

# **Jackie Collum: A Living Baseball Legend**

**By William L. Sherman**

Jackie Collum would be a good name for a baseball trivia contest. Especially in Iowa.

Collum started playing second base for Newburg High School as a 10-year old sixth grader in 1938. Newburg was a small high school. Enrollment was usually less than 50 up until the school reorganized with Grinnell in 1958. The older players didn't mind having Jackie play with them. He was good, and it sometimes meant the difference between playing or forfeiting.

Jackie's two older brothers were the Newburg pitchers. When they graduated Jackie took their place and quickly became a dominant southpaw pitcher. But he was Newburg's only thrower. So on one occasion in 1944 when Newburg had to play two games back to back, Jackie pitched the first game left-handed and then pitched right-handed to win the second game. It was the first and only time an Iowa high school baseball pitcher accomplished that feat.

Collum was also good a left-handed hitter. His pitching and hitting helped Newburg get within one game of making a state tournament appearance in 1944.

Following high school Collum enlisted in the Air Force. Baseball was a popular diversion for the troops and Collum was able to resume his baseball career as a pitcher for the Fifth Air Force baseball team. His team was good. They reached the finals of the Pacific Theatre Championship series. They had to win two games to win the championship.

Jackie pitched the first game and defeated a team that included several major leaguers—Pee Wee Reese, Stan Musial and Joe Garagiola. Jackie wanted to pitch the next game, but the manager said no. Jackie's team lost the championship game. But Jackie gained the confidence that he could pitch for a living if someone would give him a chance.

His military catcher, Bernie Gerl, who had minor league experience with the Cardinals recommended him. The Cardinals followed through and sent scout Walter Shannon to Grinnell in a blizzard in 1946 to sign Collum. Since Collum was only 19, his father signed for him.

With the end of the war there were plenty of baseball players trying to get to the majors. At 5 feet 7 inches Collum literally got lost in the shuffle. Most thought he was too small to play major league baseball. But Collum was determined to prove them wrong.

The manager of the Cardinal's class C team in St. Joseph liked Collum's desire and determination. He wouldn't be disappointed.

Collum hurled his way to a 15 game winning streak in 1947. And he hit well enough to play as a reserve outfielder.

He did even better the next year when he won 24 of 26 decisions and helped St. Joe win a league championship. The fans were supportive. "In fact we had a better attendance than the St. Louis Browns," Collum quipped.

But they did more than simply show up at the park in record numbers. Late in the season they held a Jackie Collum night and showered him gifts worth around \$1,500. This was a handsome sum for a Class C player in the 1940s.

His performance earned him another invitation to spring training with the Cards. But the Cards had five lefthanders who were bigger and more experienced than Collum. One of those pitchers, Harry Brecheen, took Collum aside and told him he needed another pitch.

He showed him how to throw the screwball. Collum liked the pitch because he could throw it with the same motion used for the fastball. The screwball is an off-speed pitch that breaks away and down on right-handed batters. It was a good contrasting pitch, especially when thrown by a lefthander, to go with the fastball which Collum was throwing at an 88-89 miles per hour clip.

Some writers said Collum was an effective screwball pitcher because of a farm accident. A writer for the Denver Post noted that Collum "labors under two handicaps that would keep almost any ball player from even thinking about the big leagues....he is supposed to be too small for a major league pitcher and the first two fingers on his pitching hand are nearly an inch short as a result of a boyhood farm accident," the writer explained.

When Jackie was four, the index and middle fingers on his left hand got tangled up in a corn sheller. The two fingers had to be reattached.

"This makes it more difficult to grip the ball securely, but there's no doubt it helps me throw a sinking screwball," Collum explained.

The Cards recognized Collum's potential and started moving him up the minor league ladder. First there was a stint in Omaha where he was among the league's ERA leaders. Next he was promoted to the triple A affiliate in Rochester. Collum pitched there from 1949-52. In 1951 Collum posted a 15-8 record with a nifty 2.80 ERA.

The Cards decided to give Collum a chance to show what he could do in the bigs. They called him up at the end of the 1951 season. Collum made the most of the opportunity.

On September 21 Jackie got a chance to start when the regular starting pitcher, Jerry Staley, said he was too sick to throw. "I think Jerry just pretended he was sick," Collum explained. "He told manager Marty Marion: 'I don't feel so good today. Why don't you pitch that kid over there?'"

Collum responded with a 6-0, two-hit complete game win over the Chicago Cubs. Four days later Collum beat the Cubs again. He finished the season with a 2-1 record and 1.59 ERA. Despite this stellar performance, Collum was unable to stick with the Cards.

"I had a problem with new manager Eddie Stanky" he explained "For some reason he didn't like me. He was the only manager I didn't get along with."

So it was back to Rochester in 1952. Collum played a key role in helping the Red Wings win the Triple A championship over the favored American Association champion, the Kansas City Blues.

Collum went back to the Cards in 1953 but pitched just seven games before being traded to the Cincinnati Reds. There he found an appreciative audience in manager Rogers Hornsby and general manager Gabe Paul. He also became a fan favorite and picked up a nickname "Half Collum."

Hank Zureick drew a cartoon for the September 4, 1953, issue of the Redleg News with the "Half Collum" caption and the following narrative: "Jackie Collum—a 5'7", 160-pound southpaw—a little guy with a big heart. The 26-year-old Collum has hurled fine ball since being acquired from St. Louis—the way the 'mighty mite' battles the opposition has won the hearts of Crosley Field fans."

It was in Cincinnati where Collum was involved in a bizarre, historic play. Collum explains it this way. "One night I was laying in bed and started thinking it would be pretty easy to pick a runner off second base by throwing with my right hand. I decided to try it if the opportunity presented itself."

