Crafty veteran

Cleveland Heights native, among oldest living MLB players, recalls pitching career

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Moe Savransky was not the first Jewish player in Major League Baseball – that honor belongs to Lipman E. “Lip” Pike, who made his debut in 1866 – but he was among the first Jewish players from Northeast Ohio to play in the big leagues, and at age 89, Savransky is among the oldest living former Major Leaguers.

A left-handed pitcher in his playing days, Savransky toed the mound for the Cincinnati Reds (called the Redlegs at the time due to communism-tinged fears stoked by U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy) for 16 games during the 1954 season.

Savransky graduated from Cleveland Heights High School in 1948, and in 1947, helped the school’s baseball team win its only state championship – though Savransky admitted during a visit to the Cleveland Jewish News the Tigers probably should have lost the championship game.

“We played the team from Akron Garfield, and a guy hit a ball to right field and my (teammate) caught it and (the umpire) called him out, but technically he trapped the ball,” said Savransky, referencing a baseball term.

Solon man arrested in Elyria murder case

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Three men, including a Solon resident, have been arrested in connection with the death of a Lakewood man in Elyria.

Willie M. Fisher, 47, was found dead shortly before 6:30 p.m. on July 6, lying behind the Convenient Food Mart at 1401 East Ave. in Elyria. Police were responding to a call claiming someone had been shot behind the building. Fisher was found with multiple gunshot wounds and pronounced dead by medical personnel on the scene, according to a news release from Elyria Police Department Capt. Chris Costantino.

Detectives later determined Fisher, who worked as a handyman, was employed by Solon resident Bruce Arnoff to do yard work around the business. Elyria Police reported Arnoff, 56, was upset with Fisher for unspecified reasons and contracted with two East Cleveland residents to “cause serious physical harm” to Fisher. This lead...
Savransky

where a fly ball or a line drive touches the ground just prior to being concealed by the fielder’s glove. “He told me, ‘I thought (I) did (trap it), but (the umps) didn’t call it,’ and we won the game.”

As a pitcher, Savransky relied on a curveball that breaks in a straight downward motion, called a “12-to-6 curve,” referencing the numbers 12 and 6 on a clock. He said he threw a fastball that topped out in the mid-90s, which would have been considered hard throwing in that era. After he entered professional ball, he began throwing a screwball, a pitch that curves in the opposite direction of a curveball.

He attended The Ohio State University on a basketball scholarship, but also played baseball for the Buckeyes, pitching in the 1951 College World Series. He was signed by the Reds in 1948 while at college, and played in the minor leagues at various levels, missing the 1952 and 1953 seasons after he was drafted by the army to fight in the Korean War. While serving, Savransky was injured after a fall and suffered a concussion, among other injuries.

EXPERIENCING ANTI-SEMISHISM

Savransky said he experienced anti-Semitism during his playing career, particularly in the minor leagues and often while playing in small towns. His first season playing minor league ball took him to Sunbury, Penn., where he said he got a lot of insults.

Occasionally he also had to deal with remarks from other players. He recalled an incident with the brother of former New York Yankees’ All-Star Charlie “King Kong” Keller, Hal Keller, who had a brief MLB career with the Washington Senators.

“He was nasty,” Savransky said of Hal Keller. “He was calling me all sorts of names, so when he came up to bat ... (I threw the) first pitch right at his head.

Boom! Down he went. And when I went out ... from our end of the inning, I said to him ‘I want to tell you something, your brother happens to be a class guy and he’s a great guy, great ball player, but you’re a nobody.’

“He says to me, ‘You got rabbit ears?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I heard you and I’ll tell you something, I don’t like it, and I’m gonna tell you something else, you see what I did – I knocked you down, didn’t I? And every time you come up, I’m gonna knock you down.’ I said, ‘You’re not a nice person and you should be ashamed of yourself.’”

Savransky said a lot of the other players didn’t have issues with him being Jewish. He also fostered friendships with other prominent Jewish players, including Cleveland Indians Hall of Famer Al Rosen, who was nicknamed “The Hebrew Hammer.” Savransky said while in Florida for spring training, he’d often go to services with Rosen and other Jewish players.

INJURY CUTS CAREER SHORT

Savransky returned to the Reds after his military service and made his Major League debut on April 23, 1954, when he entered the ninth inning of a 10-3 loss to the Chicago Cubs. Savransky allowed a hit, but didn’t give up any runs in his inning of work.

All in all, Savransky pitched in 16 games for the Reds, posting an 0-2 record with a 4.88 ERA, allowing 23 hits, 13 runs (all earned), 6 home runs, eight walks and seven strikeouts in 24 innings. He retired after the season, citing an injury to his pitching elbow.

Savransky said if he had been a pitcher today, he likely would have lasted a few more years thanks to advances in sports medicine.

“Today (players can get) Tommy John surgery,” said Savransky, referencing ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction, where a healthy tendon extracted from an arm is used to replace an arm’s torn ligament—a procedure popularized by former Cleveland pitcher Tommy John.

Savransky, who said he knows John, thought he was one of a number of players whose careers could have been extended if the procedure had been available earlier:

“I had bone chips in my left elbow because my manager ... when I was in the minor (leagues) ... got me to throw a screwball and I threw it and threw it and I got bone chips,” Savransky said. “They were bad, they were hurting me, so I finally had them operate on it. It’s a simple operation, they go in there, cut the fat away, take the chips out. He took my ... tendon and he pinched it from both sides and cut it down the middle.

“It took the elasticity out of my arm. I would be good, and then all of a sudden, I would get swelling and all of that and I would not be able to pitch for a while. It was really a crime they knew very little (about sports medicine). There were a lot of ball players that didn’t really get the right kind of treatment in those days and a lot of them had short careers for it. That killed my career, and that’s a shame.”

STAYING CONNECTED TO BASEBALL

After Savransky’s playing career, he went into the oil business, a decision he said he now regrets, but he also stayed active in baseball by throwing batting practice for the Indians. He said at the time, which was about 1965, Cleveland had a good Major League team, but the hitters had trouble with his pitches in batting practice. He said Cleveland hitters such as Rocky Colavito and Bobby Ávila had difficulty hitting him in practice.

“Rocky couldn’t hit the curveball, so I got him out,” Savransky recalled. “I told him I’d throw a fast ball and strike him out on that, and (he hit it and) almost killed my third baseman. He hit a shot, and (the third baseman) said ‘Don’t you ever throw a fastball again to him.”’

Now, Savransky lives in Marietta, Ga., just northwest of Atlanta. He still follows baseball, and during a recent visit to Northeast Ohio to see family, he compared the way he pitched to the style of current Los Angeles Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw.

He said players of his time didn’t use performance-enhancing drugs, at least to the best of his knowledge, but did say many players drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes. He said he would drink beer, particularly during his time in the minor leagues, but stayed away from the harder stuff. He felt that likely has contributed to his long life.

“I played against some great ball players, and there were so many (guys) that were really great, they were better ball players then a lot of them (today), but they were drunks,” he said. “I never drank, I never smoke – and that’s probably why I’m 89 and I’m still here. I never went for any of that stuff.”