

Mary Duke Hangs Up Cleats After Playing 51 Years In a Row

Courtesy of the Post-Dispatch; written by Susan Weich

Mary Duke's softball team lost its church league championship game 5-0, but afterward both teams gathered around, clapping and chanting "Duke, Duke, Duke."

They weren't celebrating one of Duke's plays, but the end of an era in recreational sports. At 75, Duke was retiring, ending her 51 consecutive seasons.

As the women surrounded home plate at St. Ferdinand Park in Florissant, Missouri last month, Duke's daughter, Sharon Duke, presented her mom with a dozen red roses.

"I started crying like a big baby," Mary Duke said. "It was pretty emotional for me."

After this summer's excessive heat got to her on several occasions, she decided it was time to stop playing.

"She was not a home run hitter, but you always knew that Mary was going to hit well and get on base," said Marge Mann, 68, who managed Duke's team, Florissant Valley Baptist Church.

Duke credited her ability to get on base with a tip from the late Mel Brown, the coach of her first recreational team.

"He taught me what you had to do when you bunt — you just hit the ball and run like the devil," she said. "I still have speed to this day, surprisingly enough; well, at least it surprises the other team."

Duke could play any position, but after she switched to the slow-pitch version of the game, she most often could be found on the mound.

Fay Goad, 87, a former umpire, said Duke was the best pitcher in the league.

"You have to throw an arch of 12 feet, and she was right on it," he said. "I very seldom had to call an illegal pitch on her, and she had the distance down good."

Duke's biggest asset, her teammates said, was her sportsmanship.

"She always cheered people on and never put anybody down because they messed up," said Mann. "She's always been that way, just a positive and upbeat lady, and you could always depend on her to show up to the game."

Duke said her philosophy was to play for the fun of it.

"But that didn't mean I didn't play to win," she said.

Duke first was exposed to baseball at Garfield Grade School in Pine Lawn, where she grew up.

"My girlfriend and I would sit on the hill there and watch the guys play," she said. "When some of them would get called home to lunch, they would ask us if we wanted to come down on the field, and we learned to catch the ball bare-handed."

Duke never played organized sports until she got to Normandy High School, where she was on the field hockey, volleyball, basketball and softball teams.

After high school, Duke got married and was a stay-at-home mom with two children when her neighbor asked her if she wanted to play on a co-ed softball team. She not only played herself, but as her daughter, Sheila, and son, Dennis, grew up, she coached their teams.

"My mom was truly inspired by sports," said Sheila Duke, 44, of Wentzville. "She taught me how to be a team player, to back



people up, and that lesson continues to affect me in my life now."

As the years went on, Duke's teammates got younger and younger. Instead of her peers, her teammates were her children and the kids she had coached, and in some cases, the children of those players.

"I could almost always count on being the oldest on the team," she said.

Duke was powered by her good health — she gives God the credit — and her youthful appearance.

"I'll tell you, Mary doesn't have a gray hair," said Mann. "I'm her hairdresser, so I would know. Nobody would ever think that she is the age that she is."

And seeing her come out year after year was inspiring to the younger players.

"She's got me to where I can't quit," said Carolyn Brown, 49. "I say, 'Well, Mary Duke's still playing, and if she can still play, then I can still play.'"

Duke's whole life hasn't revolved around softball. She played in a volleyball league until two years ago, and she continues to pitch horseshoes in a league. She's competed in several sports in the Senior Olympics, and has a roomful of trophies to show for it. In her spare time, she likes to fish with her boyfriend, Roger Schnur, bake meringue pies and cut the grass at her St. Charles home.

"I feel like sports have been what kept me going; the field is truly where my heart is," she said.