

Vernonia Baseball Coach Reminiscences About Pro Career

VHS pitching coach Doug McCracken played three seasons of single A pro baseball in the 1970s

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia High School baseball program, which just concluded their 2021 season, has been lucky during the last four seasons to tap into the experience of a local who spent three seasons playing minor league baseball.

First, we have some business to attend to: in our May 6, 2021 issue, in the VHS Sports Report on page 11, we incorrectly stated that coach Doug McCracken had played AAA ball (the highest level of minor league baseball), which was incorrect. We thought that while making that correction in print, it might be fun to hear about McCracken's career and share it here.

McCracken played high school ball at Sunset High School where he was named First Team All State as an outfielder in both his junior and senior seasons in 1975 and 1976; he was also an All League pitcher. Following his senior season he was selected to play in a state-wide, three game All Star series and was named the Most Valuable Player.

In 1976 he was drafted in the 22nd round by the Chicago Cubs, and went on to play three seasons in four different single A level leagues. His rookie season he spent playing in the Florida Gulf Coast League. In his second season in 1977 he moved up and

was named to the All Star team in the New York-Pennsylvania League after hitting .276 with 22 RBIs, 18 stolen bases, and 49 walks in 64 games. His third season in 1978 he again moved up and played part of the season in the Florida State League where he struggled, before being sent back down to the New York-Pennsylvania League, batting .338 with 13 RBIs in 19 games. Following the 1978 season the Cubs released him and that was the end of his professional baseball career.

McCracken recalled one personal career highlight from when he was playing for the Geneva Cubs in the New York-Penn League and hit a walk-off, game winning home run. "I'll never forget it – it was 'Pony Night' at the stadium and they had a promotion to give away a pony to someone in the crowd and the stands were packed, and that was probably the highlight of my career!"

McCracken says minor league baseball is a business and a numbers game – each year an organization might draft or sign around 50 new players, and so they need to make room and release about 50 players. He also said it was a challenge as a player right out of high school to handle the adversity and the grind that playing baseball everyday provides. "Coming right out of high school, I don't think I really had the maturity to deal with the ups and downs of pro ball," he says. "When you're hitting a baseball, if you fail seven out of 10 times you're doing great, but that's hard for a young player to understand and ac-



cept."

During his pro career, McCracken did have a few brushes with famous players, including three future major league members of the Baseball Hall of Fame. As a member of the Cubs organization, he got to face Cub pitching legend and Hall of Famer Lee Smith in batting practice. He played against Ricky Henderson and Tim Lincecum, also both inductees to the Hall. He played against fellow Oregonian Wally Backman in high school when Backman attended Aloha High School, and later against him in the minors before Backman went on to a successful major league career that included winning the World Series with the New York Mets in 1986; McCracken says the two remained friends for many years after his own career ended. He also played against Kirk Gibson, who hit one of the most famous home runs in World Series history in

1988 for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Gibson was the number one draft choice of the Detroit Tigers after being a two-sport athlete at Michigan State, playing both baseball and football. McCracken says there were questions about whether Gibson would be successful in pro baseball. "I was playing in right field for Gibson's very first professional game and he hit a home run over my head that was just a blast, and I didn't even move," says McCracken, "and we knew he was going to be something special."

"I always feel fortunate that I got the opportunity to play pro baseball," he says. "It's a challenging profession and I'll always be grateful for those three years. It was a dream come true for me, so I feel pretty lucky I was given that chance."

After his baseball career ended, McCracken says he concentrated on raising a family and went to work in the Seattle shipyards as a welder, where he spent 39 years building navy ships, many which are still in service. "That was a really satisfying and unique experience, getting to see ships you worked on get launched," he says. He did put his baseball knowledge and experience to use, coaching his sons in little league baseball, and also coaching basketball and soccer. After retiring in 2017 and raising six children, he moved to Vernonia with his wife Terri to take care of his mother Verna Baker who has lived in Vernonia for thirty years; Doug and Terri are celebrating their 19th anniversary this month and enjoy spending time

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