both the Sacramento Union and Sacramento Bee-KFBK. They included the three returning All-stars from 1961, Marietti, Green and Bonomi, and also

included seniors Jim Fox and Doug Crawford (.333) and junior speedster Gene Cervantes (.368).

Only once before had a Sacramento-area team produced six All-City players and that came in 1951 when Cliff Perry's McClatchy squad boasted the area's best. Back then, there were fewer schools and players to consider for the post-season awards. What makes Armstrong's six selections so impressive is that it has never been duplicated since.



Another way to gauge the greatness of this club: they conquered four conference champions over the span of their remarkable '62 season, proving to everyone that followed high school baseball that Armstrong clearly was the area's most dominant team and perhaps the best baseball club in the state that year.

Glen Borges, who watched the team all season, mostly from the BA bench, offers this perspective: "This was an exceptional team when baseball was a very important sport in Sacramento." Teammate outfielder Clark Aldrich, whose specialty was bowling over linemen in football, agrees. "Those guys were so good. They knew so much about baseball."

Ask the core group today if there is one moment that stands out from the magnificent season and you'll get shrugs and blank stares. Not from indifference, but from simple humility.

"I was just thrilled to be on a good team," explains Marietti, who was a main cog in the machine. "But it was about doing our business. When we finished up the season, I was focused on Legion hall."

"And Legion was big in those days," reminds Bernie Church.

Just as quickly as the school season had ended, the Armstrong boys were joined by four solid players from Encina (Rudy Minnick and John Goodman among them) on the Southside American Legion team, which also played its games at Land Park Diamond Number One. For Marietti, Green, Bonomi and the other Brothers Boys the main difference was the name on the front of the jerseys.



(Left to right: Southside Legion players Larry Marietti, John Goodman, Rudy Minnick, Mike Green and Bert Bonomi)

That season, American Legion officials upped the age ceiling to 18, enabling college players to compete in the summer league.

Before the American Legion season began Southside became ensnared in an imbroglio over the eligibility of star player, Mike Green, the CB boarder. Green had decided to play Legion ball for the first time that summer, and was invited to live at the home of his former coach, Dick Sperbeck. However, Wally Turpen, the head of the First Area, determined Green was ineligible to play for a Legion team in Sacramento since his permanent residence sported a Redding address. Turpen said he had "no alternative but to rule in with the interpretation (of the rules) of the national director George Rulon." The sports pages were replete with the accusations and counter-offensives swirling around Green's eligibility. Turpen stated that if Southside kept Green on the roster, and later won the District tournament, he would have no choice but to rule Green ineligible. And Southside would have to forfeit its victories.

Southside stayed firm and kept Green on its roster. About that contentious time, Green reflects: "Bottom line: I was going to play for Southside. Never thought I was going to end up any other place."

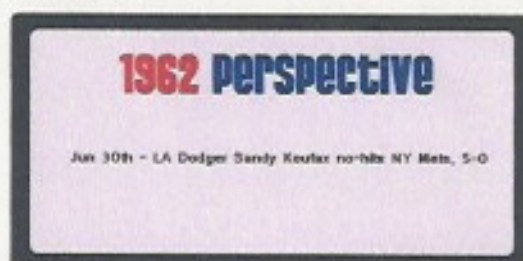
In the first game of the Legion season, Southside opened against Manhart, a team comprised of Sacramento High players, including **Johnny Gonzalez** and **Jim Graf** who hit .411 and .405 respectively during the high school season. Southside started Green at pitcher, who rode in with the unblemished record from the high school season, against Stan Vivaldi, who made All-City for Sac High. Before the game got underway at McClatchy Park, Manhart Manager **Ken Wallenberg** filed a formal protest because Southside (purportedly) had placed an ineligible player (Green) on its lineup card.

Manhart scored first in the bottom of the third when Vivaldi walked and was knocked in on a pair of singles. "(When pitching) one thing I hated, was a gift, a walk," recalls Green today. "If you're going to get on, you're going to earn it. And it amped me up that much harder (against the next batter), because I just committed a mortal sin."

