

Hall of Fame

# Staying in the game

## Gil Varjas has never strayed too far from the field

By JOHN GORALSKI  
SPORTS WRITER

**G**il Varjas remembers the 2000-2001 baseball season well. It stands out in his memory like no other. It was unique. It was different. It was the first and only time in his entire life that Varjas wasn't on a baseball field.

"I didn't play, and I figured I'd play golf every day or something like that," Varjas said. "I got tired of it, so I went back to coaching. I coached in the fall, and I coached in the spring."

### Athlete

Varjas is truly an 'iron man' in sports, and few can match his commitment to athletics. He has played or coached at nearly every level from pick-up games as a kid to high school and college coaching as an adult. After more than 60 years of competition, Varjas is still passionate about the game and the unsung challenges of coordinating the game of baseball.

"I love it," he said about his current job as an assistant coach at UConn-Avery Point. "This is the 42nd year that I've coached baseball. It's different now because I'm not the head coach. I don't have to worry about all those little things like the weather and injuries, but I love it."

Varjas hails from Southington's heyday in the 1950s and 60s when he grew up playing sports on neighborhood fields and honing his skills in the Little Leagues. But it was in high school that Varjas truly shined. As a three-sport athlete, he never strayed far from the crowds in an annual dance from football to basketball to baseball and back again.

"Most of the guys played two sports or three. Whatever season it was, we just played it," he said. "I was pretty good in Little League, but I never really played basketball. They kind of forced me because I was tall. At that time, I was 6'1" or 6'2", so they kind of pushed me to play. I played football, too. I don't know why. I just did, and I loved it."

His athleticism earned him a varsity position every season at Southington High School. In the fall, Varjas would



FILE PHOTO (1983)

**Gil Varjas has missed just one baseball season in a career that has spanned more than six decades as a player and a coach.**

help anchor a football team that went 18-8-1 over his three-year career, scoring eight touchdowns and 10 extra point conversions as a receiver and defensive end. Over the winter, he played 68 varsity basketball games, finishing with 513 points and scoring 11.3 points per game as a senior.

"I enjoyed basketball a lot, but I didn't shoot much," he said. "I did all the rebounding and that kind of work. I was just a tough guy in the middle."

It was baseball where Varjas made his biggest impact. The pitcher/outfielder hit over .333 in his senior year and led the Knights in runs batted in (60) over his last two seasons. He won 14 games as a pitcher and went 9-0 in 1961—the year that Southington captured its first baseball state championship (a feat that would take almost 30 years to duplicate). Varjas struck out 63 batters in 77 innings, allowing just 44 hits and nine earned runs.

Still, it was his fielding that secured the title. Varjas started the game,

“

I enjoyed those days. Sports were special for the town, and we carried that on. We had good coaches, good teammates, and we had good teams. It wasn't easy, but you learned and you had discipline. If you didn't, you weren't going to play.

”

Gil Varjas,  
Former SHS athlete

handed the ball to his teammate, Tom Garry, and finished the game in center field. Varjas made a

throw to the plate that ended Killingly's hopes. The late Joe Fontana called the 1961 team his 'dream

*Southington Sports  
Hall of Fame*



### Inside the Numbers

#### Baseball

- Member of the Southington High School Class LL champion team (1961)

#### BATTING STATISTICS

1960—Led the team with 26 RBI

1961—.333 batting average, 34 RBI

#### PITCHING STATISTICS

1960—5-2 record with 81 strikeouts and 5 walks in 56 innings.

1961—9-0 record with 44 hits, 63 strikeouts and 9 earned runs in 77 innings.

#### Football

1958—14 points (2 TDs, 2 PATs)

1959—4 points (2 PATs)

1960—40 points (6 TDs, 4 PATs)

#### Basketball

1958-1959—23 games, 27 pts (1.2 avg)

1959-1960—24 games, 249 pts (10.4 avg)

1960-1961—21 games, 237 pts (11.3 avg)

#### Coaching (Baseball)

- Went 430-195 at New London (1967-1999) with 4 state titles, 4 runners up, and 12 conference titles
- Current assistant coach at UConn Avery Point
  - CTHSCA Coach of the Year (1984)
  - High School all-star coach (1987)
- National HS Baseball Coach of the Year (2000)
- Inducted into the CT HS Coaches Hall of Fame
  - Inducted into the Southington High School baseball hall of fame (1983)

team,' and that's how Varjas remembers it.

"We were just good players. We averaged 10-12 runs per game. We were just so far ahead of people that it was interesting," he said. "There were a lot of kids in town baseball. Even before I got there they had some pretty good teams. Everybody played, and everybody expected to do well."

His efforts in high school earned him a spot in the school's baseball hall of fame, but Varjas was far from finished. He went on to play baseball and football at Idaho State University before settling in New London as a varsity baseball coach.

Varjas went 430-195 over a 32-year career that culminated in four state titles in eight appearances and 12 conference championships. Varjas was named as the CT High School Coaches Association coach of the year in 1984 and as the national coach of the year in 2000. He was inducted into the CT High School Coaches hall of fame when he stepped down at the

turn of the century.

That was when he turned to the golf course before being drawn back to the college game.

"I just want to be remembered for working hard," he said. "That really was a big thing for me. I put a lot of effort into working hard. I played for good teams and coached for good teams."

That's why Varjas was selected as a member of the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"It's quite an honor to be that high on the list, because Southington's a big sports town," he said. "I enjoyed those days. Sports were special for the town, and we carried that on. We had good coaches, good teammates, and we had good teams. It wasn't easy, but you learned and you had discipline. If you didn't, you weren't going to play."

To comment on this story, email John Goralski@southingtonobserver.com.