

## Robert Mendence



For all the sports he was involved in and all the teams he played for, from his basketball days with the Washington Village Boys Club and St. Joe's CYO team, to his soccer days at Ben Franklin Jr. High and football camps at Norwalk High, to his many years playing two sports for Nash Engineering, Bob Mendence's great accomplishment in local sports came well after his own playing days were over.

In 1975, Mendence was among a handful of youth baseball officials in Norwalk who founded the David Kinlock Memorial Tournament.

Named after a former player in the Norwalk International Little League who lost his life in a freak accident, the Kinlock Tournament has become an annual summer tradition in Norwalk. And it was Mendence, the president of the American Little League at the time, along with Tom Corbo of the Cranbury League, Maurice Nathan of the International LL, and Frank Laychak of the National LL, who were the founding fathers.

The West Norwalk Community League was also on board, and in the summer of '75, the Kinlock Tournament was born. But it may never have gotten off the ground without Bob Mendence and a vision he had.

"It was his idea to get all five leagues together," said Corbo, who along with Mendence are the only surviving organizers. It was only fitting that before the first game of the 2007 Kinlock tourney, the two of them each threw out the ceremonial first pitch.

The thinking behind the tournament was simple: It gave kids a chance to play more baseball, well into the month of August when they would have normally been long done.

"It gave the kids more baseball than Little League," Mendence pointed out as he recently recalled that groundbreaking year. "Back then, the district Little League tournaments were single elimination and most of the Norwalk teams went one and out.

"So when we started the Kinlock, we said every team plays every team so they would all have more games."

At first, Little League headquarters in Williamsport didn't look favorably on the new tournament, the only one of its kind at the time, and even threatened to revoke the charter from some of the local League Leagues. Their scare tactics worked to a degree as some local league officials – even some in Mendence's own league – talked about pulling out to save their charters.

But Mendence held firm, stuck to position, and convinced the others to do the same as the tournament survived.

"The Kinlock would have never made it without Bob Mendence," Corbo insists.

Even Little League Baseball eventually came around. Seeing the need for all-star teams to play more baseball, the powers-that-be in Williamsport began making tournaments double-elimination and a few years later instituted a round-robin format in the later rounds, including the Little League World Series.

"I'd like to think we had something to do with the new system and with Williamsport changing their philosophy," Mendence said.

More than three decades later, the Norwalk David Kinlock Memorial Youth Baseball Tournament is still going strong as the 35th annual intra-city tournament took place this summer.

"I'm happy to see it's still going strong," Mendence said. "It's good for the kids, and that's what it was for, the kids."

Mendence's own involvement in sports began even before Little League Baseball came into existence. Born in Providence, R.I., in 1933, Mendence grew up in South Norwalk and played two years of basketball with the Crusaders for coach Mike Caruso and then one season with the Washington Village Boys Club under the coaching eye of Rudy Costa.

He also played forward for the "5 Bills" who were coached by his brother Don Mendence, and outfield for the Morton Street PAL baseball team. His athletic exploits included two years of soccer for Benjamin Franklin Junior High School, which won the city championship, and then two seasons of football as a linebacker at Norwalk High School, where he graduated from in 1951.

Right around that same time, Mendence enjoyed three stellar seasons playing CYO basketball for St. Joseph's, which captured three straight city championships. One of his coaches, ironically, was Tom Corbo.

Mendence also played two years of softball for the Sons of Italy before playing both softball and basketball for a handful of years at Nash Engineering, where he was employed for 45 years and rose to assistant manager of his department.

When he was done playing, Mendence coached the Nash softball team for three years. He also served seven years as chairman of the Nash Recreation committee, and one year as manager of the Norwalk Industrial Softball League.

He also served four years, from 1952-56, in the United States Navy where he was a navy airman and an aviation structural technician. A member of the American Legion Post 12 and the Laurel Athletic Club, Mendence is married to the former Marie St. Denis, and they have six children, nine grandchildren, and one great granddaughter.