Southside tied the game in the fourth, and went ahead in the top of the eighth when Green walked, stole second, and eventually came home with two outs "on a Bonomi slice to left field," reported Tom Horton of the *Sacramento Union*.

In the bottom of the ninth, Green gave up a bloop single, followed by a ringing single. The next batter topped a grounder to first baseman Jim Fox, who threw to third too late to get the lead runner. All runners were safe with the bases loaded, Green appeared to be tiring, he committed another "mortal sin" when he walked in the tying run on four pitches. Then **Elwood Hamlin**, who had struck out three times in the game, hit a single to win the game for Manhart.

After all the distraction over eligibility, Manhart defeated the unbeatable Green on the field. A happy Stan Vivaldi is seen in the *Union* newspaper photo, shaking hands with the winning batsman, Hamlin. Later, the Legion District 6 Commissioner ruled out Wallenberg's protest because the state commissioner had determined that Green was eligible to play. A production of *Much Ado About Nothing* had been staged that summer weekend at McClatchy Park.



From then on, Southside won 17 straight games, lost only once more to Roseville and finished the regular season with an 18-0 spanking of Manhart. They compiled an 18-2 mark and won the right to represent District 6 in the Area 1 Tournament.

Bishop Armstrong's Big Three led all Southside hitters, beginning with Green's .432 average, followed by Larry Marietti who hit .427 and drove in a team-leading 36 RBI, followed by Burt Bonomi who hit .403. In the pitching department, Green finished 5-1 with 78 strikeouts and 20 mortal sins, while Marietti finished 4-0.

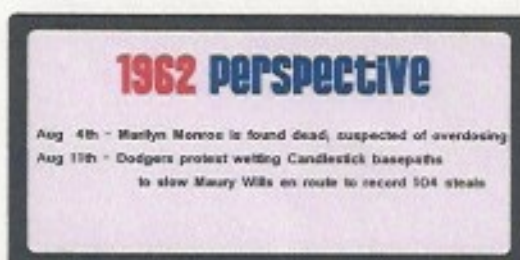
The Area 1 Tournament got underway on Thursday, August 2 at Edmonds Field, former home of the Sacramento Solons, which had been sold after the 1960 season and relocated to Hawaii. As thrilling as it was for the hometown boys to play under the lights in the minor league park, they got their first taste of Edmonds Field earlier in the season when Southside met Fort Sutter on July 4. The event was staged by Bert Bonomi and **Paul Bown**, both long time bushers and coaches of their respective clubs. The Fort Sutter gang was close behind in second place, and featured pitcher (and hitter) Tom Harris, **Dave Torgerson**, **Ed Gagle** and others. The two-night doubleheader —both won by Southside —reportedly drew 5,000 to 6,000 fans.

In the Area 1 tournament, Southside drew the 8:15 game under the lights against Oroville. Ticket prices were \$1 for adults and .50 cents for students. Mike Green pitched 9 innings, giving up two runs on three hits, while striking out 15, and Southside topped Oroville 8-2. Doug Crawford broke out of a batting slump (he was hitting just .200 for the Legion season) with three hits on the day. In the early game, Vallejo, led by the pitching of Tug McGraw, shut out Redding 2-0. (McGraw later pitched for the New York Mets and Phillies, appearing in two World Series. In the 1980 World Series, he won one game, lost one and earned two saves for the champion Phillies.)

In Southside's second game against Arcata, Marietti starred at pitcher, allowing three runs on seven hits, while fanning 11. He also had a pair of doubles and 3 RBI in the game. Bonomi and Crawford collected a pair of hits for the Southsiders. In the eighth inning with one out, after Marietti loaded the bases, Bonomi picked off a runner at first. This was also the game where Bonomi employed the unusual double steal defense taught by Sperbeck, and "the Old Pro" ran out beyond the pitcher's mound and tagged the runner out.

