

Father McGivney, Knights founder, could hold his own on baseball field

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — With the World Series underway, here is a fun fact: Father Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, played ball. And if one game is any indication, he was pretty good.

While studying for the priesthood at Niagara University, McGivney and other Connecticut seminarians formed the Charter Oaks, according to historian Douglas Brinkley, principal author of “Parish Priest,” McGivney’s biography.

On May 20, 1872, the Charter Oaks faced the Mohawks, another seminary team. McGivney started in left field, implying that he could run fast and throw far in the era before fields were fenced-in. He also batted clean-up, scoring three times in a winning effort. It is the only record of McGivney’s skills but it tends to confirm, in Brinkley’s words, that the founder of the Knights was “a naturally talented ballplayer.”

This glimpse of the sports talents of Father McGivney comes from the Knights of Columbus, based in New Haven, in an article provided to Catholic News Service.

As a Knight and an athlete, the priest — a candidate for sainthood who was ordained at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore — is hardly alone. Plenty of baseball legends have been active members of the Knights of Columbus, according to the fraternal organization.

These stars of the diamond applied the Knights’ core principles — charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism. Their participation stretches over a century, the era in which baseball — and the Knights of Columbus — came into its own, becoming the national pastime.

But who are these legends? Many will surprise you. If this were in a fantasy league, this would be the starting lineup for the fraternal organization:

Manager — Connie Mack: He played for the Washington Nationals, Buffalo Bisons,

and Pittsburgh Pirates during his 10-year career as a catcher; but he is more known for his over 50 years as a manager, compiling records for the most managerial wins (3,731), losses (3,948) and games managed (7,679). He won five World Series titles – the third most by any manager – for the Philadelphia Athletics. He was elected into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, in 1937.

Pitcher — Ron Guidry: Called “Louisiana Lightning” and “Gator,” Guidry played his entire 14-year career with the New York Yankees, from 1975 to 1988. In 1978, he won the Cy Young Award after going 25-3, while posting a 1.74 ERA. A 4-time All-Star, he was a member of two World Series-winning teams.

Catcher — Mike Sweeney: A five-time All-Star for the Kansas City Royals, Sweeney also filled in at first base and as a designated hitter. He was the Royals’ captain from 2003 to 2007, and hit .297 after 16 years in the majors, and amassed over 1,500 hits. On being a Knight, Sweeney said, “It was like putting on the armor of God. But I love the Knight’s message. You do things in Christ to raise his name, not yours.”

First Base — Gil Hodges: He played a majority of his 18-year career with the Dodgers from 1943 to 1961. During that span, Hodges was an eight-time All-Star, won two World Series titles in 1955 and 1959, and hit four home runs in one game in 1950. He went on to manage the World Series-winning “Amazin’ Mets” in 1969.

Second Base — Johnny Evers: One of baseball’s most famous poems — “Baseball’s Sad Lexicon” — is about one of the game’s fabled double-play combinations: Tinker to Evers to Chance. During World War I, Evers – a member of Troy (New York) Council 176 – was commissioned by the Knights of Columbus on War Activities as an athletic director of the K of C “Huts.” As director, he organized baseball games for the troops. “Believe me, I’m mighty glad the Knights of Columbus have accepted my offer,” Evers told the Daily News in 1918. “I feel as though I can do great work in France.”

Shortstop — Hughie Jennings: “Ee-Yah” Hughie Jennings was a professional player, coach and manager from 1891 to 1925. Jennings hit .311 lifetime and holds the major league record for most times hit by a pitch with 287. Jennings, a Knight from Pennsylvania, was set to go overseas during World War I along with Johnny Evers, but the war ended before Jennings’ passport arrived. Still, The New York Times

reported, “There is no man in the national game who is better known or more popular than Jennings, and he will be a valuable addition to the Knights of Columbus staff abroad.”

Third Base — Bill Coughlin: Nicknamed “Scranton Bill,” Coughlin played nine seasons in the major leagues for the Washington Senators as well as the Detroit Tigers. A capable hitter, his claim to fame is pulling off the hidden ball trick at least seven times, the most in major league history. During World War I, Coughlin established and ran a school for umpires associated with the Knights of Columbus in Coblenz, Germany.

Center Field — Shane Victorino: The “Flyin’ Hawaiian” was an outfielder who played in the majors for 12 years at the start of this century. Victorino won 4 Gold Glove Awards, was a two-time All-Star and a two-time World Series champion. Shane’s father, Michael, is a past K of C state deputy of Hawaii as well as a Supreme Warden for the Knights. Shane is currently a member.

Right Field — Babe Ruth: George Herman “Babe” Ruth was a member of the Knights of Columbus. Ruth learned baseball from the Xaverian Brothers and joined the fraternal order in 1919. He often visited orphanages, schools and hospitals during and after his major league career. A year before his death, he established the Babe Ruth Foundation for destitute children. His dedication to charity — the first principle of the Knights of Columbus — would go on to impact millions of lives, especially children.

Not a fan of these picks? No worries! There are more Knights of Columbus major leaguers, including White Sox pitcher Ed Walsh, who won 40 games in 1901, and legendary Giants’ manager John “Mugsy” McGraw and Pirates manager Danny Murtaugh.

Whoever you pick, a team of Knights’ could hold its own against any squad in a best-of-seven series.

Finally, since this falls into the realm of “fantasy” baseball, we can imagine that a Knights all-start team would play its home games at the old Yankee Stadium. That’s because the Knights owned the land under the ballpark from 1953 to the mid-1970s.

And the game would be called by, none other than former Los Angeles Dodgers' broadcaster and fellow Knight, Vin Scully.

Also see:

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