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Noyac slugger, 70, inducted into Boston College Hall of Fame

By Oliver Peterson



Long before mansions overshadowed the dunes in Sagaponack, a young Gerry Hamel learned to bat by hitting rocks into the ocean there. He further honed his skills on the baseball diamond at Sag Harbor's Mashashimuet Park, but the Noyac resident never imagined he would become a hall-of-famer more than five decades later.

On Sunday, November 1, Hamel, 70, was the latest player from the legendary 1960 and '61 Eagles baseball team to be inducted into the Boston College Varsity Club Hall of Fame and it was one of the proudest moments of his very accomplished life.

In 2007, Hamel, who has a Ph.D., retired after a 44-year career as a college professor, but before his more intellectual pursuits, he lived for baseball.

Hamel's baseball career was highlighted by numerous achievements, including winning a local championship with the Sag Harbor Whalers, earning a Suffolk County title alongside Carl Yastrzemski on the Sag Harbor Lions at age 16 and becoming Most Valuable Player in Nassau County as a pitcher and outfielder for Wantagh High School in 1957, but his crowning achievement as a player was reaching the NCAA World Series for two straight years as an outfielder for Boston College in 1960 and '61.

Hamel led the Eagles in home runs, hits and runs scored during his three years starting for the team in 1959-1961. He signed a professional contract to play with the San Francisco Giants in 1961 and retired from baseball the following year.

The entire 1960-61 Eagles team was honored the weekend Hamel and seven other BC athletes were inducted, first during halftime on the school's football field on Saturday and then at the official ceremony at the Sheraton Hotel in Needham, Massachusetts, on Sunday. "This was the best weekend I ever spent," Hamel said, excluding his wedding to wife Mary Jane Fox and the birth of their four children, Jay, a North Haven resident and owner of Murf's Tavern in Sag Harbor, Liz, who summers in Sag Harbor, Suzanne and Tricia. "It was so first-class," he said.

Hamel's team is considered by many to be the greatest in Boston College history, he said, noting that 10 of the players signed contracts to play pro ball and not one of them came to the school on a scholarship. "That's amazing," he said.

As important as he was to the team, Hamel almost didn't get to play with the Eagles, and he certainly didn't get a scholarship.

At 18 years old, after his epic run at Wantagh High School, which earned him a spot in the school's hall of fame, Hamel was offered a contract to play with his childhood heroes on the Dodgers. It was 1957, just as the team was making the move from Brooklyn to Los Angeles.

He had come home one afternoon to find Dodger Tommy Holmes in his living room with a contract, but the majors would have to wait. The Milwaukee Braves tried to sign Hamel that year too, but his father would have none of it. He wanted his son to be the first Hamel to attend college and the decision led the young star to Boston. "My father was smart," Hamel said, explaining that on top of his baseball chops, he graduated fifth in his class at Wantagh.

He was offered full scholarships to a couple of schools, including Yale, but Hamel's father wanted him to attend a Catholic school, with or without a scholarship, so fate brought him to Boston College. The school's baseball coach, John Temple, had offered him a prominent place on the team, but upon arriving in Boston, Hamel learned that Temple was no longer there. Worse yet, "nobody had ever heard of me," he said, noting that after being big man on campus at Wantagh, he was back to being a nobody.

Before Hamel's days of collegiate glory, his short-lived career in professional baseball or even his MVP season at Wantagh, he was just a kid who loved the game. He summered in Sag Harbor since 1946 and spent his time practicing his hitting on Long Beach and on the pristine sands of Sagaponack. "I used to go hit stones into the ocean, hour after hour after hour," Hamel said, explaining how he got to be such a great hitter.

"I could hit anything," he said, recalling that he used to pay other kids to pitch pebbles to him. "If I hit it over the first wave it was a single and over the second wave was a double," Hamel said. "I did that for years."

As a youngster, he would visit St. Andrews church in Sag Harbor and pray to become a baseball player, but Hamel recognized his own talent only after moving from Brooklyn to Wantagh in the seventh grade. He played baseball with high school seniors and beat them all.

"Nobody could strike me out," Hamel said, adding that after so many hours hitting tiny stones, "The ball just looked like a balloon."

Word about Hamel's skill spread in Sag Harbor, and at 15 years old, in 1954, he was asked to join the Whalers. The team competed in the town league and Hamel found himself playing alongside much older men, some more than two or three times his age.

The Whalers went on to win the local championship against teams including Yastrzemski's Bridgehampton Blue Sox. "We beat Carl," Hamel said. "That was unheard of." It was his first of big accomplishment in the national pastime.

Hamel and Yastrzemski played together on the Sag Harbor Lions all-star team in the Babe Ruth League and they went on to win a Suffolk County championship. Some of his teammates included local doctor Merritt White and future Dow Chemical CEO Bill Stavropoulos.

Just two years later, without a coach or a spot on the team at Boston College, Hamel said he just "muddled through" his first year, but he finally got to an open tryout and proved himself to the new Eagles coach. "I went down with dungarees, my baseball glove and spikes over my shoulder," he said, describing that fateful day. "I got two pitches and I hit a triple and a home run."

Coach Eddie Pellegrini approached Hamel and said four familiar words. "You're a good hitter," Hamel said, recalling Pellegrini's words, his voice cracking with emotion. "You're going to play for me."

Hamel was brought to tears reliving the moment that led him to his recent Hall of Fame induction. "I get very emotional," he said. "It was 50 years ago he said that to me."

Pellegrini led the Eagles in their consecutive World Series runs and Hamel said the coach taught him hitting theory and how to be more aggressive at the plate. "He was a fantastic coach," he said.

Hamel said 22 of the '60-'61 Eagles' 32 players came to be honored on Halloween weekend, but five are dead. "They were all great guys after 50 years and all prosperous," he said, adding, "We were the best baseball team that BC ever had."

Some 300 people, including his children and grandchildren came to the ceremony and witnessed the culmination of Hamel's hugely emotional journey. "I'm so proud, I can't believe this happened to me," he said.

Now a full-time Noyac resident, Hamel said he still plays with the artists and writers every weekend in Mashashimuet Park, where he learned to play. He's excluded from the annual artists and writers game in East Hampton, but Hamel said he doesn't blame his fellow players.

"I've still got it," he said. "I can still hit like hell."