

Going Green:

The American Life of Don Stratton

Editorial Courtesy of Lisa Coffey - The Ledger

BARTOW: Don Stratton bleeds orange and blue, but he's not a University of Florida Gator fan. He's a Bartow High School Yellow Jackets fan.

Not only is he a high school fan, he's been involved in nearly every aspect of Bartow youth sports for more than 20 years.

Go to a sporting event with Bartow ties and you can often find Stratton, 62.

"He has a heart as big as the city of Bartow," said friend and fellow radio WBF high school football broadcaster Fred Rhoden. "You wouldn't recognize that from the outside. Don grew up playing sports in Bartow, and it's always stayed part of him."

"I enjoy the people in sports," Stratton said humbly.

Not only is Stratton a fan, he's a knowledgeable fan without fan bias, and has a big heart and strong basic values.

He has to be. After 20 years with the Independent Softball Association as a state director, he is now the national executive director.

As a man who coached and presided over many leagues and teams, now including more than 25,000 ISA teams, Stratton has to have perspective and a willingness to pitch in where needed. He even laid sod at the 555 complex in Bartow,

where now he often holds ISA tournaments.

A 1966 graduate of Bartow High School who played baseball and football, Stratton has:

- Spent 17 years as the coach and/or president of Bartow Youth Football.
- Coached high school basketball under Alvin Pearsall and Fred Bretz.
- Coached Dixie Youth Baseball in Bartow for six years, tallying two undefeated seasons.
- Coached a 14-year-old baseball team.
- Coached two years in the Bartow Mighty Mite youth football program.
- Served 12 years on the city of Bartow's recreation advisory board.
- Been a commentator during high school football and basketball games on WBF for 20 years.

"The best times in a person's life is when they are young and playing sports," Stratton said. "They just don't realize it until it's over. I think now a person pushes a kid too much to concentrate on one sport. I think kids should do it all."

He has helped make youth and adult sports the best times for many players in Bartow and Polk County.

ROUGH START

Stratton moved to Bartow from Dayton, Ohio, when he was in the eighth grade. He played high school baseball and football.

Although he received a baseball scholarship to Central Florida Community College in Ocala, it was football he enjoyed more. But his football career was short-lived when he slipped a disc in his back playing basketball.

"I got up the next morning and I couldn't walk," he said. "My mother took me to the doctor and they sent me to the hospital and I spent a week in the hospital in traction."

Off to college and playing baseball, Stratton admits he messed up. His grades fell and he joined the Air Force. He spent two years with the Air Force in Vietnam as a dog handler. Then he finished his degree with the G.I. Bill at the University of South Florida.

He started as



Don and his partner during the Vietnam War. As a dog handler, he patrolled the base outside the gates.

an insurance agent and taught school on two different occasions, once at the Donald E Woods Alternative Opportunity Center, where he really learned how to deal with children and love them.

"You've got to treat everyone different," he said. "Some you treat with kid gloves, and some need discipline."

Soon softball became a bigger part of his life and he left teaching, but he was still learning.

"I think in sports people need some kind of structure," he said.

As a father of two, he spent his time learning about life through sports while enjoying the wins and the losses.

Loyal to his city, children and youth leagues, he coached and volunteered in any way possible.

"Sports and kids - they tell you what's important and what's not important," he said.

Stratton's first foray into coaching made him look like a pro. He was coaching his son in Bartow Youth Football and called a play.

"The kid got scared and turned around the other way, reversed his field and scored a touchdown," he said. "They thought I made the play up."

As a coach his teams won the state title three years in a row. They beat a St. Cloud youth team coached by future Bartow coach Danny Smith.

"Three years later he had eight or nine of those same kids on the Bartow team that won the state high school title," Stratton chuckled.

Often Stratton took kids home from youth football on Thursday and Friday and kept them all weekend.

"He's helped a lot of young men over the years, getting those guys to become better individuals," said former Bartow and Sunshine State Youth Football Conference president Frank Webster. "I think he loved the kids. He loved the game and he loves to make sure that the kids who came through our program did well. He was a stickler to see how far they could go. He was always trying to inspire the kids."

