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BOWLING GREEN HOT RODS

Allensville man throws out first pitch at age 100

By NATASHA A. SIMMONS/For the Daily News @wkudn

Aug 26, 2013



Clarence Morton Sr. (right), 100, of Allensville, throws out the first pitch Sunday, Aug. 25, 2013 to Hot Rod's Matthev against the Tin Caps at Bowling Green Ballpark in Bowling Green, Ky. Morton's grandson, William Allison, of Russe (Photo by Joshua Lindsey/Daily News)

Joshua Lindsey/Daily News

Inside Bowling Green Ballpark, Clarence Morton Sr. stood at the pitcher's mound waiting to throw the first pitch in Sunday afternoon's Hot Rods game. He wore a special yellow cap reading "100 year olds rock" as he pitched.

Morton, of Allensville, turned 100 years old Aug. 8. After attending a couple of games last year, stepping on the Hot Rods pitcher's mound was a birthday wish he asked of his niece and her husband, Michele and Brad Tolbert.

"When he had his birthday celebration, my husband and I came to just wish him a happy birthday and he said 'I wanna go to a ballgame, I wanna be on that field.' I was like 'OK,'" said Michele Tolbert.

Tolbert emailed Jennifer Johnson, promotions manager for the Hot Rods, to ask about the possibility for her "Uncle Pete."

"She told me the story about him, and I said 'we would be more than happy to have him out here and to throw out a first pitch,'" Johnson said. "From there, we set up the date and went through the logistics and got him out here today."

While at the game, Johnson said he and the 14 family members could be on the field with him. Upon hearing this news, Morton said "I'm gonna walk" and abandoned his wheelchair, but took his wooden cane. His daughter and grandson, Levanora and William Allison, walked him to the base.

"This diamond," Morton paused. "Nothing in Nashville like this. Not one I haven't looked at. The field makes the Hot Rods different. They had a pretty diamond in Allensville. It was pretty, but not pretty like this."

While introducing Morton on the field, Johnson said she noticed the crowd's attention in the stands.

"I can see more heads looking up and paying attention (to Morton)" Johnson said. "This is the first time that someone is 100 years old throwing the first pitch. We have returning veterans, family reunions, reunions with families and their soldiers, but we never had this before, and that was very special."

Morton, who was born 50 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, played in different negro leagues, as they were called back when he played, said William Allison. Up at base, Morton told his grandson – who calls Morton the "rock of the family" – that he was disappointed with his throw.

“He wanted to throw it over again. He said he could throw better than that,” said Allison, of Russellville. “It’s just a blessing to him to be able to walk back there. It was a big blessing and honor to him because he loved baseball so much.”

Morton’s fondness of baseball is as long as his lifespan. It was the popular sport among him and his friends throughout childhood.

“It’s what we played all the time,” Morton said. “We didn’t have any basketball or anything around then. When I started going to high school, we played basketball.”

When Morton’s friends formed a team in Allensville, his father Jerry “Babe” Morton, nicknamed after Major League Baseball legend Babe Ruth, played with him in cow fields in Allensville as the pitcher.

“Uncle Pete said he (Babe) had a fast pitch until he hurt his arm and, of course, they didn’t do surgery back then, so he had to stop pitching so hard,” Tolbert said, repeating Morton about his father.

Clarence Morton Jr., said his father, friends and grandfather played at different parks but were at a disadvantage in the 1930s and 1940s living in the rural community of Allensville and not having an official baseball park like Bowling Green today.

“They put some bases down and play whatever place is big enough and whatever equipment can scrounge up, but they love the game,” Morton Jr., said. “Of course all of them ended up being Brooklyn Dodgers fans on account of Jackie Robinson ... He loved baseball.”

After the pitch, Morton returned to his wheelchair, and the Tolberts took him on the outer edge of the field to see two Hot Rods players practice in the bullpen.

Raising in her seat to cheer him on, Glasgow native Deanna Sexton yelled from first row stands on his way to the bullpen.

“You did a good job on the pitch,” Sexton said twice. Morton smiled.

Morton and the Tolberts returned to the stands with family after seeing the bullpen. He smiled throughout the day, and Tolbert and his grandson noticed.

“I could just imagine how he felt, even at 100,” Allison said about his grandfather getting out on the professional field.

In an aisle seat, Morton sat beside his 74-year-old daughter, Levanora, with his great-great-granddaughter, Chloe Allison, 2, slightly crying two rows below. Morton continued eating his ballpark food and watched the game with undivided attention.

Tolbert observed her uncle watching the game while looking at family pictures in her iPhone. She spoke of their close family saying the bunch would help with anything a family member needs. In this case, Morton wanted to put his feet on a real field.

“He said he would like to pitch that ball. He would like to play on this field. That is the one thing we could give him,” Tolbert said. “Like I said to Jennifer, at 100, what other stuff, what material stuff, do you really need? You just don’t.”

— Natasha Simmons is an intern for the Daily News. She attends Western Kentucky University.