

Former Cardinal Ken Reitz shares stories at Legion tourney banquet

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
July 29 2018 9:59 AM



ALTON - "It's an honor to be playing (American) Legion ball and be in this situation."

So said former Cardinals third baseman Ken Reitz Friday evening as he started his remarks to a gathering of the six teams who will be playing in this weekend's American Legion state baseball tournament at a pre-tournament banquet at Alton High School's auditorium.

The tournament was underway at 11 a.m. Saturday at AHS' Redbird Field. Games continue through Tuesday, with the top two teams advancing to the Legion Great Lakes Regional in Napoleon, Ohio, Aug. 8-12.

"I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area; we played Joe DiMaggio ball, which was particularly like this," Reitz, who played for the Cardinals from 1972-75 and again from 1977-80, with stints with the San Francisco Giants, Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates before he retired in 1982, said. "We didn't have a tournament like this where we played a state tournament; of course, California was 700 miles from one end to the other."

Growing up in the Bay Area, Reitz had an older brother who signed with the Giants. "When I was a kid growing up in San Francisco, I had an older brother who signed with the Giants," Reitz recalled. "I was in the sixth grade and he played in Fresno, which was about two hours away from San Francisco and Candlestick Park – I grew up about a half-mile from Candlestick; I'd go out on my bike in second grade and get batting practice balls from behind the fence.

"When I watched my brother play and I said, 'hey, you get paid for this?', and he said, 'about \$500 a month', so I went out for the high school baseball team."

Eventually, Reitz began working on the game and improved to the point where he was drafted by the Cardinals in the 1969 MLB Draft and signed with them after his graduation from high school. "I was 17 years old and had never been out of San Francisco in my life," Reitz recalled. "I had \$200 in my pocket and my dad put me on a plane to Sarasota, Fla., in the Rookie League; there was four teams using the same clubhouse and all of them had signed with four different organizations. We played at 10, 12, 2 and 4, and for some reason, I liked it; when we were done, I'd get a couple of other guys and we'd go out and hit ground balls to ourselves.

"In two weeks, I got moved up to a town called Cedar Rapids, Iowa; then I went down to the Instructional League in St. Petersburg, Fla., and I didn't have a position."

Reitz then tried a couple of positions in the Instructional League before being sent to Bogota, Colombia, to play winter baseball. "I literally did not go home for two years," Reitz said. "I played baseball year-round; the next year, I played in St. Pete in (Class) A ball the next year, then Double-A in Little Rock, Ark., (with the Arkansas Travelers, the Cardinals' Class AA team in that era) and Triple-A in Tulsa, Okla.

"I had just turned 21 and the manager called me into his office and said to me, 'you're going to St. Louis'. I said, 'what for?' - I thought he wanted me to pick something up," he said to laughter from the audience.

What it meant was that Reitz was being called up to the Cardinals in September 1972 to take third base from Joe Torre; his first game was against the then-Montreal Expos, where he got a pair of hits off Bill Stoneman. “They asked me if I was nervous (before his first game as a Cardinal),” Reitz said. “Yeah, I was nervous because there was a guy pitching – back then, they only had games (on national TV) on Saturday – the Game of the Week (a long-time Saturday afternoon institution on NBC for many years). Bill Stoneman had thrown a no-hitter against the Cubs – I thought, no big deal.

“I had never played before more than maybe 3,500 people and there was something like 30,000 people – I was shaking a little bit, but I grounded out. Next time up, I got a broken-bat single and I thought, ‘this is cool, I got a hit in the big leagues, so if I never come back, at least I got one hit.’”

He then told a story about his second hit in that game which included an encounter with Tim McCarver, who was catching for the Expos in that game, and how they later became good friends, then told a couple of stories about some time he spent with the Giants, both as a player and working in the organization.

“As you grow older, you’ll appreciate your teammates, the things you get out this week playing these games, the friends you make, the big hits you get or the error you might make that someone picks you up – this is the biggest game of failure that there is,” Reitz said of the game to the players in attendance. “Three out of 10, you’re great; last year, there were 17 players in the major leagues that hit .300, so there’s a lot of failure going on and these guys are making \$1 www.legionbb.com 8 million or \$14 million or whatever it is.

“The game is no different whether you’re playing or they’re playing; I’m like you, I’d rather watch you guy’s game than a major-league game because you play with heart and passion. But that’s what kept me in the big leagues; I said to myself, ‘I’m going to do something every day that will help my team win a game, whether it’s a bunt, playing defense or moving a runner over or hit a sacrifice fly, things like that.’”

For updates and information on the tournament, visit the tournament web site at www.legionbb.com.