

Hall of Fame

Call him Mr. Competitive

Walt Marek was known for his hard work on the field

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Walt Marek was carefully choosing his words during an interview at his kitchen table. He spoke about his love for sports, his memories of sandlot baseball games and his three-sport childhood, but Marek carefully side-stepped questions about personal triumphs and his dominance on the field in the late 1950s.

"I just liked to play sports," he said about making the varsity team in every high school season. "We had some good players," Marek said about a touchdown that ended Plainville's bid for a perfect season in 1958.

Athlete

Finally, his wife burst into the room. "I have to interject," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Walt is extremely competitive. He picks up a cue stick. He picks up a tennis racquet—anything with a ball—and he just has that hand-eye coordination to win."

She begins to tell stories about Marek picking up a tennis racquet and beating a friend that had been playing for years. She talks about his dominance in bowling leagues with an average that never dipped under 200 and one game that came within one pin of perfection. Marek held the low handicap for years (6) in his league at Pine Valley Country Club. No matter what Marek does, he gives 100 percent.

"He's as competitive as they come," she said, "and his son is just like him."

That's what makes Marek such an interesting subject. Humble, soft-spoken, courteous in his kitchen, Marek can flip a switch when he steps into a competition. It's a rare gift that only the best athletes possess. It was a competitive spirit that pushed him to the top of the list when committee members were selecting the first group of inductees to the Southington Sports Hall of Fame.

"I was kind of honored to get a thing like that. I never expected it," Marek said. "I'll tell you what. I never thought I was that good of a ballplayer, but I'm very excited."

Not good? Few players dominated an era like Marek in the 1950s. From 1956 to 1958 he rushed past



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Walt Marek was a true three-sport athlete during his reign in the late 1950s.

opponents as a halfback for the Southington High School football team, earning all-state honors as a junior and a senior. He played 67 varsity games over the winters, scoring more than 15 points a game as an upperclassman. In the spring, Marek did it all. He pitched, hit for power, and hit for average. He was drafted by the Cleveland Indian organization and fought through the minor leagues before a shoulder injury sidelined him during spring training in Florida.

"I was a freshman watching him play all three sports," said Art Secondo, a former Southington sports reporter. "I've always considered Walt the greatest ever in the history of

Southington athletics."

That's because Marek never shrank from a challenge, honing his skills in the back yard against bigger, older kids.

"I can remember playing with the older kids and getting the crap beaten out of me. I'd come home with bloody noses and bruises from playing football," he said. "Back then, you didn't play touch. You played tackle, and you were always trying to fit into the crowd. It was quite an experience."

It paid off when Marek stepped onto the high school field. His sophomore season, the football team was 4-4, but as Marek developed so did the program. They went 7-0 in 1957 and a 7-2 senior season cul-

minated in a 12-0 victory over Plainville on Thanksgiving. The Blue Devils entered the game unbeaten and unscored upon. Marek scored first, but he credits the entire team for the victory.

"That was a good memory for me," he said. "We had a good team. In the first half, they were leaving the two-hole open for me, and I was running through that hole. In the second half, they blocked that up and we had Petricilli, the fullback, go up the middle. I scored the first touchdown and Petricilli scored the second. Then, Gil Varjas made one hell of a catch down the sidelines, a one-handed catch, and I'll never forget it."

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Art Secondo,
Former Southington
sports reporter

Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

Baseball

- 1959 pitching—Went 8-2.
- 1959 batting—.459 BA, 8 HR, 3 triples
- Inducted into SHS baseball hall of fame (1982)
- Drafted by Cleveland Indians

Football

- 1956—18 points (3 TDs)
- 1957—52 points (8 TDs, 4 PATs)
- 1958—94 points (13 TDs, 8 2pt conversions)
- All-State (1957, 1958)

Basketball

- 1956-1957—22 games, 101 pts (4.6 avg)
- 1957-1958—22 games, 346 pts (15.7 avg)
- 1958-1959—23 games, 350 pts (15.2 avg)

To put it in perspective, it's important to realize that Marek earned all-state honors for two seasons despite an ankle injury that haunted him throughout his career. He was the primary running back, the place kicker, and the punter.

"Coach Orsene used to tape my ankles every day because I tore ligaments when I was a freshman," he said. "It hurt, but I wanted to be in the game. It was bad enough to have somebody help me off the field. Then the doctor gave me a few shots. When it was good, I went back in there."

Marek carried the Thanksgiving momentum into the winter season where he led the basketball team to the postseason with a 16-5 record. In the spring, he anchored a baseball team that went 19-0 in the regular season to give Coach Jay Fontana his first undefeated season in 26 years. At the plate, Marek hit a staggering .459 batting average with eight home runs and three triples.

"I'm proud of that," he said about his .459 average. "I was a switch hitter, and I

could see the ball well. Also, going back to that time, you met up with a lot of pitchers that weren't particularly fast. They threw a lot of junk balls, and that gave us the opportunity to hit a little better."

After graduation, Marek packed his bags and headed to Nebraska to spend the summer in the rookie leagues. He bounced between the Cleveland and Baltimore organizations before shoulder soreness forced him from the mound.

"I started out in Lincoln Florida and got transferred to Selma Alabama. I had four home runs down there, and all they used to do is bunt the pitchers," he said. "That's why in hindsight, I think I should have stayed with Baltimore. I was a good hitter."

On Wednesday, Nov. 10, Marek will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John GoralSKI, email him at jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.