Collum didn't have to wait long. A few nights later with runners on first and second and no outs, Collum stepped off the rubber and threw right handed to shortstop Roy McMillan who put the tag on the very surprised base runner. Home plate umpire Al Barlick walked out to the mound and told Collum, "You can't do that. You deceived the runner."

Collum's response back to Barlick was, "Tell me when a runner who is picked off wasn't deceived."

Collum backed off but the Cincinnati manager went out and argued with Barlick that Collum could make the throw since he was off the rubber. The call stood and the runner went back to second.

David Nemec, who is a baseball rules authority and has done extensive research on pick-off plays, explained that a rule requiring pitchers to throw on pick-off plays with their pitching arm was adopted late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when there were a number of major league pitchers capable of throwing with both arms. This was also at a time when many players did not wear gloves. The rule adopted required that the arm with which it appeared the pitcher was going to pitch was assumed to be his pitching arm and he could not throw with the other to deceive a base runner.

Nemec noted that it is legal for a pitcher to pitch with both arms in the same inning and even to the same batter as long as he switches gloves and glovehands prior to every pitch in which he intends to change arms. This must be done in full view of both the batter and any base runners.

What makes this play even more confusing is there is no mention of pick off attempts in the regular major league rule book.” It is covered in the special umpires’ rule book which deals with special situations that for a variety of reasons are not covered in the official rule book available to the public,” Nemec explained.

This writer believes Collum was not aware of the pick-off rule when he threw right handed to pick off the runner. It was probably the last time this move was made in a major league game.

Collum’s best pitching was probably with the Reds during the 1954 and 1955 seasons. In 1954 he pitched in 36 games mainly as a short reliever. He gave up 33 earned runs, walked 32, and struck out 28 while posting a 7-3 record and a 3.76 ERA. And he was named to the 1954 All-Star team as a batting practice pitcher for the National League. When I asked about his experience on the All-Star team, he said he was surprised to get the telegram asking him to be on the team and then discussed having a chance to get to know Jackie Robinson during the game.

His stats were even better the following year when he posted 9-8 record and a 3.63 ERA. He gave up 54 earned runs, struck out 49 and walked 37. He had become a dependable relief pitcher.

But the Reds traded him back to the Cards and the roller coaster ride to various teams was underway. In 1956 the Cards traded Collum to the Dodgers who moved to Los Angeles in 1958. Collum spent three years in the minors after he was released by the Dodgers. He then returned to the majors with the Minnesota

Twins in 1962 and pitched his final game with the Cleveland Indians that same year.

Collum returned to Grinnell and purchased a gas station. He sold the gas station and purchased an auto repair business which he still owns and operates. He played several years for Grinnell in a semi-pro summer league.

Jack Smalley of Ames, IA, who played in that same summer league, remembers hitting against Satchel Paige and Collum in the summer of 1964. "I had no trouble hitting against Paige." I got a solid single to the fence in right center off Satch, but Collum was still pretty crafty and dispatched me on three strikes with ease," Smalley recalled recently.

Collum pitched for seven major league teams during an 11-year span from 1951-62. He appeared in 171 games and recorded a winning record of 32-28 and a respectable ERA of 4.15. He walked 173 batters, struck out 171, hit 16 batters and did not commit a balk. He was considered a good hitting and fielding pitcher. He hit .246 and posted a fielding percentage of .952, making only 7 errors.

Collum summed up his career this way: "I was a mediocre player no doubt, but I was lucky enough to have had a chance to play with the best of them—18-19 Hall of Famers."

Collum also contrasted the time he played with the game of today. First there were hardly any signing bonuses. Collum didn't get one. Bob Feller was probably the exception to the rule during that era. When Collum hit the majors the minimum salary was \$5,000. Today it is \$327,000. He played with the first \$100,000 player—Stan Musial.

The toughest batters Collum faced were Red Schoendienst and Carl Furillo. They didn't try and overpower the ball. They would hit it wherever you threw it.

The best catcher he worked with was Roy Campanella. "He knew the strengths and weaknesses of the hitters. I could put the ball where he wanted it. I think one of the biggest problems some pitchers of today have is that they pitch to the hitters instead of throwing to the catcher," Collum said.

Another player Collum admired was Jackie Robinson. "I don't know how he took all that abuse. He was not only a great player, but a great person. He was very intelligent and determined to play ball in spite of everything that was happening around him."

One major difference with today's game is the use of the designated hitter. Collum doesn't like that change. He agrees with Sparky Anderson that taking the pitcher out of the batting order takes away some strategy. But he does believe it

gives some good hitters who couldn't field very well a chance for a longer playing career.

Another change that troubles Collum is the use of the disabled list. "Why are there so many players on it? There ought to be some restrictions. If you go on it you should forfeit some dollars. I think this would cut it down quite a bit."

What advice does Collum have for youngsters who dream of playing in the big leagues? "You have to love the game, work hard, have some talent and be very determined to succeed."

Some of the stats that Collum are most proud of are of the non-baseball variety. He has been married to his wife Betty Jo for 59 years. They raised six children and are helping take care of 12 grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Now let's conclude by playing some baseball trivia. Here are the questions:

Who was the youngest boy to play on an Iowa high school baseball team?

Who was the only Iowa high school baseball pitcher to pitch and win games on the same day with both his left and right arm?

Who was the last major league pitcher to pick a runner off base by throwing with his non-pitching arm?

Bobby Shantz, who stood 5 feet 6 inches and weighed 163 pounds, was the smallest person to pitch in the major leagues. Who was the second smallest major league pitcher?

Who was the only Iowan to pitch for seven different major league baseball teams?

Jackie Collum is the answer to all of these questions.