

Harvey Soolman, who devoted his life to baseball on the field and on the page, dies at 68



Brian Feulner for the Globe/file 2012

‘Hitting a baseball on the button is the greatest feeling in the world — by far,’ Mr. Soolman said. He played organized ball for about five decades and wrote a book centered on the game.

By Marvin Pave Globe Correspondent June 04, 2018

While playing and managing in the Boston Park League, working as an accountant, and running a stereo store, Harvey Soolman still found the time to write “Ballplayer,” a 1997 play that mirrored his life.

“Hitting a baseball on the button is the greatest feeling in the world — by far. I’m a much better person because of baseball,” says the lead character, a 44-year-old amateur player named Carl Kotowski. “I’ve always had a tough time with the end of each baseball season. It’s as if winter begins the very next day.”

For the writer and his character, jumping on the right pitch was akin to seizing life’s opportunities, and like Kotowski, Mr. Soolman played on.

Over the course of 46 seasons, Mr. Soolman played in Boston’s Park and Yawkey leagues — beginning in 1970 with the Lechmere Orioles while he was a Northeastern University student, and ending in 2015 as player-manager of the Towne Club. That year, he was inducted into each league’s hall of fame.

An amateur baseball umpire who had conducted youth clinics for the Red Sox Foundation, Mr. Soolman had a heart attack while walking on Brattle Street in Harvard Square May 13 and died in Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge. He was 68 and lived in Medford.

His e-mail address began with the word “ballplayer.” In 2015, he told the Globe that he spent “a pretty emotional summer” before deciding to retire. “It was time to be a full-time writer and not a part-time ballplayer,” he said.

Mr. Soolman, who also was the junior varsity baseball coach at Newton South High School, wrote and produced several plays, authored two detective novels, contributed articles to the Society for American Baseball Research, and wrote a Baseball Rules Index that is widely used.

He had served on the boards for the Park and Yawkey leagues, and he told the Globe in 2012 that he considered the organizations “my Major Leagues.”

Mr. Soolman was “a blue-collar, throwback kind of player” who stood by his opinions with tremendous conviction, said Park League president Walt Bentson. “I admired his loyalty and tenacity.”

A lefty outfielder, first baseman, and catcher, Mr. Soolman took the field for the Park League champion Triple D’s in 1981 and Towne Club in 1984 and 1985.

Off the field, he was an accountant at Esplanade Travel in Copley Square and former owner of Audio Replay in Cambridge.

“Whether talking baseball, politics, or ’70s music, Harvey and I might have disagreed, but he always listened to and respected your opinion,” said Franz Strassmann, a former teammate and longtime Boston Park League player/manager. “If I had a question on a baseball rule, Harvey was the first person I would call.”

In some writings, Mr. Soolman incorporated fictionalized versions of people from his own life. Kotowski in “Ballplayer” plays for Devlin’s Bulldogs. The team is managed by Charlie Devlin, whom Mr. Soolman based on the late Al Thomas — sponsor of the A’s Yawkey League championship team for which Mr. Soolman once played.

Mr. Soolman also sometimes revealed a Mel Brooks-like sense of humor, and his play “A History of Insurance . . . Or Sort Of” includes biblical and real-life figures among the characters.

In Mr. Soolman’s telling, General George Custer places his life insurance policy renewal into the saddle bag of his horse just before his demise in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. George Washington, meanwhile, learns that because his insurance copay had maxed out, his dentist provided him with

“temporary teeth made of, well, other people’s teeth” — which Washington promptly tossed into the icy Delaware River.

“Harvey was a fountain of cinema knowledge, and also loved cartoons, Looney Tunes in particular,” said Diane Sakakini-Rao, an Esplanade Travel colleague. “We would constantly make wisecracks or use funny voices from cartoons or television shows we watched as kids.”

Esplanade Travel had arranged a free trip to Australia, which Mr. Soolman was planning to take this summer. He also volunteered at Kitty Connection, an animal shelter in Medford, and was taking horseback riding lessons at Chrislar Farm in Rowley.

He was a son of Louis Soolman, who owned a dry cleaner and tailor shop near Coolidge Corner in Brookline, and the former Florence Lazarus, a nurse’s aide.

“My father wasn’t interested in baseball,” Mr. Soolman told the Globe in 2012. “But in the middle ’50s, what else did you do with your kids? So he brought us out and we played baseball, and I really liked it.”

Mr. Soolman played summer baseball as a youth and hit a two-run homer for the winning Devotion School in the town’s elementary school championship.

A 1967 graduate of Brookline High School, Mr. Soolman was cut from the freshman baseball team, but the next season made the junior varsity. He played varsity ball the next two seasons.

After graduating from Northeastern in 1972 with an accounting degree, Mr. Soolman returned to Brookline High as the junior varsity baseball coach from 1987 to 1992. His players included future baseball executives — former Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein and Sam Kennedy, who is now the team’s president.

“Harvey’s passion for baseball was infectious. Playing third base for him was, sadly, the highlight of my playing career,” said Kennedy. “However, he instilled in us a love of baseball so deep that three members of our team went on to pursue careers in professional baseball. I will be forever grateful for his mentorship.”

Once unsure of his ability to play at the next level because he didn’t make the Northeastern varsity, Mr. Soolman was still a threat at the plate into his early 50s. In 2002, he hit .320 for the South Boston Saints and played for the Yawkey League All-Stars at Fenway Park.

His Lechmere Orioles teammate, Avi Nelson, who sponsored teams that Mr. Soolman managed and played for, said his friend had regarded Red Sox slugger Ted Williams as a god.

“Harvey was always sending e-mails about Williams, sometimes just a photograph he came across,” recalled Nelson, a TV and radio personality. “I don’t know how many times he read Williams’s ‘The Science of Hitting.’ ”

Stepping to the plate in Fenway Park for the Yawkey League All-Stars was a special moment for Mr. Soolman. “To stand there in the lefthander’s batter’s box and think of Ted Williams and Carl Yastrzemski was an amazing feeling,” he recalled in a Globe interview.

He fouled the first pitch straight back over the roof and later joked: “It was nice to hit one out of Fenway — even though it was backward.”

Mr. Soolman leaves a brother, Arnold, of Needham, and two sisters, Roberta of Ashland and Marilyn Bianchini of Taunton.

A memorial service and reception will be held at 5:30 p.m. June 18 in the State Street Pavilion Club at Fenway Park.

Roberta Soolman said her brother was “a ballplayer to the bone, a writer, and a complex person.” She added that he had “a sweet, kind, and gentle side that will forever make me smile.”

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