LIFETIME OF LEARNING

Stratton spent a lifetime learning about life through games. "I think the games themselves teach people how to get along," he said. "Sometimes on the adult side they are trying to fulfill or relive their sports fantasies and enthusiasm through their children. The kids, I think they learn teamwork and what's not taught in school and I think a lot of the coaches are good for the kids."

Way back when, Don signed his daughter up for cheerleading. Those were the days of tryouts. He heard a coach's daughter always makes the team. He signed up to coach.

Stratton coached his son all the way to the college level. He went to every one of Michael's games.

"I just liked it," he said. "I liked dealing with kids. I like knowing I maybe made a difference in some of the kids' lives," he said.

Stratton knew Bartow High School football coaches Paul Quinn, Charlie Tate and Danny Smith. He knew basketball coaches Alvin Pearsall and Freddie Bretz. He was around good teams for years, the Bartow state football champions, the nine consecutive district basketball titles, watching the softball program win state championships. All the while he donated time and money to sponsor teams and programs.

"I got kind of spoiled," he said.

Former Bartow athletic director Marnee Cobb had been around Stratton for years, watching him push for high school fast-pitch softball before it was a sanctioned sport, announce football games, hold fundraising softball tournaments for Bartow athletics and run the Bartow High School booster concession stand at the Polk County Youth Fair, where Stratton worked from 6 a.m. to midnight for seven days.

"Nobody could do it as great as he could," Cobb said. "He was the man. He's always around Bartow sports. And if he isn't, all you have to do is call and ask. He's that kind of helper and fan. If he couldn't be there he'd come up with a way or idea or work with you for whatever you needed. That's kind of the Bartow way - one high school, one town. This is his school and his town. And that's what makes it special. He wants to make sure it's great and right."



Above: Basketball in high school; Right: American High School, Phillipines - 1965



Don, (left) and buddies remembering and paying homage to a very different time in America.

LOVE OF THE GAME

Stratton is re-shaping the ISA, a softball organization he helped bring to Polk County.

He's taken a lifetime full of on-the-field learning and applying it after taking over the executive director position in October.

ISA owner Bill Ruth has known and worked with Stratton for some 20 years.

"He is an unusual man in the regard that he is an intuitive, intelligent individual who chose a couple of unlikely professions as a teacher and softball director," Ruth said. "I said many times that he is a quick study. I think he could be a CEO in any size corporation he wants to be in. He has those talents. He's a quick problem solver, energetic and innovative and his communication skills are very, very good. He runs the most successful state program in all of ISA and his position is supplemented by having a good heart."

It's not an easy task to take over a national program.

"We're learning," Stratton said. "I'm enjoying it, but there's not enough hours in the day."

He would love to play softball again, maybe with the seniors in a foreign country, but right now, it's business.

Stratton was playing on a men's softball team in 1987. They played in an ISA tournament. Not long after that Stratton, along with

DON STRATTON
Age: 62
Born: Dayton, Ohio
Home: Bartow, Florida 47 Years
Family: Married to Mary, 41 years; Children, Kim Heidle and Mike Stratton; 7 grandchildren
School: Bartow High School grad, 1966; University of South Florida graduate with bachelor's degree in business and education
Hobbies: Grandchildren, Doo-wop music
Favorite band: Kenny Vance and the Planofones
Favorite author: James Patterson
Favorite team: Tampa Bay Buccaneers



Russell Burney, started to hold ISA tournaments in Bartow and Auburndale.

He was asked to help host a Miss Florida Softball youth tournament. He kept a cheat sheet to help him learn the ropes. Soon he was hosting ISA youth tournaments as well. He became the ISA assistant men's director. Then he became state director, putting thousands of miles on his car visiting tournaments all over Florida, making friends, earning respect and checking on the games.

"I've gone with him to a lot of the softball parks and he knows 90 percent of the people there, coaches who coached 20 years ago and those who coach now," said Rhoden. "That's one of the reasons he's a great football broadcaster, he's knows every situation and people listen to what he says."

In 2001 Stratton was the first director to be inducted into the ISA Hall of Fame.

"I've learned a lot from Don," said Burney, who has known Stratton for some 30 years. "I've learned how to treat teams and sponsors, to listen to their concerns and respond in a positive way. Don is a very caring person. He wants you to be straight up. I know ISA will grow with his leadership and dedication."

