

Clark plans baseball celebration

Penguins won 1956 state community college crown

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A baseball that emerged from a Vancouver businessman's private sports collection has provided the impetus for a celebration of the 1956 Clark College boys of summer.

The ball, signed by the members of the team who won the Washington State Community College Championship, was part of Chuck Chronis' collection when he decided to bring it to the attention of the Alumni Association of Clark College.

The association held it for a time until the realization that this year is the 50th anniversary of the championship.

The team will be honored during halftime at the Clark men's basketball game today.

Fourteen of the original 23 team members, coaches and managers will be in attendance, including longtime Clark coach and athletic director Claude "Skeet" O'Connell.

A reception will take place following the game. Clark faces Grays Harbor at 3 p.m. at the O'Connell Center.

Team captain and third baseman Joe Johnson says O'Connell did it all — teaching hitting, defense and pitching with no assistant coaches.

"We became good hitters because of him," Johnson said. "He had a brilliant mind for baseball. He taught all the extras: defense, stealing, and timely hitting. He had special plays using the bunt as an offensive weapon to produce runs."

The players knew every hole, rock and bump in the field across from present-day Propstra Stadium, and took advantage of it.

"The ball would just die out there," Johnson said. "The fields weren't manicured like today's fields are."

The team was a mixture of recently discharged Korean War veterans from the Midwest and local kids who drove their own vehicles to away games at Grays Harbor, Centralia, Longview and Portland, as well as the University of Oregon and Oregon State.

Clark had an 11-0 regular season in 1956, and beat Northern Region champs Olympic College by a score of 2-1 to take the Western Division title.

The championship play-off was a best-of-three series against Yakima Junior College, which traditionally dominated the east side of the state.



Photo courtesy of Clark College

Clark College's 1956 baseball team.

Clark:

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No third game was necessary as Clark won the first two on their home field by scores of 3-1 and 2-1.

Bunting and stealing bases figured greatly in the wins.

"Those Yakima boys were big, strapping guys," said Johnson, 73, a retired Pfizer representative. "We weren't husky boys like the boys are today. But we had outstanding pitching by left-hander Tom Garrow in Game 1 and by John Aldridge in Game 2."

They also had their coach. It was O'Connell's fifth consecutive year leading his team to the Washington State Community Colleges Western Divisional championships.

Some of the former teammates who signed the ball so long ago now live retirees' lives in places like Arizona and Las Vegas, and some still live locally.

One outfielder's signature on the discovered baseball is that of Clark County's Harley Hall, a U.S. Navy pilot and member of the Blue Angels. He was shot down on the last day of the Vietnam War and was the last American to be classified Prisoner of War.

The ball and two team photos, one from 1956 and one to be taken at tonight's celebration, will be placed on a trophy to be presented to Hall's family by the Alumni Association and the Penguin Athletic Club. The trophy then will be displayed at the H.H. Hall Building in Hazel Dell named in Capt. Hall's honor.