

Hall of Fame

The boys who finally broke through

The 1961 baseball team earned Southington's first state championship

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

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 teams had won four straight conference titles in the challenging Central Valley League.

Fontana talked about his opening lineup. He announced Gil Varjas as his opening day pitcher. He never mentioned that this would be his last year coaching the Southington team, and he certainly didn't say that he was saving his best for last.

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"We knew we had a good group. We had all played in the intermediate league in town, against each other and with each other," said Dick Tully, the top hitter and fourth pitcher on the 1961 team. "We probably weren't as talented as some of the previous years, but we had a good bunch of guys. We had talent, and we just gelled. The key is always pitching, and we had that."

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 win a state championship in baseball," said Tully. "Believe me, my brother played for four years at the high school, and they had some great teams. They probably had some teams a lot better than we were, 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 at the end."

The boys got off to a strong start with six straight victories before suffering a loss. Varjas allowed just four hits in the opener and struck out 15 in game two. Dave Zychowski and Tom Garry combined for a two-hitter in the third contest, and Zychowski struck out 10 in the fourth. Garry allowed just one hit in a 4-0 win over St. Thomas Aquinas, and a 13-0 win over Glastonbury catapulted the Knights to a 6-0 start.

Fontana shuffled his top three pitchers in and 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, relieve on Wednesday, and start on Friday again," said Varjas, a member of the SHS Baseball Hall of



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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.

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Dick Tully,
Member of the 1961 SHS baseball team

1961 Blue Knight Baseball Statistics

HITTING STATISTICS

Name	AB	R	H	RBI	2B	3B	HR	AVG	BB	K	SB	HBP	SAC
Dick Tully	85	32	32	24	4	1	0	.376	19	5	13	1	1
Jim Theriault	89	23	31	20	2	2	3	.348	12	12	16	3	1
Rit Chopus	76	21	26	22	6	2	0	.342	17	16	9	1	4
Gil Varjas	78	21	26	26	3	3	1	.333	17	11	8	1	2
Tom Garry	56	13	15	11	0	0	1	.268	9	19	4	0	6
John Spain	70	16	17	17	2	3	0	.243	17	23	11	3	3
Dave Mikosz	50	7	11	5	1	1	0	.220	8	10	1	0	2
Ron Carbone	49	9	9	5	1	0	0	.184	5	16	2	2	0
Dave Zychowski	69	32	12	9	0	2	0	.174	27	19	5	1	4
Bob Lasbury	42	9	7	3	1	0	0	.167	8	16	3	1	0
Ed DellaBatta	35	10	4	5	5	0	0	.114	12	13	2	0	1
Team Totals	699	193	190	147	25	14	5	.272	151	160	74	13	24

PITCHING STATISTICS

Name	R	H	BB	SO	W	L	PCT	IP
Tom Garry	18	39	28	82	8	0	1.000	64.0
Dave Zychowski	13	26	25	60	6	1	0.857	53.3
Gil Vargas	27	31	38	81	5	2	0.714	56.0
Dick Tully	5	4	7	12	0	0	0.000	9.0
Team Totals	63	100	98	235	19	3	0.86364	182.3



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 the following game that snapped a home winning streak that stretched back to 1956.

Tully said that they never gave up. "As the season went on, a lot of the younger guys—the first year starters—developed," he said. "We knew we had a good team. 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 10 wins and a tie down the stretch. They went 12-2 in the conference to capture a share of the title with Middletown by beating them, 16-4, in the season finale. Southington pitchers entered the postseason with 235 strikeouts and just 100 hits and 98 walks. Garry and Varjas collected more than 80 strikeouts apiece. Zychowski surrendered just

13 of the team's 65 runs.

"Dave and Gil were our main starters. Tommy would be the third starter if we had a game that we thought would be pretty easy, but all three of those guys were great," said Tully. "I was the fourth guy, but I would only come in if we had a big lead in the last inning or something like that."

The one surprise was the hitting. By season's end, Southington batters had collected 190 hits with 44 extra base hits and four players with batting averages above .300. Tully (.376) led the way, followed by Jim Theriault (.348), Rit Chopus (.342), and Varjas (.333). Garry (.268), John Spain (.244), Dave Mikosz (.220), and Zychowski (.174) each managed to collect double digit hits.

"When you define 'team,' that was the team. It really wasn't just one individual—other than having a good pitching staff," said Tully. "We were pretty good defensively. We made plays, and we got a lot of timely hits. It was a different guy all the time. It was a team concept."

Varjas said that their success at the plate was no accident. The team would travel to Cheshire in the preseason to practice hitting at a prep school. They worked hard throughout the year, and it paid off.

"We averaged a lot of runs, and we hit the ball pretty well," Varjas said. "I remember playing

1961 Blue Knight Baseball Team

(Overall record: 20-4-1)

Date	Opponent	W/L	Score
Wednesday, April 05	Cheshire	W	8-2
Wednesday, April 12	Bristol Central	W	8-3
Friday, April 14	Newington	W	17-2
Tuesday, April 18	Farmington	W	6-2
Wednesday, April 19	St. Thomas Aquinas	W	4-0
Friday, April 21	Glastonbury	W	13-0
Monday, April 24	Windsor	L	3-6
Thursday, April 27	Wilson	W	8-6
Friday, April 28	Rockville	L	3-4
Thursday, May 04	Middletown	L	5-9
Friday, May 05	Plainville	W	17-1
Tuesday, May 09	Cheshire	W	11-1
Wednesday, May 10	St. Thomas Aquinas	W	14-3
Monday, May 15	Farmington	W	6-0
Wednesday, May 17	Wilson	W	14-1
Friday, May 19	Windsor	W	7-1
Monday, May 22	Glastonbury	T	7-7
Tuesday, May 23	Rockville	W	7-1
Wednesday, May 24	Bristol Central	L	0-8
Monday, May 29	Plainville	W	5-3
Thursday, June 01	Glastonbury	W	12-7
Friday, June 09	Middletown	W	16-4
POSTSEASON			
Monday, June 12	Housatonic Regional	W	16-6
Wednesday, June 14	North Haven	W	4-2
Saturday, June 17	Killingly	W	3-2

Farmington once, and they had a guy that threw the ball pretty hard. He ended up lobbing the ball to us to try to get us out. We were pretty strong, and we could hit."

The hard work and balance paid off in the postseason with different players stepping up in each contest.

Varjas started the game for a 16-6 win over Housatonic Regional in the first round, and Zychowski earned the decision in relief. Tully, Chopus, Theriault, and Mikosz each scored three times as the Knights rallied for 14 hits.

Garry allowed just three hits with six strikeouts in the semifinals at Municipal Stadium in Waterbury as Southington outlasted North Haven, 4-2. Spain was the only Southington batter to get two hits in the pitchers' duel.

Then, Varjas started the championship game against Killingly, and Garry claimed the decision in relief. Southington scored three runs in the fifth inning to come from behind for the win. The Knights finished with a 20-4-1

record and earned the program's first state title.

"That was special," said Tully. "If you ever hear about the big league players, they never appreciate winning the World Series until after they're all done playing. At the time, we were young, and we were pretty excited. Looking back, you appreciate it a lot more."

Few programs at the high school have enjoyed more success than baseball, and the 1961 team was the one that raised the bar for all that followed. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, the team will be honored in an induction ceremony for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"I'm glad that we're going to be inducted because I think it was a great team," said Varjas. "We were the first ones to win the state championship for the school, but about 90 percent of us played three sports. We went through football and basketball and baseball together. It was kind of cool to do that, and it was a great way to end our high school careers."