

Hall of Fame

Charles in charge

Charlie Klemovich was a year-round star

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Matt Shepherd remembers being herded into a family caravan in 1997 and driving to New York for a Columbia University football game. His grandfather, Charlie Klemovich, was being honored along with his teammates for the 50th anniversary of the "Miracle on Morningside Heights."

On that trip, Shepherd learned Columbia upset an Army powerhouse on Oct. 25, 1947. The Lions rallied from a 20-7 halftime deficit to break Army's 32-game unbeaten streak in the final minutes. His grandfather—a center, offensive guard, linebacker, and kicker on that team—played a crucial role in that victory.

Hall of Fame

It was an eye-opening trip for the young Shepherd. He knew his grandfather was a former athlete because of his lingering limp from old football injuries. He had heard him retell some of the funny stories like the time he spit on the shoes of George HW Bush during a football game against Yale or how he beat Frank Gifford in another contest, but Shepherd had no idea how big his grandfather was until he saw him celebrated at halftime on the New York City field.

"He never bragged, but if you asked him about it he'd tell you stories," said Shepherd. "I think that was the first time I realized how good he was...I knew he played a lot of sports. I knew that he was a good golfer, but I had no idea before that."

It's been three years since Charlie Klemovich passed away at the age of 86, and even longer since Klemovich's name has been mentioned alongside professional players in local barber shops and breakfast stops, but Klemovich is still a standard that few athletes can ever match.

Few have excelled as much at one sport, and fewer still have risen as high in as many arenas as Klemovich. If there was a bat, a ball, or a field of play, Klemovich was at the center.

Ray Michanczyk, a hall of famer himself, was almost 16 years younger than Klemovich, but he remembers hearing about the local star as he was growing up in town. They became friends in his later years, and Michanczyk said that Klemovich was a true competitor.

"The town was pretty close back then. The word got out about him. Everyone wanted someone local to be successful, and he was. Everything I ever heard about him was a positive thing," Michanczyk said. "He was a very sports-minded person and very successful. He set himself up in business and did very well. He was well-liked by people and many of the people who really knew him and seen him play said that he was an excellent ball player."

Everything that Klemovich touched seemed to turn to gold. As



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT SHEPHERD

Charlie Klemovich anchored the offensive line at Cheshire Academy in 1941 (above) and earned 14 varsity letters at Southington High School and Cheshire Academy in the late 1930s and early 40s.

“

It's a great honor, and I think he definitely would have appreciated it. Playing sports was such a big part of his life.

”

Matt Shepherd,
Grandson of the late Charlie Klemovich

a boy in the late 1930s, he won the CT junior golf championships. During his college years, he played baseball for the International Silver Insilcos of Meriden and as a member of the Southington Gems semi-pro football team. His college career was interrupted by a three-year stint with the Army during World War II, and he returned to the Phillipines to play baseball in the Pacific Olympics after the war. As an adult, Klemovich returned to golf, earning three golf tournament championships (1977, 1982, and 1994) in Southington's 'Kielbasa Open' that is sponsored by the Southington Falcons.

"He was such a good golfer, but he was always fooling around," said Shepherd. "He went out one time with me and my friend, and here he was, trying to hustle my friend. He'd say things like, 'Oh, man. I'm an old man. I could never hit the ball like that.' Then, he'd do it. He was pretty funny like that. I remember looking at the scorecards, and he was always at even par or one stroke over, and this was probably about 10 years ago. He was in his late-70s, and he was still

hitting par."

In every season, Klemovich held his own. He graduated Lewis High School in 1940. He prepped for a year at Cheshire Academy and went on to play football and baseball at Columbia University. In his college and prep years, Klemovich earned a total of 14 varsity letters in golf, hockey, baseball, and football. In college, he earned eight more varsity letters as a four-year player on the baseball and football teams.