Don, (top row, second from left) at first ISA game; below: In the parking lot during a game break



Break a leg - or rather, tibia and ankle...how Don Stratton met Gene Smith, Publisher of Softball Magazine and Baseball The Magazine.

"To say that I remember the day fondly would be a little bit of a stretch of the truth," Smith says, recalling that rainy July, 1997 day in Plant City, Florida. Playing third base, Smith was taken out on a slide by a player on the opposing team, dislocating his ankle and shattering his tibia half way up to his knee. "I learned firsthand of Don's concerns for the individual players. He called nearly every day to check on my progress and was genuinely concerned and upset. He took it personally because it happened on his watch. Funny how something as drastic such as this turned into a close and trusted relationship that means so very much to me."

In his own words: Looking back on Forty Years in Softball by Don Stratton....

I was reflecting back on when I got started in softball, the changes that have come about (some good, some not so good) and the people I've met and places I have visited.

When I first started, we wore metal cleats, long pants, used regular metal bats and used the same ball everywhere.

In 1968, I played in my first softball tournament. It was Fast Pitch in San Antonio, Texas while I was in the United States Air Force. I was a catcher as this was where I played in High School and College. Shortly after that I was sent to Vietnam where I played on the Air Force team.

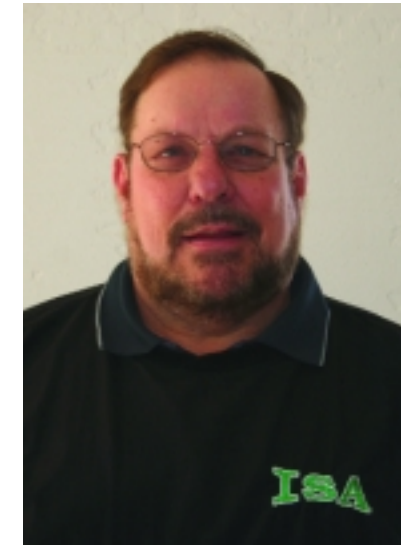
When I returned from Nam and was discharged from the Air Force, I returned to my hometown of Bartow, Florida. This was 1970 and most of the softball played then was ASA.

There were four big tournaments: two in Lakeland, one in St. Petersburg, and one in Haines City. Everyone played in the same class with unlimited homeruns. The awards were merely trophies which meant little to most as it was the game that mattered.

The first big time softball I witnessed was in Cocoa Beach as Stotler Staggs hosted an event that featured Howard's Furniture and Far Yarn which were at the time the number one open team and the number one Industrial team in the game. I got to play with a team out of Lakeland called Turner Aos against these teams.

Shortly after that they brought in Class A and now we had two classes. This was the first big change I can remember that affected softball. I hosted my first tournament for a gentleman named Carlton Benton who is now the Florida ASA Commissioner in our area. We played part of this tournament at the site where the Colonial Bank now sits in Bartow on Broadway.

I also hosted the ASA Men's Southern Regional Class A tournament which was the next to highest class. Back then to play for a National, you had to win your sanctioned league, finish in the top two or three of your sub-district and district to advance to the State, then Regional, then the National/World. It was an accomplishment to just get there. It was about this time that a team in Tampa was formed that would later win the big one. That team was Copher Brothers. We used to scrim-



mage them in Bartow playing 3 to 5 games, and they would always bring plenty of beverages for all.

It was around this time the second big change came about which was unlimited arch. Man, they would throw that ball as high as 16-20 Feet. This rule only lasted one year, and then they went back to 6-12 feet for the arch.

It was around 1988 that I heard about a new brand of softball. Lower arch, more classes and base stealing. This was the third big change as I was introduced to ISA.

I was playing part time. Then I became a manager when I tore my hamstring so bad it needed surgery which I did not get. I took my team to Ocala, Florida where

a reporter for the Ocala Star Banner put on an ISA Tournament. ISA was so new that all teams played together and depending where you finished decided the class you were awarded a berth to. We won a few then lost to the WW Gay and the Green Machine so we were awarded the AA berth. I went back to Bartow and contacted the then ISA Florida State Director Jeff Singleton. As they say the rest is history.

