

# Teammates always came first for former Fitchburg High star Thompson

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FITCHBURG -- When expectations are low, strong leadership can make all the difference.

Although the 1959 Fitchburg High School baseball team was a little green in spots and did not have that elite billing, catcher Ronnie Thompson helped lead the Red Raiders to a successful campaign and a postseason championship appearance.

Thompson died at age 76 on March 24 in Perkins, Oklahoma, but he leaves a legacy that stretches all the way back to the Twin Cities. Thompson was a standout athlete at Fitchburg High School and even played his way into the Boston Red Sox organization.

Those who knew Thompson remember him as a proven leader and a truly caring teammate and friend.

Thompson ascended into the starting catcher role unexpectedly as a sophomore in 1957, and by the conclusion of his junior year in 1958 was batting in excess of .400. After losing a solid group of seniors in 1958, suffering an unexpected death on the team and watching a key player move out of the city, the 1959 team had plenty of cause for concern, despite having some promising young talent.

But sometimes perception doesn't match reality.

"Ronnie probably batted .450 his senior year and was the heart and soul of our team," former teammate and Fitchburg High School historian Fred Sullivan said. "He led by example, and was just a good team leader. With a bunch of younger guys, Ronnie handled the staff really well as a catcher.

"He was the kind of guy you listened to when he said something, and you didn't take offense to it, because you knew he was a good player and a good guy. We had all of the same guys the next year, and the team kind of dipped after he left."

North County was heavy on strong teams that 1959 season, with powerhouses Gardner, Leominster and St. Bernard's, among others. But it was Fitchburg that posted a stellar 17-3 record, including a sweep of local favorite Leominster High.

Fitchburg would split with Gardner during the regular season before the teams met again in the semifinals of the district tournament.

The regular season might have been a close battle, but Fitchburg stormed into the championship game with a 10-2 victory. St. Stephen's, of Worcester, was the defending state champion and Fitchburg's next opponent, and that would be the final game of Thompson's career, as he posted two hits in a losing effort.

"We went 17-3 and lost our final game to St. Stephen's, who is no longer in existence," Sullivan said. "St. Stephen's sent four players that year to Holy Cross and were the defending state champs. They were really good."

The bright lights and pressure never seemed to faze Thompson. Throughout his senior year at Fitchburg High, Major League Baseball scouts were attending his games, but Thompson never changed his approach and never turned his focus away from being a leader to his teammates.

"Throughout his senior year he knew the scouts were there," Sullivan said. "It didn't bother him, he handled pressure very well. I think he was the best overall leader I played for or played with."

On graduation day in June 12, 1959, Thompson inked a deal with the Boston Red Sox organization, shipping off to Waterloo, Iowa, for the Red Sox's Class C team. He played in the minor leagues for a few seasons, earning an all-star selection for the Alpine Cowboys in the sophomore league, where he hit .310 with 24 home runs, and 112 RBIs. He ended his baseball career in 1963.

"He gave professional baseball a shot," Sullivan said. "He did fairly well. He was a good hitter. I remember asking him at the time if there was anyone down there who he thought would make it, and he said there was a good kid from Brooklyn named Rico Petrocelli."

Petrocelli went on to spend 13 years in the majors as a shortstop and third baseman for the Red Sox.

Thompson played multiple sports while attending Fitchburg High and was the starting quarterback of the 1958 football team that went 6-2-1 and beat rival Leominster on Thanksgiving. For his efforts, local sportswriters named Thompson to their all-star team.

Fitchburg High had just started its hockey program in 1958 and Thompson had experience playing for much of his youth, growing up in Woburn. Because the team was brand new, the Red Raiders struggled, but Thompson secured all-star status in the Central Mass. Hockey League.

"Ronnie was an all-star in hockey, a county all-star in football," Sullivan said. "He was one of the better quarterbacks at Fitchburg High in the 1950s, but he was really a tremendous baseball player."

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