

Thoughts On The Passing Of A Great One

On Wednesday, March 31st, the Metro League tragically lost one of its own. MLB and St. Louis Cardinal veteran Ken Reitz passed away at his home in St. Charles, leaving behind his son Brett, his daughter Corrie, six grandchildren and an ocean of red-clad baseball fans to mourn his passing.

Reitz's legacy in baseball is a storied one. Drafted by the Cardinals in 1969, he quickly established himself in the 1970s as a sure-handed fielder at the hot corner. Twice, he set major league records for fewest errors at that position, earning a Gold Glove award in 1975 and ending his playing days with a .970 career fielding percentage. Forty years after his retirement, it still stands as the all-time highest career fielding percentage in the National League among third basemen and just one point behind the all-time American League career record held by Brooks Robinson. Reitz was nicknamed "The Zamboni Machine" by Cardinal broadcaster Mike Shannon and to this day, Redbird fans still refer to him as such. He wore that moniker with pride and would inscribe it below his signature whenever he autographed a baseball.

Closer to home, Kenny had been a coach for the St. Louis Metro Collegiate Baseball League since 2006. It's often difficult for an old-school baseball man to relate to young players, but it wasn't for Kenny. He took to it like a duck to water. Always supportive of his players, he would shout encouragement, never criticism, regardless of the situation. He liked to say that baseball is a failure game. He understood how difficult that game can be and was careful not to breed discouragement. Like any good mentor, he would offer guidance, but stood back and allowed his young charges to discover the game ... and make it their own.

Contrary to what you might expect, this former Major League All Star didn't take the field with something to prove. He was there to share his knowledge and love for baseball. He didn't try to control the flow of the game as so many coaches do these days. He didn't call pitches and he wouldn't throw a lot of signs from his position in the third base coach's box. Why? He wanted his team to process the game for themselves and think through the game situations.

One play he really liked though, maybe to a fault, was the hit-and-run. Kenny used it a lot. He ran it to keep his hitters aggressive and to open dynamic opportunities. That was Kenny – make something happen. Don't sit around and wait for the game to come to you, take it to your opponent. His players loved it, and they loved him. After hearing of Kenny's passing, the son of a former Major Leaguer stated that his fondest memories in baseball were with Ken Reitz in the Metro League. No higher honor can be given to a coach or a teacher than the knowledge that he has had positive impact in the life of a young man.

That's Kenny the player and Kenny the coach. Kenny the man was open and respectful to everyone he met. Everyone was Ken Reitz's friend, because he made them feel that way. He would take a knee to talk to a little leaguer, or sit under the BMAC pavilion with a gaggle of coaches and dads, telling countless stories and sharing his philosophy of the game. I will miss those moments on warm June evenings under the lights. But most of all, I'll miss my friend. We'll all miss our friend. But let's remember him the way he was: a Cardinal for life, an ambassador of the game and still just a big kid in his heart.

So long, Kenny.

For the St. Louis Metro Collegiate Baseball League,

-Bob Totterer