At Columbia, Klemovich broke a pair of kicking records that had stood since 1915, and he still holds Columbia's single-season record for extra point kick attempts (24) that has stood for almost 65 years. In fact, he's currently ranked third all-time for single-season extra point kick completions with the Lions (23 in 1948).

"You've got to remember that, at the time, those teams that were playing in the Ivy League were much better than they have been over the past 10 or 15 years," said Michanczyk. "They had a lot of great football teams and sports teams."



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Jan. 28, 1922—May 22, 2008

- Graduated from Lewis High School (1940) and Cheshire Academy (1941).
- Earned a total of 14 varsity letters (golf, hockey, baseball, football).
- Movie extra for "The Babe Ruth Story" (1948).
- Inducted into Cheshire Academy Sports Hall of Fame (1993).
- Inducted into the SHS Baseball Hall of Fame (1993).

Football

- Played for Southington Gems (mid-1940s).
- Recruited to Columbia University in New York as a center, offensive guard, linebacker, and kicker.
- Earned 4 varsity letters (1941, 46, 47, 48)
- Major factor in "Miracle on Morningside Heights" comeback game against Army (Columbia University, Oct. 25, 1947).
- Holds Columbia's single season record for extra point kick attempts (24 in 1948).
- Ranked 3rd all time at Columbia for single season extra point kick completions (23 in 1948).
- Played for the Eastern College All-Stars and beat the New York Giants, 28-13 (1949).
- Drafted by Brooklyn Dodgers (AAFC).
- Offered contracts by the NY Giants (NFL) and the Cleveland Browns (NFL).

Baseball

- Earned 4 varsity letters at Columbia University (1946, 1947, 1948, 1949).
- Tied for the Ivy League lead in hits as a freshman (1946).
- Batting average .354 (1947) and .375 (1948).
- Played baseball in the Pacific Olympics (Phillipines) after World War II.
- Played baseball for the International Silver Insilcos of Meriden during college summers.

Golf

- Won the CT Jr golf championship in the 1940s.
- Hit nine holes-in-one, including two on the same hole at Southington Country Club.
- Won the Kielbasa Open Golf Tournament sponsored by the Southington Polish Falcons (1977, 1982, 1994).
- Played with friends from the "Brother Bills," a group of 16 regular players at Southington Country Club.
- Served as a volunteer "walking scorer" at the Greater Hartford Open for most of the 1990s.

On Columbia's baseball team, he led the Ivy League in hits as a freshman and averaged over .350 in at least two seasons. He even had a chance to play an extra in "The Babe Ruth Story" where he spent the day watching William Bendix try to mimic the Babe with the long ball.

"He always talked about how he had to do the scene about 30 times. He had to make it look like he was watching the ball go over the fence because that guy could not hit at all," said Shepherd. "They were shooting it in Yankee Stadium, and they wanted to use the kids from Columbia. For the extras, they actually had to use people that could play. They were in New York, so they went and recruited the kids from Columbia."

When college ended, there were three professional football teams that showed interest in the former Southington gridiron star. He was drafted by the Brooklyn Dodgers (All-American Football Conference) and was offered contracts by the Cleveland Browns and the New York Giants. Klemovich turned them all down to start a family.

"He almost seemed to play it down. He never made a big thing

out of the fact that they beat Army, he could have played pro football, or done this or that," said Shepherd. "Some people like to tell stories where they make themselves sound good. For him, it was more about him doing well but having a lot of fun doing it. He made a lot of friends, and that was what was important."

On the other hand, Klemovich's success in sports was so big that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame officials clamored to include him in the Class of 2011. He played multiple sports and multiple positions on almost every team. He was a champion into his 70s in local golf tournaments. Few athletes can match his versatility.

"It's a great honor, and I think he definitely would have appreciated it. Playing sports was such a big part of his life. He loved the camaraderie and being around everybody," said Shepherd. "I always thought that it was incredible with all the sports that he played. He got into Columbia because of it, and sports really set him up for life."

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Klemovich will be inducted into the local hall in a posthumous ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.