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SPORTS

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News Herald Photo: Terry Barner

In 1992, Gulf Coast baseball coach Bill Frazier died following a game. The school's baseball field was named in his honor.

Beagles, Buicks and baseball

LEGACY: Former Gulf Coast coach Bill Frazier helped the school grow more than just on the baseball field.

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THE NEWS HERALD

On April 18, 1992, Chipola's Bernie Bellard slammed a two-run homer in the first inning as the Indians registered 10 hits in a 3-0 victory over Gulf Coast Community College.

The Commodores — who opened the Panhandle Conference season 0-6 but rebounded to win 17 of their next 21 games — had clinched a bid to the state tournament a day earlier, rendering the game insignificant, little more than filler for the local sports page.

But not really.

Gulf Coast head coach Bill Frazier and his wife, Jeannie, had a dinner date after the game. It had been a grueling 55-game season and — despite the fact that the

couple rarely went out — an evening with friends, Jeannie said, was a good idea.

They never made it to dinner.

At 6 p.m., as Jeannie emerged from the shower, with her hair still wet and a gentle steam rolling out of the bathroom, she found her husband unconscious, sprawled on the dining room floor.

He'd been hit with his second heart attack in seven years. Less than an hour later, 54-year-old Bill Frazier was dead.

"I knew he was gone," Jeannie said, "I could just tell."

But this story isn't about death. It's about life and love. It's about beagles and Buicks and baseball.

It's about a generation of ballplayers to whom Bill Frazier was both coach and surrogate father.

This is a story that starts in a dreary Pennsylvania mill town, encompasses 32 years of meant-to-be marital bliss and winds up — 888 career wins later — at a baseball diamond in the Florida Panhandle.

First, the statistics: Frazier was born on April 4, 1938 in Ellwood City, Pa. He met a pretty little thing named Jeannie Keller at Marietta College in Ohio. The couple married in 1960 and had a pair of sons.

On Aug. 1, 1968, Frazier began his tenure with Gulf Coast. He spent 24 years there, winning 71 percent of his games, leading the Commodores to 11 conference titles and, in 1973, the state crown and a second-place finish in the national tourney.

He sent 10 players to the majors, including the Oakland Athletics' current second baseman Frank Menechino.

"I learned how to play baseball the right way at Gulf Coast," said



Frazier

FRAZIER: Former GCCC coach was elected to three halls of fame

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Menechino.

Frazier was elected, posthumously, to three halls of fame: the National Junior College Baseball Hall of Fame (1993), the Florida Community College Athletic Hall of Fame (1996) and the Bay County Sports Hall of Fame (1997). He was a Southeastern Conference basketball referee, a New York Yankee minor leaguer, a scout for the Kansas City Royals and chairman of the Panhandle Conference.

He was a kind father, a doting husband and a local demigod. He was the kind of man you name baseball fields after.

"He was a good man," Jeannie said. "He wasn't very good at loading the dishwasher or doing the laundry, of course. What do you expect from a baseball coach?"

"You know, we were married 32 years and we didn't have one fight. Not one. We were sort of made for each other, I guess."

relationship bespeak this point: Their families had the same kind of dog (beagles), the same ratio of girls-to-boys (2-to-1), even the same red-and-white Buicks.

"His family was so wonderful to me," she said. "He and I had so much in common. It was special."

It was uncanny, really, the sort of thing that helps a woman forget the fact that nearly her entire marriage was sculpted by the game of baseball.

Dinner at the Frazier's house often included players, forcing Jeannie to whip up oversized pots of spaghetti and massive bowls of chili. First baseman and pitchers substituted as babysitters.

"We didn't go on vacations, we went to ballgames," she said. "We did go to Miami once ... but that was to pick up some netting for the baseball field."

As a coach, Frazier was disciplined and confident. There were rules — no drugs, no smoking, no foul language — and if you didn't like them, you could check out anytime.

deal of respect for him," Jeannie said. "He set his style of discipline and that's what he had to say about it."

"At the same time, though, he had a great deal of influence on young people. They came to him with advice and he turned it around so they were able to figure out the problem for themselves. I was a surrogate father to the kids who they were down here."

Current Commodore head coach Darren Mazeroski — who spent five years as an assistant under Frazier and was named interim head coach immediately following his death — understands the impact left by his former mentor.

"You know, I'm sure people drive by the field and see the sign," Mazeroski said, "but I'm sure there are people who don't know who he was or what he meant to this school."

"When he started here, Gulf Community College used to hold its orientation meetings in a classroom. They've since moved to the auditorium. It's grown tremendously. I remember that he saw this place as