'Pinky' Deras: The greatest Little Leaguer there ever was

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The Detroit News

Hamtramck -- "Gifted, phenomenal, amazing." Tom Paciorek, the longtime major league outfielder, kept using those words, but not about one of his numerous All-Star teammates in the major leagues. Paciorek, who started his career on the fields of Hamtramck, was talking about Art Deras.

Or, as many of that era knew him, "Pinky" Deras.

"He was just better than the rest of us, it's that simple," said Paciorek, who played on a national title-winning Hamtramck Pony League team with Deras in 1961. "I say this to everybody who listens to me, and I'm not the only one to think or say this: Pinky was the greatest 12-year-old ballplayer who ever lived."

It was Deras who led Hamtramck to the 1959 Little League World Series title. It remains the only Michigan team to win.

"We were good, but Pinky just had that much more talent," said Mark Modich, a teammate of Deras' from age 9 through 18 on various Hamtramck teams.

"Artie was just a little bigger, taller, stronger. You'd look at us and we were like runts. He was a whole head bigger.

"He had a lot of talent for that age."

Nearly unhittable

Deras' exploits are chronicled in the documentary, "The Legend of Pinky Deras: The Greatest Little-Leaguer There Ever Was," which will premiere Monday night at the Hamtramck Community Center.

The 64-year-old Deras, however, isn't comfortable talking about himself or his Little League exploits.

"It's what our team, what we all accomplished," said Deras, a retired Warren police officer who lives in Sterling Heights and happens to be a Little League father these days.

But the accomplishments of Deras can't be overlooked.

Little League officials in South Williamsport recognize Deras as one of the best players in history in publications and records regarding the tournament. During that 1959 championship season, Deras had an 18-0 record with 16 shutouts and 10 no-hitters. He struck out 298 in 108 innings.

"You couldn't see the ball," said Paciorek, who played against Deras in Little League. "He had such a fastball -- there was no such thing as a radar gun back then -- but his fastball would be the equivalent to a 90 or 100 mph fastball, given the distance (to the plate), no doubt about it."

And at the plate?

Deras hit .641 with 33 home runs and 112 RBIs
Deras figures he was about 6-foot in those days, solid and well-built, and says he played baseball in the summer from morning until the sun disappeared.

"In those days, everyone played," Deras said. "It wasn't like these days when you have the video games, the phones, and everything else these kids have. Back then, we didn't have anything to take away our attention. It was just baseball.

"That's all we would do. It kept us out of trouble."

**Baseball hotbed**

Only two cities have ever won both the Little League and Pony League World Series.

Marietta, Ga., is one. Hamtramck is the other.

"A lot of people are surprised to know that," said Stan Nalepa, a teammate of Deras' on the Pony League team. "We're very proud of that fact. We had a close-knit group and we remain that today."

To those players who were part of either, or both, of those teams, the success isn't startling.

Little League baseball in Hamtramck was thriving. Kids were encouraged to play, and more than the fundamentals were taught by a dedicated group of elders.

"The dads, parents who gave up their time, the coaching, it was tremendous," Paciorek said. "It was such a great, hard-working community. We had the support of everyone. And the caliber of play was excellent."

"It was just a special time in Hamtramck."

The Hamtramck team would travel to out-state tournaments dressed neatly on air-conditioned buses, and had clean uniforms and new equipment.

In the 13 tournament games in 1959, Hamtramck allowed just two runs. In the three games in South Williamsport, it outscored the opposition, 24-1, including a 12-0 victory over Auburn, Calif., in the championship game.

"Always laid-back, always modest," Nalepa said of Deras. "He didn't like the attention, but he never looked down on anyone. Just went about his business."

At Hamtramck High, Deras starred in baseball, football and basketball. He was such a highly regarded quarterback that Michigan State offered a scholarship. The offer, though, came about the same time the St. Louis Cardinals outbid the Tigers, offering an $80,000 signing bonus.

Family situations made the decision between baseball and football easy.

"I chose baseball more out of necessity," Deras said. "There was a semi-depression, just like now, the economy was bad, my parents were being foreclosed. We needed the money."

Deras wonders what would have happened had he pursued football.

"All the time," Deras said. "I hadn't played much football. I wonder what would have happened (with more coaching, playing)."

Deras would go on to play five seasons in the Cardinals minor league system. The Cardinals made Deras a third baseman-outfielder, and in his best season, he hit .269 with eight home runs.

**Moving on**

In 1968, with the major leagues drifting farther away each season, and the possibility of being drafted into the Army becoming more likely, Deras joined the Army Reserve, ending his baseball career.
"Basic training was during spring training," Deras said. "You just couldn't do both. Times were a lot different back then."

So the best Little League player never played in the major leagues. It's something Paciorek still can't believe.

"I really can't," Paciorek said. "At that (major league) level, you need someone in your corner. With the Dodgers coming up, I had Tommy Lasorda backing me. It helps so much.

"I never felt there was anyone in the Cardinals organization that was behind Art."

Said Deras: "I wonder about that (not reaching the majors). I played against Tom in the minors. Some of my teammates were guys like Ted Simmons, Jose Cruz, Pedro Borbon. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be."

When Deras' military obligations were done, he returned to Hamtramck. Deras knew he didn't want to pursue a baseball career again.

"I was done with it," Deras said. "I was tired. After all of those years playing, the expectations to succeed and the pressures. Mentally I was just done with it.

"But at the same time, I knew I had to do something to make a living."

A neighbor near Deras' home was a policeman.

"That always interested me," Deras said. "It seemed like a good way to make a living in the community."

Deras spent 30 years in the Warren Police Department before retiring in 2001.

Few officers knew they were working alongside a Little League legend.

"Some of the older guys did," Deras said. "They knew about what we did. They talked about it. But no one else really did.

"That was fine with me."

**Different game**

Deras will tune in to the Little League World Series, which started Friday. He'll watch it with his two sons, maybe he'll call a former teammate, relive some of those memories from 1959.

"But it's a different game to what we played," Deras said. "There were no pitch counts. We had single elimination, one loss and done. No second chances. You had to be at your best every game."

Those kids, who've grown into parents and grandparents themselves, will watch the games from South Williamsport, too.

And remember those days some 50 years ago when they ruled the ball fields alongside, arguably, the greatest Little League player ever.

"I remember all the headlines that Danny Almonte made (in the 2001 Little League World Series)," Paciorek said. "And there have been others. But none of them were as good as Pinky."

**Documentary tells his story**

The amazing story of Art "Pinky" Deras and the 1959 Hamtramck team that won the Little League World Series has been made into a documentary.

"The Legend of Pinky Deras: The Greatest Little-Leaguer There Ever Was" will premiere at 1 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 29, on WXYZ (Channel 7), before the 3 p.m. LLWS championship game.
The film is being released by Michigan-based Stunt3 Multimedia's Blue Hammer Films, and was produced by Brian Kruger and Buddy Moorehouse.

"We couldn't believe nothing had ever been done on this before, and felt we needed to get this story out there," Moorehouse said. "It's an amazing team, and when you talk to people about Pinky, it's unanimous that he's the greatest Little League player they've ever seen."

The film includes rare footage from the actual broadcast of the 1959 championship game against Auburn, Calif., and has numerous interviews with teammates of Deras', including former major leaguer Tom Paciorek.

A screening of the movie is set for 7 p.m. Monday at the Hamtramck Community Center (adjacent to Hamtramck High).

Deras, Paciorek and numerous players from the 1959 Little League and 1961 Pony League world championship teams are scheduled to be in attendance.

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