

Alabama Baseball Coaches Association Distinguished Service Award



JERRY BELK 2009 Recipient

*"In Recognition of a Lifetime of Outstanding Achievement in the game of Baseball.
The State of Alabama will forever be in your debt."*

Baseball has run through Jerry Belk's life like the proverbial river for more than 60 years now. The game has been his passion since boyhood - as player, national championship coach, outstanding parks and recreation director and fan.

His love of baseball came naturally. Belk's father, Roy, was a pretty fair country second baseman in Fayette County during his youth and went on to play a year at Jacksonville State University. "My younger brother Tommy and I might not ever have played baseball if our dad hadn't played and loved the game so much," Jerry said. Tommy, who died a few years ago, became a second baseman and Jerry mostly played third base.

There was no Little League baseball program in Tuscaloosa when Jerry and Tommy were growing up, but they played ball anyhow. If they didn't have a bat and baseball, the brothers Belk used broomsticks and tennis balls. If they didn't have a tennis ball handy, ping pong balls had to do.

"You have to have really good eyes to hit a ping pong ball with a broomstick," Belk recalls with a smile.

Jerry started playing American Legion baseball at age 12. He played third base and pitched for the Post 34 team which won the first state tournament in 1949. He started at third base for Tuscaloosa High for three seasons, then for the University of Alabama for three more seasons. He played semi-pro baseball. He played pasture baseball.

"I just really loved playing baseball," he said.

Jerry served as an infantry platoon leader in Germany following college. He also was player-coach of the 12th Infantry Regiment baseball team. "We did real well," he said.

When Belk came back home to Tuscaloosa County, he became baseball coach at Holt High School from 1958-66. His teams won about 80% of their games and several county and Warrior Athletic Conference championships. During that eight-year span, Belk coached in six Lions Club East-West regional games and two state East-West games in Birmingham.

And he came to realize that as much as he had loved playing the game, he loved coaching more.

It wasn't just about wins and losses. It wasn't even just about baseball. Jerry loved the teaching opportunity. His players learned the importance of teamwork, enthusiasm, and discipline. They also learned that academics came first. "You could miss practice to study," he said. "I was a teacher-first, second and third.

"I really was more of a teacher of baseball and life then just a coach. "I cared deeply about every young man I ever taught and coached. I tried very hard to help each of them over-achieve, to be the best they could be in baseball and, more importantly, in life" Belk said. "I worked very hard to try to do things correctly, to build character, to instill a work ethic, to be a better coach every year." And he worked hard to help his players get college baseball or other athletic scholarships to help them further their educations.

Belk also coached the American Legion Post 34 team during the summers of 1957-69, first as an assistant to head coach James (Pup) Brown from 1957-64, then as head coach after Brown's death in an airplane crash in 1964.

Belk guided the Post 34 team to the finals of the national legion tournament in 1966. It was the first time an Alabama team had even reached the national tournament. Belk's team competed in the tournament with only 12 players. Post 34 lost to a California team in the championship game, but one of Belk's players, Bill Parker, was named the National Player of the Year.

The following year, Post 34 won the national championship by defeating Northbrook, Illinois in the title game. Another Post 34 player, Randy Ryan, was named the National Sportsman Player of the Year, which made Belk particularly proud.

Belk later coached Little League (ages 9-12) and Pony League (ages 12-16) for several seasons and was active in youth baseball in various other capacities.

Belk left Holt in 1966 to become director of Tuscaloosa Parks and Recreation Department. When the city program merged into a new countywide Parks and Recreation Authority, Belk became its executive director. He developed and grew PARA into an outstanding, diverse program which did its best to serve the needs of all of the people of Tuscaloosa County.

Construction and renovation of baseball fields was a significant part of the recreation effort. Belk was involved directly or indirectly with the construction of regulation size fields at Bowers Park and at five city and county high schools. Another high school field was renovated. Approximately 29 Little League baseball fields were built, 18 of them in small communities within the county.

Now age 75 and officially retired, Belk is frequently seen at college, high school and American Legion games. The level of involvement has changed over the years, but one thing hasn't. Jerry Belk still loves baseball and the game remains a major passion of his life.

Inducted January 16, 2009