In the championship game, Green outducelled McGraw. The southpaws tossed six innings of shutout ball, but Southside managed single runs in the seventh and eighth innings. Green allowed just three hits and fanned nine to claim his 7th victory of the Legion season, as Southside topped Vallejo 2-0 to win the Area 1 Tournament.

Marietti was voted the tournament's Most Valuable Player by the District 6 coaches and newspaper sportswriters. The award came with a kiss from the Maid of Sacramento County, a pretty blonde named **Yvonne Zetz**, who happened to be Bernie Church's girlfriend at the time.



With the First Area tournament victory the Southsiders advanced to the state Legion tournament at Yountville. In the first game, Green pitched and Southside lost 2-1 to West Covina. In game two, a San Francisco team defeated Marietti and company 3-2 in the elimination contest. Unfortunately, their magical season of 40 wins combined in high school and American Legion came to an abrupt close.

"We were ranked number one (in the state) and lost the first two and were done," grouses Green. "That's not the way you want to go out."

But as Marietti remembers, it wasn't the end of the world. He had more baseball to play that summer in the County League, followed by another round of Winter League. Ditto for Bonomi and several others on the Southside squad.

For his accomplishments, Green earned a full ride scholarship to play basketball and baseball at University of San Francisco (USF). At the Area 1 tournament, USF also offered Marietti a full ride to play baseball. The scholarships meant a dream come true for both boys' families, and in the case of Green's, who had "hocked everything," made it all worthwhile.

Burt Bonomi, Jim Fox and Bernie Church went on to Sacramento City College where they played with numerous fellows they had competed against in high school and Legion, such as Tom Harris of Johnson. There they also teamed up with an infielder best known for failing to make the McClatchy High School team, **Larry Bowa**, who later went on to have an outstanding pro career with the Phillies and Cubs.

In hindsight, it is curious why Bonomi, who was clearly the best catching prospect in the area, didn't get a whiff from the scouts. "He was an intelligent sumbitch, and probably the best clutch player on that club," remembers Ron King. "And he was a really good hitter."

Some, like Sperbeck, theorize Bonomi's lack of size (5'9") held him back. Reminded that **Yogi Berra** wasn't a big guy and yet was considered one of the best backstops in the business, the former coach explains "It was just an image thing. The scouts thought a catcher should be a big guy. (Bonomi) was as fine a catcher as there ever was. He knew the game so well. He was very smart."

Church agrees. "They didn't sign the **Dustin Pedroia's** in those days (diminutive-sized players). Size was overrated in our day."

To prove the point, Doug Crawford, who stood 6'3", signed a professional contract with Cleveland that summer for a \$20,000 bonus. Ironically, Cleveland's shortstop at the time was **Woodie Held** of Sacramento.

Sometime over the course of the summer, the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce awarded Mike Green his second "Hall of Fame" trophy in baseball, making it two years running he was tabbed the best high school baseballer in the area. It perplexes that none of his former Armstrong teammates remembers him ever winning the prestigious awards (In fact, Green himself doesn't recall when or where he received the trophy). Not that they begrudge him the honor; every member of the team acknowledges Green's amazing accomplishments during that two-year period (including making All-City in basketball).

Harris of Johnson High, who twice made the All-City baseball team, shared this: "To me, Mike Green was one of the best players who ever came out of this town. I don't know if he ever gets enough credit or not. But he was really a great player and definitely the best player in town."

At summer's end, local baseball fans shifted their attention from sandlots to the professional ranks, as the San Francisco Giants tied the Los Angeles Dodgers on the last day of the season, and then won a three-game playoff to determine the National League pennant winner. The Giants played the New York Yankees in the World Series, and came within inches (McCovey's line drive snared by Yankee second baseman Bobby Richardson) of winning Game 7 in San Francisco.



