

## Gary Lawrence



The city of Norwalk has certainly produced its share of outstanding softball players, some of whose names are legendary. And Gary Lawrence certainly has to be somewhere close to the top of that list.

In fact, in a 1981 article in *The Hour* newspaper, Lawrence was not only named one of "The 10 Best Softball Players" in the city of Norwalk according to a panel of local softball officials, but he was selected as the MVP.

Not surprising when you look back on a career that started in 1969 when Lawrence was only 16 years-old and played with Chatham Oaks, a local powerhouse back then.

"My cousin Harry Brower played with them and Bob Peco, who used to run Chatham Oaks (a local catering hall on Connecticut Avenue) ran the team. They got me to play with them when I was only 16. There were some great players on that team."

Like Earl Stabell, Donnie Bieling Sr., Dickie Blake and Peco, who managed Chatham Oaks to over a hundred tournament wins all over Connecticut and New York State, Lawrence, who played left-center field, won the MVP award in a number of those tournaments.

He eventually left Chatham Oaks to join Lawrence's Tigers, the softball team his father, George 'Mimi' Lawrence, started, sponsored and managed. The roster included his three sons: Gary 'Moose' Lawrence, Tracey

'Moonie' Lawrence, and Bobby 'Rocky' Lawrence.

"We all had nicknames," Gary, the oldest of the three boys, said. "When I was in Little League, I was a pretty big boy and one of the coaches called me 'Moose' and it stuck all these years."

Another Norwalk softball power, Lawrence's Tigers won four city championships and a number of tournaments throughout the state, including the Danbury Labor Day tournament six times. Gary was named MVP in four of them.

By now, Lawrence had earned the reputation as one of the most dominant players in Connecticut, so much so that he was recruited to play in a professional softball league for two years (1977-78) with the New York Clippers in Mount Vernon and the Trenton Statesmen in New Jersey. One of his teammates at Trenton was former New York Yankee Joe Pepitone.

Lawrence eventually returned to the amateur ranks, although he had to sit out two more years before he was reinstated in 1980. That was just in time for him to help lead Sonny's to the Connecticut ASA Major state championship that year.

He also helped Sonny's finish runner-up in the USSSA World Tournament a few years later in Cincinnati. Meanwhile, Lawrence collected some more MVP awards for tournaments Sonny's won all along the East Coast.

"We used to play in five or six tournaments a weekend. There was nobody like Sonny," Lawrence said of the late Sonny DeMattio, the team sponsor and manager who was also a mentor to him. "He was like a second pop to me. Sonny would find a tournament somewhere to play in every weekend. He's probably up there now still arranging tournaments."

Lawrence, who also played Major competition with the Connecticut Merchants, moved from the outfield to third base while playing for a number of local Class A and B teams. That included DeVito Bros., where he was reunited as teammates with his two brothers and won two city championships together.

He also won three sectional titles with Snellman Construction, and four sectional crowns and a pair of city championships with Gallo's Sandbar.

A bothersome hip, which eventually needed replacement surgery, forced Lawrence to retire in 2001, bringing down the curtain on a 30-year career that saw him bat over .600 against top level competition. He provided power in the lineup whether batting leadoff or fourth, and was an outstanding outfielder who possessed a cannon for an arm.

Lawrence was duly recognized for all his achievements in November 2007 when he was inducted into the Connecticut Amateur Softball Association Hall of Fame.

But Lawrence's athletic talents were evident long before he hit a softball. During his four years in the Norwalk American Little League, he hit 35 home runs, including one in an all-star game to beat Wilton 4-3 in 10 innings. As a 12-year-old, he also compiled a 10-0 pitching record to lead Darien Cleaners to a 16-0 season. Then in the Colt League, he pitched a pair of no-hitters.

Lawrence also shined in basketball, once scoring 50 of his team's 58 points in the Norwalk Parochial League. He went on to star at Brien McMahon High School, where he was a three-year starter and an All-FCIAC center who scored 986 career points. As a senior, he was MVP of *The Hour's* very first All-City Basketball Team in 1971.

"Gary Lawrence could have been an all-star in any sport he wanted. He was that good," said his former basketball coach, Ralph King, a 1996 Old Timers honoree. "If he hadn't broken his wrist as a sophomore there's no telling how many records he would have set."

Lawrence certainly could have been an all-star in football, too. He was part of seven championship teams in the Norwalk Recreation Adult Touch Football League, winning three titles with the Bruce Park Steelers, two with the Majon's Steelers, and one each with Soundview Variety and Partners' Café.

Lawrence, who will turn 57 on Nov. 28, retired from the Norwalk Department of Public Works in 2008 after 36 years of service.