

Hice Stiles, Southern California

By Bob Otto October 2001

If not for the tugging of an older brother, Hice Stiles and fastpitch softball may never have crossed paths.

In a (still active) career spanning over 30 years, Stiles was recently inducted in to the International Softball Congress Hall of Fame at the World Tournament in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in August, 2001.

“Receiving the call from Herb Wisdom (ISC Commissioner) that I was voted in was tremendous,” said the 56-year-old Stiles. “I’ve played against some of the greatest players that ever played the game. To be even mentioned (with them) for the Hall of Fame gives me a great feeling of accomplishment and honor.”

Now brother Ray, you may take a bow.

“My older brother Ray kept after me to play for his company sponsored team in the Montebello city “D” league in 1970,” said Stiles. “I didn’t want to play. I didn’t think the competition would be all that great. If not for Ray I might never have played softball and started playing lousy golf a lot sooner than I did.”

Maybe it was just good fortune or perhaps the stars were in the right alignment, but after yielding to Ray’s demand, another event unfolded that had a profound impact on Stiles’ softball journey. He met Stan Grebeck.

“Stan was umpiring in the Montebello league. It seemed I either hit home runs or bunted my way on,” said Stiles. “I think Stan took notice. He asked me if I’d like to play some better softball for a team that he played for in San Bernardino. I said I thought that I was playing the best softball there was...”

Yielding to Grebeck, Stiles watched the San Bernardino Flames play the following night. And he got his first glimpse of major league pitching as the Flame’s Bob Todd and John Henderson exchanged heat.

“Wow! I had never seen anyone throw a softball as hard as these two guys,” Stiles said. “I didn’t play, just watched. I was so intimidated by the intensity of the players talking about brushing hitters back, trying to take out the catcher or shortstop on the next play. These guys played as professionals played.”

Grebeck convinced the doubtful Stiles that he possessed the talent to play in the Western Softball Congress. “He argued that my talent just needed to be cultivated to play highly competitive fastpitch softball,” said Stiles.

A cultivation of talent that propelled Stiles from the “D” league to the pinnacle of fastpitch softball: The International Softball Congress World Tournament and ultimately into its Hall of Fame.

Along the way he played for some of southern California’s all-time great fastpitch teams: The Flames, Long Beach Nitehawks, Lakewood Jets, and the Lancaster Chameleons.

With those four teams, Stiles appeared in eight ISC World Tournaments, winning one championship and three runner-ups. He was All-World three times, 1976 and 78 with Lakewood, and 1979 with the Nitehawks. In 1978 he shared the World Tournament batting title with Brad Burrup, hitting a robust .545. And in 1976 he had two, four-hit games; one of only 51 players in World Tournament history to do so.

"I was fortunate to play on really great teams, in some great games, in some great World Tournaments," said Stiles. "I loved playing against the best and playing the best I could; that's what fastpitch softball was all about."

And Stiles battled with and against some of California's great fastpitch stars. "The best pitching staff that I played with was K.G. Fincher and Ed Klecker in 1973 with the Jets, and Kevin Herlihy and the Lancaster Chameleons in 1983," Stiles said. "Just one of those guys could carry a team by himself. They were dominating and would challenge the best of hitters. These were the guys you wanted on the mound with the score tied in the 7th inning with no outs and a runner at third base. Just look out and watch a master go to work."

But for opposing pitchers, Stiles was masterful himself.

"The thing about Hice is that he is left handed (batter), could put the ball in play and he was so fast," said ISC Hall of Fame pitcher K.G. Fincher. "Putting the ball in play was a major accomplishment in the Western Softball Congress in the 1960s and 70s because the pitching was so great."

"Like Pete Rose he took the extra base, but he was much faster. Singles were doubles and doubles were triples. He didn't settle for anything less. And you had to play him honest. If you didn't he would lay it down. Hice could do it all: bunt, hit line drives and hit for power."

Former Lakewood player and manager Bob Osborn says that Stiles was the consummate fastpitch player; his defense and speed placing him in the upper echelon of WSC talent.

"Hice was a player," said Osborn. "He had the speed, one of the top three or four speedsters in the league, had the great arm and the power. He really showed his stuff in the outfield. Take the extra base and Hice would throw line drives to any base on the field and throw runners out."

Looking back on the height of his career in the 1970s, Stiles marvels at the caliber of pitching in the WSC. "The Western Softball Congress, what a league that was," he said. "There was Bob Todd, Neil Green, K.G. Fincher, Ted Brown. Cary Weiler and Jim Heinz for the Navy; Greg Hallberg, Ron Smith, Don Sarno and Roger Teske. These guys were all in our league! If you hit 250 (batting average) you were fantastic."

On the defensive side, he says Shortstops Don Sears, Nick Hopkins and Greg Sepulveda had unbelievable range and tenacity. They wanted the ball hit to them in pressure situations, said Stiles.

And at the plate he tips his hat to Bob Wills. "He could bunt, slap, push and hit with power in the gap," Stiles said. "If the game was on the line there was not another hitter that I wanted at the plate. But the man who brought oohs and aahs was Bob Aguilar. I just love thinking about some of the towering drives that this man hit. Pitchers didn't dare make a mistake with Bob. He was our 'Babe Ruth' of Softball."

Like most fastpitch players, Hice first love was baseball. In the collegiate ranks, as a pitcher and first baseman, he won a batting title and was an all-conference pitcher at Imperial Valley Junior College and later at the University of California at Fullerton.

After college baseball he moved from the infield to centerfield where he settled for most of his softball career.

A career with no end in sight.

Even at 56, Stiles says his fastpitch fires are still burning. He plays in the Artesia city league with his son Darren and in the ASA Masters division where his Team California recently won its fourth straight Over-45 national championship. An ASA record, he believes.

Now in the twilight of a magnificent career, Stiles longevity has given him insight into the transformation of the sport.

“The biggest change is that slow pitch has replaced fastpitch in the city leagues all over the country,” he said. “Exposure to fastpitch is less and less. You need to have leagues for pitchers to develop. No pitcher development, no pitchers. No Pitchers, no teams. No Teams, no fastpitch. It’s a catch 22. The bottom line is there is no farm system to bring in new talent...”

“The top teams are as good as ever,” he said. “But having teams not made up of local talent makes the cost and budgets tremendous. This makes it very difficult for other teams to compete that do not have the resources.

“When I played (Open level) the local talent was tremendous and if we wanted variety, we could drive to Bakersfield and find another pool of teams that were equally as good.”

So for a Hall of Famer who has seen and done everything in fastpitch softball, is an end in sight?

“It’s still fun,” said Stiles. “I used to keep telling my wife Lyn, ‘one more year, just one more year,’ now I’ve told her that as long as I’m having fun I’m going to keep on playing.”