

Diamond guy

SHELLIE BRENNAN

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HE'S been a permanent fixture and familiar face at the country club for so long – nearly 20 years – you might think he's been there for ever.

But club secretary-manager Dick Shirt has had another life: one as a highly successful sports player and coach that spanned three decades.

Mr Shirt played baseball. Seriously. He excelled at the game.

So much so that at the 2009 Baseball Australia Diamond awards he was named as a pitcher in the 75th Claxton Shield Diamond All Star Team – the national selection of all-time greats.

The Diamond All-Star Team selection took place at an Australian Baseball Federation (ABF) black-tie dinner in Melbourne earlier this year, and followed states-based All-Star team selections.

“I saw guys I have not seen in 20 years. It was great,” Mr Shirt said of the function in the Victorian capital.

“I still can't believe I was selected. At the end of the day I feel extremely honoured.

“The calibre of players (selected for the team) was amazing. Graeme Lloyd pitched for the New York Yankees in the World Series. I was in pretty elite company.”

Mr Shirt said that when he told his mentor, Kingsley Wellington, named manager of the All-Stars team, how astonished he was, Mr Wellington's response was, “You might not be the number one, but you are in the top eight”.

As a youngster Dick Shirt played rugby league, but after missing out on a spot in Sydney's Renown team, a mate talked him into playing a game of baseball.

“I turned up and they gave me the ball,” Mr Shirt said.

“I couldn't believe it – no one hit the ball and I thought, ‘I like this’.”

After that first taste of the game, Dick Shirt was hooked and never looked back.

During his baseball career, the left handed pitcher represented New South Wales and South Australia, which, he says, was the home of the sport in Australia.

In 1967, Mr Shirt was selected to join Florida's Tampa Major League Baseball team for spring training.

He was in the USA for a year, and it was an experience he would never forget.

“It was such a huge jump because we were so far behind their skill level,” he said. “It was a real cultural shock, and we had to play 144 games in a season, compared to 20 here.

“The physical level of it was so much more. Because of the training I had in America I had the skills and fitness to travel and pitch in a large number of games.”

Back in Australia in 1971, Mr Shirt joined the Auburn Baseball Club, where he coached and played.

He retired from the field in 1978, but continued to coach until 1983. “After 30 years I figured I’d done my job,” he said.

“When I was coaching in Auburn we had two players get contracts in America.

“That to me was an excellent achievement, kids making the professional league in America.”

Dick Shirt says there were many highlights in his baseball-playing years, but one game stands out.

“It was one of the many grand finals at Auburn. It was the ninth innings and it was 8-8.

“There was a mishap in the field and we ended up being down 12-8.

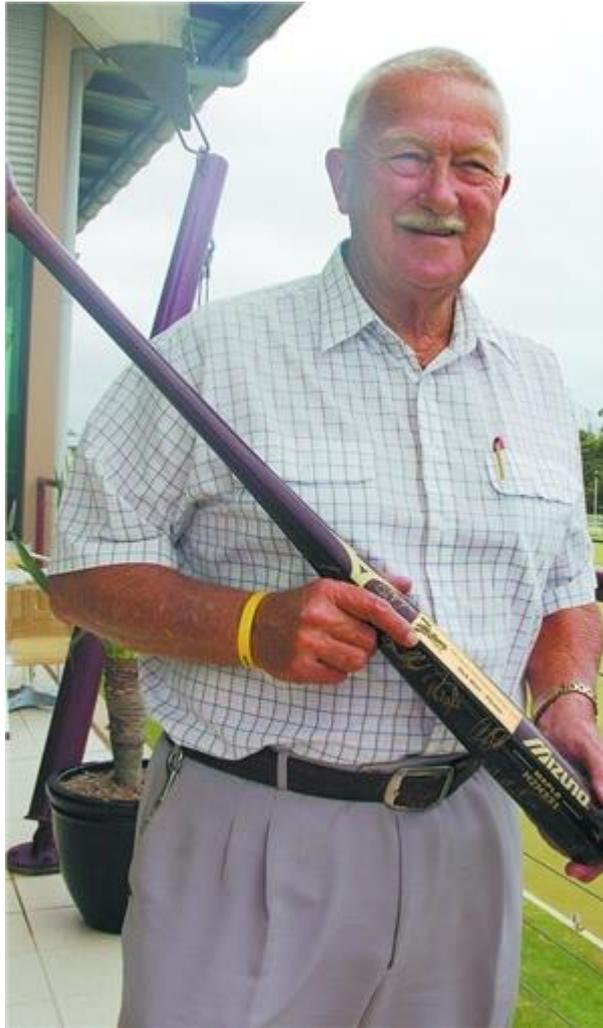
“From there we had two outs and the next five batters, including myself all hit doubles to win by one run.

“It was one of the most memorable moments.”

Over the years, several of Dick Shirt’s former baseball buddies have settled in South West Rocks, including good mate Scott Franklin, Les Roberts, Gary Heggie and Paul Russell.

These days, however, instead of hitting the diamond, they prefer the bowling greens.

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Dick Shirt holds the baseball bat presented to him after selection as an all-time great of the sport in Australia.



Dick Shirt (extreme left, back row) with the other members of the 75th Claxton Shield Diamond All Star Team: David Nilsson; Kevin Greatrex; David Mundy; Larry Home; Dave Roberts; Jack Rowley; Lionel Harris; Geoff Martin; Tony Adamson; Andrew Scott; Grahame Cassell; Charlie Puckett; Ron Sharpe; Adrian Meagher; Ray Michell; Neil Page; Phil Dale; Graeme Lloyd; Shayne Bennett; & Kingsley Wellington