By JOHN GORALSKI
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Joseph "Jay" Fontana tempered his expectations at the start of the 1961 baseball season. Pitching appeared to be steady, the coach told the press, but hitting was still a question mark. Expectations were always high, he acknowledged. After all, his team had won four straight conference titles in the challenging Central Valley League.

Fontana talked about his opening lineup. He announced Gil Varjas, the top hitter and fourth pitcher on the 1961 team. "We probably weren't as tall as some of the previous years, but we had a good bunch of guys. We had talent, and we just got better all year," said Tully. "I was the fourth guy, but I would only come in if we had a game that we needed."

The stage was set for Southington's first title run. The Knights had come close to the promised land with losses in the championship game in 1955 and 1957, but they were never able to capture the final victory. In 1955, the Knights suffered a 7-0 loss to Woodrow Wilson in the final contest. In 1957, they swept Farmington twice in the regular season, only to suffer a 5-4 loss in the championship game.

Nobody could have predicted that the 1961 team would finally break through.

"One thing I used to boast about is that we were the first team to finish with six straight victories in baseball," said Tully. "Believe me, the boys who finally broke through were pretty consistent all year. We were pretty good defensively. We averaged a lot of runs, and we had that." We had great teams. They probably had some teams a lot better than we did, but we were the ones that won it. That's what makes me so proud. We had the team concept. We were pretty consistent all year long, and we just played exceptionally well at the end."

The boys got off to a strong start with six straight victories before suffering a loss. Varjas allowed just four in the opener and spotted out in game two. Dave Zychowski and Tom Garry combined for a two-hitter in the third contest, and Zychowski struck out 10 of the first four. Garry allowed just one hit in a 4-0 win over St. Thomas Aquinas, and a 13-0 win over Glastonbury with Fontana switching the Knights to a 6-0 start.

Fontana shuffled his top three pitchers out of the lineup on a break-neck pace. Southington pitchers allowed just nine runs in the first six games, and that was the key.

"I used to start on Monday, relieved Tully on Tuesday, and start on Friday again," said Varjas, a member of the SHS Baseball Hall of Fame and the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. "It was a different time than it is now, but that pitching staff was really good." Southington was riding high with a 6-0 record and a 33-game winning streak, but that momentum came to a screeching halt. Windsor edged the Knights at the end of April, and Southington lost three of their next four contests, including a 4-3 loss to Rockville that was the only one in Zychowski's career and a 9-5 loss to Middletown in the following game that snapped a home winning streak that stretched back to 1956.

Tully said that they never gave up. "At the games we won on, a lot of the younger guys—the first year starters—developed," he said. "We had a good coaching staff. We had a good pitching staff with Gil Varjas, Tommy Garry, and Dave Zychowski. Those were the three pitchers, and they were all very good."

Once again, Fontana turned to his pitchers. Southington rallied for 14 hits. Windsor allowed just three in the seventh inning.

The Knights, pictured above in the 1961 SHS Chronicle yearbook, captured their first state championship, going 4-0 in the postseason to win the Class M tournament.

We had a good bunch of guys. We had talent, and we just gelled. The key is always pitching, and we had that.