This brought about the fourth big change in softball to me. It was during one of my first tournaments where I was running the event and cooking for the concession. The umps informed me that they were tired. They left with two games to go. Needless to say I burned the hamburgers while umpiring the final two games. The next day I contacted Russell Burney who was in charge of the umpires for the Auburndale League and brought him on board as the UIC and later as a Director. The Tournaments then were all 2 or 3 day events mainly because we only had two fields to play the games on. The main ISA Tournament was played in Tampa at the Greco Complex and later in Clearwater. It was about this time that I met two men who were really into ball. They were Pop Davis and Rock Davis who would eventually run ISA Tournaments and the League in Plant City. I have two strong memories of Plant City. It was the hottest place to play ball and the weekend where I met Gene Smith from Softball Magazine which represents the fifth change to the game... It was also the weekend that Gene broke some bones. Gene



Above: Playing the only game in town at the time, ASA; Right: Coaching AU Baseball





Above and left: Ahead of the times: Local sports broadcasting before the Internet!

"Back in the early days - and I mean real early days of Softball Magazine, things were very different than they are now," recalls Luann Madison, Managing Editor of Softball Magazine and Baseball The Magazine. "Players used to run from the cameras to avoid team pictures, sort of like those NatGeo specials where the aboriginal people are afraid that the camera will steal their souls. Don and I devised a plan: We worked as a team of Border Collies would herd a flock of sheep - us in front with the camera, Don gently nipping at the heels of the players from behind and coaxing them into rows. Still a little wary of myself or Gene, they trusted Don. We began to get the pictures - we began to get noticed - and the rest is history. I have also always teased Don about his very unique affinity for spell check; it's a joke between us but he knows that I always know what he's saying. Don always has been, and always will be, one of my very favorite people I have ever met. Even beyond the sport of softball."

Top Middle: Don's return between the lines as a player after a seventeen year absence as first baseman for the USA team in Mexico; Bottom: Don (third from left) with teammates (from left) Bill Ruth, Hank Heffner and Terry Hennessey

Sports Profile: Don Stratton

The strength of a community may be based on the people who teach the kids. Not only in the schools, but in the churches, in the music rooms, the dance studios, the swimming pools, the Boy Scout troops and the athletic field, there is a need for interested adults who will teach our kids - and do it well.

Don Stratton is one of those who has been teaching our kids on the athletic fields and courts. While some youth league coaches have their particular areas of expertise, Stratton goes from one sport to the next - football, followed by basketball, which rolls to baseball.

For eight years he has coached boys from ages nine to 12 in the Bartow Yellow Jackets Youth Football League. He is currently the president of that organization.

For nine years, he has assisted both Alvin Pearsall and Fred Bretz on a volunteer basis in the very successful Bartow High School basketball program.

For five years, he has taught baseball to youthful ball players ages seven to nine in the Bartow Dixie Youth League minor leagues.

While Stratton has been a championship coach at each of those levels, his record is not the reason for the profile. These comments made by those who observe him working with kids center more on the issue.

"He's a natural with kids," says Dixie Youth League minor league president Fred Rhoden. "He doesn't



Don Stratton

push winning, he pushes having a good time. He teaches fundamentals, and he's the best I've seen at it. He wins but he uses all of his players while he's doing it."

"He is good with young people," says Bartow high school basketball coach Bretz. "He communicates well with the kids but he maintains a sense of discipline. He just has that knack with kids."

He has the way about him that makes kids learn, have fun, and feel good about themselves. That's a special talent. Meet Don Stratton.

Do you have a favorite sport to coach?

My favorite is probably football. It seems like the kids in the football program have a great need for it. Many of the kids come from homes without two parents and need some guidance.

You have stayed mostly with young kids. Any reason why?

With real young kids, teaching them fundamentals is important. If they get good fundamentals, teaching the philosophies and finer points is easier later on.

Do you prefer teaching fundamentals over philosophies?

I'm more into fundamentals than philosophies. I started out with good fundamentals. That's probably why I like it that way now.

Do you have a coaching philosophy?

I ask the players to give 100 percent all the time. I try to teach them that if everybody is trying to do the best they can do all the time that we'll usually will turn out okay. I also don't believe in building a team around one player. We've had some pretty good players but we try to develop all of the kids on our team.

What have been some of the highlights of your coaching career?

