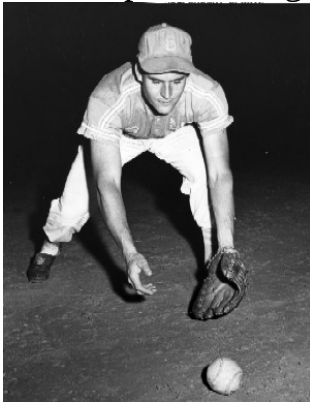


Nick Hopkins, Long Beach, CA



Nick Hopkins signed with the Boston Red Sox organization and played professional baseball for five years after graduating from Wilson High School. Nick combined softball and baseball for six years playing with the Long Beach Rockets. He played for one year with the Long Beach Fire Fighters in the Western Softball Congress before joining the Nitehawks in 1959 where he played shortstop for 18 years (1959 – 1977). He was named to the Western Softball Congress All-Star team 15 times and was a member of six International Softball Congress World Tournament winners. He was named to the ISC All World Team in 1966 and in 1969 and was named WSC MVP in 1966, 1968 and 1974 and was inducted into the ISC Hall of Fame in 1992. Often accused of playing a shallow left field, Hopkins had arguably the best range of any shortstop to ever play the game. He once handled 125 chances without making an error.

Nick Hopkins was one of the finest-fielding shortstops in pro softball history, and the Wilson product and one-time Boston Red Sox prospect played 19 seasons for the Long Beach Nitehawks and was inducted into the Century Club Hall of Fame, joining two other Nitehawk legends, team founder Joe Rodgers and former player, manager and owner Red Meairs.

Amid all of Long Beach's rich baseball history, the Nitehawks also earned a lofty spot on the Century Club's 50 Greatest Sports Moments List that was compiled in honor of the club's 50th anniversary.

"Back in the '50s and '60s, people really liked coming out to watch the Nitehawks," Hopkins, 68, said from his home. "We'd draw a couple of thousand people for our big games and our holiday tournaments. We'd play the Lakewood Jets and there would be people lined up along the tennis court fences.

"Then we'd go to the world championships, usually in the Midwest, and draw crowds of 6,000 or more. Back then you could get three cans of beer for a buck, too. It was a pretty good deal."

Back then, Hopkins estimates there were at least 350 city league men's teams playing in Long Beach, and there were a dozen pro teams in Southern California playing high-end softball in search of a Western Softball Congress title and a trip to the world championships, which ranged from 16-to 48-team double elimination tournaments.

Four of those World Championships were held in Long Beach (1958-60 and 1976) and sponsored in part by the Century Club. The original ISC Hall of Fame opened here in 1972, and has since moved. It was only proper considering the Nitehawks' hold on the sport.

The team won the 1953 world title, six in a row from 1955 to 1960, and then in 1968, 1971 and 1975. They finished second six times and in the top four five other seasons. They missed the world tournament just once between 1951 and 1977.

Forty different Nitehawks earned all-American or all-world status for their play in the world championships, and 12 players from the core 1950s teams are in the Hall of Fame (see list). Six former Nitehawks LeRoy Zimmerman, Stan White, Larry Silvas, Cleo Goyette, Clint Herron and Lucky Humiston, plus manager Rodgers were chosen to the ISC all-time team two years ago.

Hopkins was all-world in 1966 and 1969 and inducted into the hall in 1992. As a kid, he recalls getting caught sneaking into a game at Joe Rodgers Field, by Rodgers himself, and thinking he'd never be allowed back. Instead, Rodgers invited him to stick around. "I remember thinking 'does anyone ever hit the ball in this game?'"

"What I learned was that this was a pitcher's game, low-scoring. If you had good pitching and caught the ball in the field, you could win."

Hopkins never forgot those games. After starring in baseball at Wilson, he signed with the Red Sox and played in their system from 1955 to 1958, getting as far up their chain as Memphis.

"I got married young and had a son, and was probably a little too young when I signed," he said. "There was a lot of travel and I was getting homesick. The Giants offered me a second chance to play closer to home, but by then I had a good job (route salesman for a bakery). I'm not sorry I did that."

He was playing ball, after all. Like a lot of the Nitehawks, he played for the Long Beach Rockets Sunday semipro baseball team as well as fast-pitch. He was playing ball four or five nights a week, often year-round.

"We had great teams," he said. "Third-baseman Clint Herron played until he was 50. Stan White was a great catcher who threw so hard to second that the ball would still be rising when it got there. The same guys stayed together for a long time and we got better each year.

"Joe and Red always had good pitchers. If you could pitch and catch the ball, you could scrape a run in here and there and win. When I joined the Nitehawks, I wasn't much of a hitter, but I was pretty good in the field, and when Jimmie Jones (another Nitehawks Hall of Famer) retired, I got the job."

Nick's son played for the Nitehawks in the '80s, but the drift of the sport was pretty obvious then. Modest city stipends dried up, as did attendance, the number of teams and ability to find quality players.

Meairs, a Wilson baseball and basketball player who was on LBCC's 1942 state title basketball team, was a postal employee in real life who went into hock every year the last decade or so to keep the team afloat.

The one-time Dodgers minor leaguer considered shutting down the team in 1986, then finally pulled the plug in 1988, after the Nitehawks' last trip to the world championships.

“I’ve been to the Century Club’s banquet a lot, and always felt it was great that athletes in our city were always honored,” Hopkins said of his induction. “I’m a Long Beach boy, and it’s a great honor for me and to all those guys who played for the Nitehawks.”