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Beloved softball, Rockford Park District leader dies !

By Emily Tropp
RRSTAR.COM

Posted Aug 06, 2008 @ 03:46 PM

Last update Aug 06, 2008 @ 06:49 PM



RRSTAR.COM FILE PHOTO | EDDY MONTVILLE
Bob Papich watches a recreational game June 3, 1999, in Rockford. Papich died Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2008.

Everyone knew immediately whether a player was safe or out when Bob Papich was an umpire. He made his calls with certainty, and he made them loud enough for everyone in the park to hear. "His raspy voice rung them up," said Ken-Rock Community Center director and friend John Guth. Nobody argued with Papich. His experience on the softball field made him untouchable. His kindness and selflessness off the field made him unforgettable.

Papich, better known as "Pappy" to the local sports scene, died Tuesday morning. His youngest son, Derek Papich, said he died of natural causes at his home.

Papich, 66, was working softball games as recently as two weeks ago when he starting feeling ill. "It was so unexpected," said Illinois USSSA Director Brenda Paulson.

"I can't imagine softball in this community without Bob Papich. I think everyone felt close to him. He was just that kind of guy."

Papich was the first manager of Sportscore and held the position from 1983 until his retirement in 1999. He was a USSSA director for 25 years and was elected into the Illinois USSSA Hall of Fame in 2002 for meritorious service with fast- and slow-pitch softball at all levels.

"When you talk about softball in Rockford, Bob Papich's name is there," Paulson said. "I don't remember a time, be it fast-pitch or slow-pitch, that he wasn't there. He had such a love for sports.

"He was a good director and good promoter getting Sportscore started, but I think his passion was for umping. It's always been about the kids. The man lived at Sportscore, and he always had a smile on his face."

Papich was respected and loved in more than just the softball community. As an employee for the Rockford Park District for 38 years, he had a love for all local recreational sports.

"I think it's pretty obvious that this is not just a great loss for my family, but also for Rockford," Derek Papich said. "Anybody who knew my father, knew he loved Rockford.

"We gave up a lot of time with my father so the community could have him, and he definitely gave a lot of himself to Rockford and to the people in the community. Even when he 'retired,' he continued to ump softball because that was his true passion and his true love."

A 1959 East graduate who played soccer and tennis at Northern Illinois University, Bob Papich began working with the Park District in 1961.



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He started on a seasonal basis, working Tall Pines Camp on the south side of Atwood Park. In the following years, he directed several Park District camps while teaching fifth grade and eighth-grade history and science at St. Edwards School.

He joined the Park District's full-time staff in 1969 and served as recreation supervisor until 1981, putting him in charge of all the camping and environmental programs, Aldeen Nature Trail, the Saturday Morning Rec Centers, the Atwood Building and the Friday Night Rec Programs. From 1981 until Sportscore's opening, he served as the supervisor of environmental education.

Papich once said one of his most memorable contributions came during the 1977-78 school year when the Rockford School District decided it would not continue to fund the outdoor-education program.

Papich put together the proposal for the Park District to take over and operate the program. Aside from his Park District duties and serving as a USSSA director, Papich served as the national president of Sportscomplex Operators and Developers Association, known as SODA, and was involved in several other softball organizations.

"We're deeply saddened by the loss," said Tim Dimke, executive director of the Rockford Park District. "He was always a little rough on the outside, but really a teddy bear on the inside. He might come across a little rough, but the next thing you know he's giving you everything he had to make you happy.

"He'll also be known around the country as a father to not only sports complexes, but also tournaments."

Along with Chuck Lockinger, who died in 2006, and Paul Martin, Papich founded Rockford Metropolitan Sports, which is responsible for the numerous national softball tournaments now held in Rockford every year.

"He gave a lot to this community in more ways than one," said Guth, who was also Papich's next-door neighbor for three years. "He was a very kid-driven person."

When Papich retired from the Park District in 1999, he told the Register Star he wanted to spend more time with his family. He leaves behind three sons, four daughters and seven grandchildren.

"I don't see myself as Mr. Recreation," Papich said in the interview. "I think I've just been around longer than some of the others, and I've had my fingers stuck in more pies. Whether it be soccer or tennis or softball or whatever. I've been blessed that I've been able to be involved in so many things.

"I don't think I'll ever get away from it. I'll still be doing something. It's been fun. It's been a heck of a lot of work, but it's been fun. I loved every minute of it."

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