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News Herald Photo: Robert Cooper

Originally built as a baseball field, Joe Tom King is now occupied by the Gulf Coast softball team.

King's love of sports renowned

HONOR: Gulf Coast's field was named for the man who never seemed to miss a baseball game.

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THE NEWS HERALD

Joe Tom King was a simple man who loved three things in life. He loved his family first, his church second and baseball third.

And it was the love of baseball, especially youth baseball, which helped shaped his life and legacy in Panama City. Clerk of Courts Harold Conrad said it best when remembering King and his love of baseball.

"If there was a baseball game in town, Joe Tom King was there," he said.

According to his son, Tom King, his father loved sports but baseball was his one true love. The funny thing about King is even though he had the men's baseball field (now the women's softball field) at Gulf Coast Community College named after him, he never had the opportunity to play sports as a teen-ager.

"When my father was in junior high school, he got hit in the eye," King said. "So what you had a man who couldn't see out of one eye and had severe asthma. He never played or coached. He was a true fan of baseball and all sports although he loved



Contributed Photo

Joe Tom King believed the best entertainment was amateur sports, especially baseball games.

high school sports and Gulf Coast the best."

King, who did not graduate from high school, moved his family to Panama City in 1946 when he became the manager of the Panama City Cigar and Candy Company. King was born in Troy, Ala., and moved to Panama City from Montgomery, where he was the sales manager for the candy company. Tom King was 5 years old when his family made the move.

City Commissioner Bob Barnard of Panama City was the sales manager at the company under King. He said the business was just like one big family.

"He was a second dad to me," he said. "He was a fine gentleman and he treated

everyone at the company like family. He was our leader."

Barnard said when it came to working late or going to a baseball game, King would leave business up to him and slip out to the game.

"Whenever he wanted me to do something, he would call me Bobby," he said. "He would say, 'Bobby, do you have any plans tonight?' He would tell me what needed to be done and then he would go off to his ballgame. But he never ordered you to do anything. He would always ask you politely."

And, if it was baseball World Series time, he always made sure his employees could watch the game.

"He would work out in the warehouse alongside of us and he would bring a television set when the World Series was on," Barnard said. "We would work a little, take a break to watch the game, work a little more and then break again to watch some of the game."

Barnard began working for King when he was 21 and assumed the manager's duties when King retired, working until 1978.

King was instrumental in starting Little League baseball in Bay County along with Denny Trumbull, Joe Johnson and Don Mulholland.

"When it started, there were four teams in one league," Tom King said. "That was in 1951. My dad went to

most of the games and sponsored teams in Little League and all leagues."

Joe Tom King Sr. helped a lot of the kids who Tom King grew up with. They include Harold Basil, Ronnie Weathersby, Freddie Campbell, Frank Mize, Billy Tolar and Bucky Brown.

"When I was 12, we went to the state finals in Little League and lost," he said. "That was the first time a team from Bay County had gone to the state finals. He was always a supporter — even after I stopped playing — of Little League."

King said when he was young, there was no organized soccer and very little basketball for youngsters. He said there is a lot more pressure on kids today.

"I remember me, Basil, Weathersby and Tolar meeting up on Monday or Tuesday morning, getting on our bikes, going to the park and playing home run or a game called 'Move Up,'" he said. "We would do that for hours. Kids just don't go and play for the heck of it anymore."

"My son played basketball and baseball and had to give up basketball last year because baseball takes up so much of his time. That is the real difference with sports today. It has been professionalized in a lot of ways, even at the Little

KING: Helped raise money for Gulf Coast baseball, basketball teams

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League level."

But, unlike many parents today, King never lived through the accomplishments of his children.

"I never felt he pushed us to sports," Tom King said. "I can remember lots of times throwing the baseball in the backyard with him. But he never took me to hit or never coached. He was always a fan and very seldom did he miss a game.

"He was also the most positive person I ever met in my life. I can't ever remember a time when he was down. Even when he was sick, everything was upbeat and when you were around him, you couldn't help but feel better."

His third heart attack forced King to retire from his position at Panama City Cigar and Candy. That was at the same time sports at Gulf Coast CC was just getting started.

"There was an organization called the Gulf Coast Athletic Foundation and my father was president," Tom King said. "After he retired, he became very involved in building dorms for the baseball team and raising money for the basketball and baseball teams."

He was not above riding the bus to

watch Gulf Coast play.

"I can remember when the Gulf Coast men's basketball team went to the Nationals in Hutchinson, Kan.," Tom King said. "He rode the bus all the way there to watch them play. He loved all sports and in order, his favorites were baseball, basketball and football."

King said his father watched little television, spending most of his time working and going to baseball games.

"The only television show I remember him watching was 'The Price Is Right,'" he said. "I could never figure that out. And I don't remember him ever going to see a movie. He believed, and I still believe today, the most value for an entertainment dollar is amateur sports. He would go to Little League games and baseball games even if he didn't know anyone there."

They named the first baseball field after King, who died from heart failure at age 63, in 1974 with very little fanfare. King said his father might have objected if he had been alive to see the first field named after him.

"He would have been proud but he also would have been shy about it also," he said. "He was never about having his name out front and he didn't like things like that. But I was proud of it then and I am very

proud of it today.

"Even after he died, my mother would still go to the games at the college. My mom, Annie Katherine, was the second biggest Gulf Coast baseball fan. I can remember her sitting in her lawn chair bundled in a blanket at the college on those cold February nights watching baseball."

When they built a new baseball field, they named it after legendary baseball coach Bill Frazier. Tom King had no problem with that.

"Bill Frazier totally deserved to have his name on the new baseball field," King said. "It was great that they kept my dad's name on the women's softball field. I know softball provides girls with a great way to get a college scholarship."

King said the biggest lesson he learned from his father was learned away from athletic fields.

"It wasn't any one thing he said to me," he said. "It was the way he conducted his life. He worked like hell and I figured out that working hard was the way to be successful. It had nothing to do with education. Learning the value of effort and work and working something all the way through is the most important lesson learned from him."