In the fall, Varjas would head to Southington High School. He was given a varsity position and loved it. "I don't know why. I just did," Varjas said. "I got tired of it, so I went back to coaching. I coached in the fall, and I coached in the spring." Whatever season it was, 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 baseball. 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 even sooner than at Southington High School. In the fall, Varjas would 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 (81) over his last two seasons. He won 14 games as a pitcher and went 9-8 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, 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 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 and inducted into the Southington High School baseball hall of fame (1963).

Gil Varjas has never stayed too far from the field. Staying in the game 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.

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"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 at southingtonobserver.com.

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