I only had one thing on my mind when I stepped onto the mound, and that was to throw a strike and throw it as hard as I could.

I didn't fool around and try to over-engineer the situation.

Jack Valentine gets some pointers from former Yankee pitcher Art Ditmar at a Blue Knight baseball camp in the late 1960s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN FONTANA

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Jack Valentine knew all about his father's achievements in high school when they were playing catch in the backyard. He knew about his father's semi-pro baseball career in the army. He had heard the tales about his dad playing with major league players like Joe Garagiola, so you can imagine his disappointment when he faced his father one spring to tell him about his own future dreams.

Valentine was only nine years old, but he was cut from his Little League roster. As it turned out, his dad knew just what to say.

"My father took me aside and told me that we were going to go home and work on all the different fundamentals of the game," said Valentine. "He told me that I was going to put the effort forth and that we'll see where it leads me. He told me that, next year, I'd be a little bigger because I wasn't that big at nine."

His father meant every word, and Valentine threw himself into his studies. Over the next 12 months, they practiced in the back yard. Valentine started learning the fundamentals and focused on the mental approach to the game. Between lessons, the young Valentine would join pick-up games with older kids from the neighborhood. He spent every waking moment studying the game of baseball and waiting for another chance.

"I learned how to catch the ball, throw the ball, and not be afraid of the ball. That's what helped," he said. "As I started to grow and get a little bit bigger, I taught myself to grip the ball for pitching and what wind-up to take. I taught myself all the intricacies of the game, and he loved the pitching part."

The following spring, Valentine continued to battle older kids in sandlot contests where held field athletics on the high school. He dominated Little League games, and his reputation kept growing as he let his feats speak for themselves. Former Blue Knight coach John Fontana remembers hearing about the young Valentine before he reached the high school field.

"He was a unique player. He was a really big star from the time he was in the Little League, so people knew all about him when he came to the high school," said the coach. "He could really hit, but when he came to it was the pitching that really was incredible. He could throw a fast ball. He could throw the curve. He threw a knuckle ball. He was ahead of his time."

Valentine would stare down batters from his perch on the mound. Every pitch was thrown with his full effort, and it seemed that every one crossed the plate. If you were a batter, you had to swing because it was sure to be a strike either way.

"My father drilled into me that you had to be accurate. Anybody could throw hard. You have to be accurate with your pitches," said Valentine. "I only had one thing on my mind when I stepped onto the mound, and that was to throw a strike and throw it as hard as I could. If I couldn't do that, then I couldn't do anything."

"He just shut them right down," said Fontana. "I remember that the game was a lot faster—I was just one year or two out of Little League—and I had to learn a few different things. It was a different experience playing with those college-level guys. You had different coaches, and you were always learning different things. It was just great, and I loved it."

By the time he reached the high school, Valentine was already a proven player. It was an easy selection for varsity coaches. Valentine dominated on the mound, setting five school records that still stand after more than four decades. He set the standard as a starting pitcher with 25 varsity starts. He shattered the record for strikeouts (288) in three seasons with the Blue Knights. His accuracy was unparalleled with the fewest walks per inning in a single season (12 walks, 106 innings in 1969) and for a career (50 walks, 199 innings). He raised the bar for durability with 15 complete games when high school games stretched nine innings instead of seven.

"I didn't ever have any- thing that went out onto the field of play with as much confidence as he did," said Fontana. "When he got it, I don't know. He was just so confident out there. He didn't care who was watching him. He thought he was the best. 'Go on up there. See if you can hit me.' He was that kind of guy."

On the other hand, he still had critics across the state. When Southington drew a postseason match-up against Trumbull in Valentine's senior year, Fontana heard the negative predictions fill into his office. Sure, Valentine could dominate batters in Southington's weaker conference, but a Fairfield County team? No way.

"It wasn't just me. It was Southington High School," said Valentine. "We had a reputation in all sports of being at the top of our game. Everybody always set their sights on Southington High School. If they set them on me, that's fine. I was having success. It didn't affect me whatsoever. I just went out and did my thing."

Fontana remembers the game vividly. Valentine struggled at times with the strike zone, but he just reached into his bag of tricks. The precision pitcher walked more batters than any other time in his high school career, but Trumbull batters still couldn't make contact.

"He just shut them right down," said Fontana. "I was looking out, and all I could see was the ball fluttering. He was throwing knuckleballs at them. Trumbull batters never knew what hit them. When the dust cleared the Knights had won the game, and their all-time pitcher had earned his first no-hitter in a game that nobody thought he could win."

The funny thing is, in nine innings, I had something like seven walks," Valentine said. "I don't know what happened, but the ball was moving all over the place. It was just one of those days."

Hall of Fame

"It surprises me, and it hum-