

Dave Mills



The 1940s was a time of war and peace, and Dave Mills performed admirably during both.

Back in the late 1930s and early '40s, and again in the late 1940s, very few pitchers around here threw the ball any better than Mills, a six-foot tall redheaded righty with a zipping fastball and a hooking curve that perplexed the competition.

Born and raised in Norwalk, Mills attended Broad River School, Center Junior High and Norwalk High School, where his baseball career really began to take shape and he once struck out 16 Stamford High batters.

After graduating in 1939, Mills played for several area teams, including the Laurels, the Stamford Holy Names, the Wilton Farmers and the Bridgeport Americans. One of the highlights of his career was pitching a no-hitter for the Laurels in a 4-1 win over the NHS Alumni in the Norwalk Twilight League at Dunbar Field. Mills gave up a run in the first inning on three walks and an error, but then allowed only one other batter to reach first base the rest of the game,

and that was a hit-batsman as he outpitched the legendary Jack Cronin.

But it was with the Wilton Farmers, pitching at Orem Field, where Mills enjoyed some of his greatest success, once going 12-3. In fact, he and catcher Johnny Buschbaum formed one of the best batteries in the area during their time. Other teammates included Bob and John Edge, Vic D'Amato, Rudy Sciaudone, Billy Dudas, and Sam and Frank Impy.

Two of Mills' biggest wins came over the rival New Canaan Maroons, including a 7-0 victory on Labor Day at Mead Park in which he hurled a four-hitter and struck out nine. He also shut the Maroons out for eight innings earlier in the season, again yielding only four hits, before getting hurt and leaving the game with a 4-0 lead. The Maroons rallied for three runs off his replacement in the ninth, but the Farmers held on to win 4-3.

Mills also beat the Fairfield Kennels twice, both times 3-2, including another four-hitter in which he struck out 12. He also singled in the tying run in the seventh inning and then knocked in the winning run in the ninth.

In addition, the lanky right-hander once posted back to back gems at Orem in which he first beat the Greens Farms Firemen 8-1, giving up only an unearned run while fanning 14, and finishing with yet another four-hitter after hurling one-hit shutout ball the first seven frames. In his next game, Mills fired a one-hitter and struck out 16 as the Farmers beat the New York Melfords 7-0. Mills had a no-hitter for 8 1/3 innings before the visitors spoiled his bid, but he came back to strike out the next two batters to end the game.

Mills threw another one-hitter in a 3-1 win over the Norwalk Crusaders, a two-hitter with 15 strikeouts in a 14-0 rout of the Fairfield Townies, and a pair of three-hitters in a 3-0 win with 14 strikeouts over Portchester, N.Y., and a 5-4 victory over the Colonials. He threw three more four-hitters, beating the Park City Giants 3-2 in 10 innings while striking out nine, fanning 11 in a 4-2 win over the NY Collegians, and dominating the Naugatuck Highlanders 11-2 as he didn't allow a hit over the first six innings. He also recorded 14 strikeouts in a 4-2 loss to Newberg, N.Y., and another 11 strikeouts in a 5-4, 10-inning win over the Hamden Townies.

But Mills' success on the mound wasn't limited to just the Farmers. In addition to pitching for Wilton on Sundays, he pitched the Norwalk DeMolay baseball team to its first state championship. He also set a new Senior City League record by striking out 16 batters to lead the Bridgeport Americans to a 4-3 win over St. John's at Seaside Park. Mills' pitching talents caught the eye of several pro scouts in the area, and he had minor league tryouts with both New York Giants and Cleveland Indians.

In 1942, however, Mills' outstanding pitching career would be interrupted by World War II. He was drafted into the U.S. Army and soon became a corporal in the 88th Infantry Division. He then applied to Officer Candidate School and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and assigned to the 13th Armored Infantry Regiment in Camp Beach, Calif., as a platoon leader. As an officer, Mills was able to apply for pilot training in the U.S. Air Corps and soon earned his wings.

That led to a tour with the 8th Air Force, and in December of 1944 Mills began combat flying and successfully completed 24 B-17 bombing missions to Germany from his base in England without injury to any of his crew members.

Following his discharge in September 1945, Mills married Janet Marsico and he entered Pratt Institute in New York on the GI Bill and majored in art. He also resumed his baseball career and pitched for Pratt.

Then after reeling off seven straight victories in 1946 in the Stamford Twilight League for the Holy Names, the Pittsburgh Pirates organization signed Mills to a professional contract and assigned him to their Class B team in Alabama, the Selma Cloverleaves.

But he didn't report until June 1 so he could finish his term at Pratt, and began the 1947 season with the Uniontown (Pa.) Coal Barons, the Pirates' Class C team. Mills won four games that season, including both ends of a doubleheader against the Johnstown Johnnies. He pitched a six-hitter in the opener to win 7-4, then came on in relief in the nightcap and got the win as the Barons rallied for 9-7 victory to complete the sweep. Mills singled in the top of the 10th to ignite the winning two-run rally.

He also threw a four-hitter with eight strikeouts in an 8-2 win over the Erie Sailors, in which he had two singles.

Unable to support he and his wife on a baseball salary, Mills left baseball after the 1948 season and began a new career as a commercial artist. After a stint with the Carr Spiers Company in Stamford, Mills joined the Ted Sommers Advertising Agency in Bridgeport in 1951 as a staff artist and was promoted to art director the following year. Shortly after, he and Bob Porter, one of his associates at Sommers, began their own ad agency, Porter and Mills, in Fairfield, which was successful for many years.

While baseball was his first love growing up, Mills also excelled in tennis and hockey. While at Norwalk High, it was Mills who convinced Principal Eric Malmquist to start a hockey team at NHS. They used football jerseys and borrowed equipment from the Norwalk Cubs, an independent team Mills played left wing and center for and helped them win the city championship in 1939 and '40. Mills would even return to Norwalk High in the 1950s as an assistant hockey coach under Hall of Fame coach Tom Scarso.

Now retired, the 84-year-old Mills has lived in Norwalk his whole life and continues to play golf, his new favorite pastime.