Bartow's winning the district in basketball in 1981 was a pretty exciting time. Freddy was in his first year as coach after Coach Pearsall and it was satisfying to know that we could still win even after a change in coaches.

Seeing some of the kids who played in youth league football do well in high school football is also rewarding. We

are dedicating our youth football league program to Tyrrow Williams, Donald Parham and Troy Young this year. They started out as quarterback, fullback and tailback in our program when they were kids and stayed in those positions all they way through their high school careers. They are now going off to college on scholarships. We think that gives us a pretty good slant to motivate the kids coming into the program now.

What do you think of the criticisms that some have of youth league football?

Well, I think that the young team (seven and eight years old) is too early myself. But without the program, a lot of the kids in it would get along in school years pretty far before they were exposed to some of the discipline, the need to make good grades and other areas we teach in football.

Does the football program focus on academics that much?

When I played in the program 20 some years ago, grades were extremely important. On my teams, we stress that you have to make grades to stay eligible to play. That helps some of these kids get their attitudes right about school.

Do you have a coaching dream?

I would like to see a Bartow High School basketball team make it to the state championships again. I also would like to see a player I coached make it to the pros.

Interviewer: Howe Q. Wallace

and I formed a friendship that has lasted all these years.

Gene was publishing a small local softball publication called Brevard Softball Magazine, but talked to me about his idea to make this statewide. I had just taken over as the Florida State Director, and I encouraged and badgered all the Florida directors to send in a story about every tournament. Gene would indeed take this to become a successful state publication. Today it is the number one Softball National publication and website in the nation.

When I first started with ISA, it was under the original owner Larry Nash from Shelbyville, Tennessee. Shortly after we started, I became good friends with the owner of Legends Softball, Mr. Charles Dale. Charles was always there for us in the early days with the hottest ball around and great prices. Charles drove all over the US to promote his ball. Charles represents the sixth big change for me.

In 1994, Larry sold ISA which represent the seventh big change for me. Bill Ruth purchased ISA and appointed Dave Carroll a CEO. Dave ran things for two years when Chet Tyl was appointed CEO. Chet ran ISA for 13 years and not only left his imprint on the Association but also showed me the business side of softball, thus the eighth change.

The ninth big change involved three men who were Al Palmquist, Ron Musselman, and Jim Simoons. These three brought about the ISA Girls Fast Pitch program and took it from its inception to one of the biggest in the state of Florida. We went through a lot building the program, but we are all richer for our experiences.

It was also during this time that the tenth and eleventh big change came and perhaps the two that have affected the game more than anything else. These are the Association's web pages and the local Message Boards. Teams now enter and pay through the Internet, and can check standings, draws and direction. They are also able to voice their opinions. Now many may view this as a negative impact, but in my opinion if one approaches the reading of these message boards as a way to be informed and realize some of the posts are intended to

merely get a response. This allows the message board to help all directors, players, and managers.

The twelfth change was getting involved with Florida Half Century and their program and format. Once we appointed Rick Bose as the UIC and the Half Century board ironed out some issues, they became the blueprint for many senior teams and leagues around the US.

My thirteenth big change came about when I was appointed by Bill Ruth as the CEO of ISA. I was, at first, reluctant to accept this position, but once I started I realized it is an opportunity of a lifetime. Working with Bill and the ISA President's Council of Hank Heffner, Jerry Jackson and Terry Hennessey has been a rewarding adventure and the thirteenth big change.

The fourteenth big change reflects working with Senior Softball USA and Terry, Fran, Dave and all the Senior Softball USA staff. Going to Mexico to play after taking off about 17 years of not playing was a blast. Everyone in the game should take the opportunity to play on one of these trips.

The new and fifteenth change is the web streaming and video streaming of live games on the internet. If you haven't listened to a broadcast yet, go to www.softballmag.com click on Softball Central and listen to an archived broadcast. It is the future...

The final change represents all the people who have an impact on me through softball. People like Kevin Schullstrom from Anaconda, Mike Macenko from Anaconda, Hank Bassett from TPS, Charles Dale from Legend Softballs, Mark Jackson from Polk County Sports Marketing, Adam Peterson and Mike Rommes from Miken and all the Florida directors who play a big part in ISA and of course, my family for putting up with all the weekends at the ball park.

Till next time, I'll see you at the park.