The memory of that magical 1962 high school season began to acquire dust. That fall, Sperbeck took over the Armstrong varsity football program and guided it to an impressive record, nearly duplicating on the gridiron what he'd accomplished with the diamond nine. He continued coaching both football and baseball until 1966, when he handed the baseball reins to JV coach, Ron Limeberger. When he retired as CBS' head football coach in 1977, Sperbeck had created one of the top programs in the area, posting an 81-57-7 record. He is also known for spawning a coaching tree that saw fifteen of his former assistants go on to direct college or high school football programs.

As the years, and finally the decades passed, a carpet of dust covered the memory of Armstrong's 1962

baseball season, obscured to all but the players and a few insiders. It remained that way until the publisher and founder of Cal-Hi Sports published its first Record Book. In it, the 1962 Bishop Armstrong Falcons baseball team had been acclaimed the state's Team of the Year and Dick Sperbeck as Coach of the Year for 1962.\*

According to Mark Tennis, the current publisher of Cal-Hi Sports Record Book, his uncle Nelson went back and retroactively awarded the honors. Now they are presented annually by the firm. Tennis says Nelson, the founder of Cal-Hi Sports, would have employed the same guidelines and parameters used today in selecting the best baseball teams: won-loss percentage, head-to-head competition and numerous other quantitative factors.

Interestingly, the awarding of the mythical state championship and coach of the year honors escaped many of the Brother's brethren, as there never was a formal announcement by Cal-Hi Sports or a ceremony held at the school. Bernie Church had been aware of it years before, and in fact, arranged for a banner commemorating the team's accomplishment to be hung in the school's gymnasium. But the banner has since perished. Church now heads Christian Brothers' booster organization, the LaSalle Club, which each year honors past Sacramento area baseball standouts with selection in the [LaSalle Club Baseball Hall of Fame](#).

Sperbeck learned of his Coach of the Year honor when his 10-year-old grandson happened to be flipping through the Record Book and noticed the family name. Sperbeck was pleasantly surprised to learn of the honor and yet chagrined that no one had alerted him.

For the coach and his players, now well into their mid-sixties, the year 1962 will always inspire fond memories of a significant sporting accomplishment in Sacramento high school athletic history.

For others it represents that pivotal, final year before America's innocence would be shattered by unfathomable turmoil.

One year later, President Kennedy would be shot dead in Dallas. The Viet Nam war would rapidly escalate, eventually leading to the deaths of 58,000+ American soldiers over the next decade. And African Americans would march in the streets, angering discomfited southerners still clinging to outdated traditions, eventually forcing Congress to grant civil rights to all people. In truth, the United States of America took a dark, divergent turn from which it has never returned.

On the flip side, 1963 also gave us a new direction in music led by The Beatles, and the rest of the British Invasion. One could argue that trend carved out a new direction in music, which eventually influenced culture and politics. When mixed with the violent forces cited above, the synergy created a cacophony in the American psyche.

Yet we need only go back one short year prior to those events to return to a more pastoral Norman Rockwell time, when the thock of wooden bats colliding with the horsehide meant the local nine were down at the diamond playing like champions.

And all was well in the world.



Larry Marietti, Bernie Church and Bert Bonomi today

\*\*\*

\* Cal-Hi Sports Record Book selected five Sacramento area teams as "Team of the Year"

- 1935 Sacramento High (20-1)
- 1951 McClatchy High (33-0-1)
- 1962 Bishop Armstrong (22-2)
- 1969 Grant High (30-1)
- 1984 Cuedova (33-5-1)

^"The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball."  
The line spoken by the character Terrence Mann, fictitious writer, in the movie *Field of Dreams*.

---

*(Special thanks goes to Bernie Church who arranged numerous interviews and delivered research materials, without which this article would not have been possible. To paraphrase the late journalist Bill Costin, "He's as good a man as Gunga Din.")*

**Uploaded 06/13/10**

All contents © Rick Cabral, 2010

[Site Map](#)   [Privacy](#)   [About Us](#)