

Cleve Penberthy

There may be no higher praise in the sports vocabulary than the word “clutch.” On June 15, 1966, Cleve Penberthy was indeed clutch.

That was the day the Brien McMahon baseball team defeated Bobby Valentine and Rippowam High School 4-0 to win the CIAC Class A state championship.

And Cleve Penberthy had a very big hand in delivering what is still the city's only state title in high school baseball.

All the senior second baseman did that day was drive in three of the Senators' four runs and score the other. He singled and scored the first run in the second inning, singled in the second run in the third, and then iced the victory with a two-run triple in the seventh inning.

In fact, Penberthy was clutch throughout the 1966 state tournament, batting a blistering .500 as he went 8-for-16 in McMahon's four postseason victories. He was 3-for-3 in the first round, 2-for-4 in the semifinals, and in the last, and biggest, game of his scholastic career, Penberthy played perhaps his best game as he collected three of the Senators' six hits.

That gave him 27 hits on the season as Penberthy led the 19-3 Senators with a .375 batting average and was named All-FCIAC.

A few months earlier, Penberthy was part of another memorable McMahon victory. He was a senior co-captain and starting point guard on the 1965-66 BMHS basketball team, averaging a team-high 7.7 assists as the Senators went 18-4 and reached the Class LL state semifinals.

The highlight that season was when McMahon, with Penberthy directing the offense, posted a thrilling 72-68 win over crosstown rival Norwalk High before a standing-room only crowd in the NHS gym (and another thousand people in the auditorium watching on closed-circuit TV). Norwalk, led by future NBA all-star and Hall of Famer Calvin Murphy, came into the game 16-0 and that loss would be the only blemish in a 23-1 season by the Class L state champs.

Penberthy received All-FCIAC *Honorable Mention* to go with the all-conference honor he would later earn in baseball, and he was voted Brien McMahon's Co-Athlete of the Year with Kelly Myrick.

The versatile Penberthy also played football at McMahon, starting at quarterback for the JV team as a sophomore and starting a few varsity games as a junior. He was actually elected one of the captains his senior year, but decided not to play in order to keep Saturdays free for college visits.

Penberthy headed to Dartmouth College, where he was captain and the second leading scorer on the freshmen basketball team that went 19-2. He also started at second base for the undefeated freshmen baseball team (12-0).

He played two years of varsity basketball and his highlights included being matched up against current Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, a point guard at West Point; playing at famed Madison Square Garden against Rutgers; and playing in the NBC 'Game of the Week' against top-10 ranked Columbia.

College marked the end of a sports journey that began in 1957 as a third grader at Rowayton Elementary School where Penberthy played in his first organized basketball game. A year later he played in the American Little League with the Laurels and a year after that made the 1959 all-star team. In 1960, he would play his final year of LL baseball in the first year of the new Rowayton Little League for Rowayton Fuel and Oil.

Penberthy also played for the Laurel AC in the Norwalk Biddy Basketball League and as an 11-year-old made the all-star team that won the New England championship and finished sixth in the International Biddy League tournament. The following year, he again made the all-star team, which returned to the New England finals and lost by one point in double overtime. The co-captains of that Norwalk team were Calvin Murphy and 2013 Norwalk Old Timers honoree Drew Czulewicz.

A year later, in 1962, Penberthy served as a co-captain himself of the basketball team at what was then known as Brien McMahon Junior High School, also housed in the new building on Highland Avenue. As a freshman in '63, he moved up to the junior varsity and a year later joined the BMHS varsity.

After college, Penberthy embarked on a 40-year career in public education throughout North America. He started his first school, "Changes, Inc.," in Newark, N.J., in 1971. He taught and coached basketball at St. George's School in Montreal, and returned to this area at Staples High School, where he coached the boys tennis team to the 1979 state title.

From 1980-91, Penberthy served as a K-12 principal and then Superintendent of Schools in Colorado. His next stop was Amherst, N.H., where he was hired to help design a progressive new high school for their community. As Dean of Students, Penberthy was responsible for building Souhegan High School's athletic department from scratch.

Then in 1993, Penberthy relocated to Spokane, Wash., where he was a high school principal for 18 years. He retired in June 2011 and still makes his home there.

