



Reflections of a River Rat:

Happy 100th birthday Coach Holleran

By Jim Holleran

Imagine players soft tossing during warmups at the Morristown Central School baseball diamond when a Green Rockets player spies the sign in the left-field corner – Holleran Field. He wonders aloud to his throwing partner, “Who was Holleran?”

If the players are 16, perhaps their parents have reached their mid-40s, still too young to know Francis John Holleran, who would have turned 100 on March 31. This one is for the grandparents – the era of Chapman and LaVarnway in Hammond, Tehonica and Gutterson in Heuvelton, Backuses and Moores in Lisbon. Morristown was flush with brothers – Otts, Perrettas, Colburns and Spilmans. This one is from an era when Tom Chapman and Fran Holleran could coach against each other on a Friday night, then ride together to Canton on Saturday morning to work on their Master’s degrees at St. Lawrence. The people of Morristown knew Fran Holleran well enough to dedicate the field to him while he was still alive. He won his last Class D sectional title on a Thursday and died four days later, June 7, 1982, from a heart attack.

The old-timers knew him as the newlywed Army Air Corps veteran who arrived from Ithaca College in the summer of 1950 with his bride nurse, Eileen. He was lucky enough to inherit a budding legend – a physically mature, 6-foot-3, 180-pound pitcher, basketball center and football player, a Chip Hilton named Lyle Woodcock. That meant instant success in the defunct Valley League.

Fran Holleran raised 6 children, herded them each Sunday to St. John the Evangelist, could carry a tune with his Irish tenor, started summer baseball and swimming programs, loved to relax on rainy days with a stack of LPs from John Gary, Frank Sinatra, Robert Goulet, Camelot, My Fair Lady and any Firestone or Goodyear Christmas album, and in the same breath swore at a Fran Tarkenton interception while spinning around to say, “Oh, excuse me ... good afternoon Sr. Joanne.”

It’s a fine line between bragging and recalling his memory. Undoubtedly, he had his share of faults. I restrict my keyboard to this brief passage and yield to his contemporaries:

Larry Casey, retired guidance director at Morristown and Canton schools

Eight-man football -- Coaching football in Morristown in the old Valley League was tough. The parents and the fans stood right on the sidelines. They were all former NFL All Stars or so they thought. They all had advice about the play to call, the defense to run, who should get playing time etc. It was absolutely remarkable. Coach kept his cool, endlessly with the peanut gallery. Oh, after the game, at his kitchen table, he would “go off” on various and sundry personalities but never, I mean never, did he turn to an unruly fan and say what he felt. On one particular day, Louie White could tell you who the opponent was, I believe either Augustinian Academy, Carthage or Belleville Academy, Coach turned to Louie, a good-sized boy, U.S. Air Force veteran, grabbed him by the shoulder, his assistant coach, and sent him into the game.

Youth baseball -- Little League baseball in Morristown was Fran’s baby. We wouldn’t start playing until all of the Canton and Ogdensburg boys arrived. They all thought they were better than the Morristown boys. One team garnered a lot of trophies, Morristown Fuel and Supply/Expos. It seemed, maybe it was true, that team was in the championship game every year. We always had two umpires for that game. One was always a good, honest, reputable man who would call balls and strikes. The other umpire always called the bases. Roger Bouchard behind the plate, Coach Holleran on the bases. In this particular championship game, Jimmy Spilman

spoke to the head coach of Morristown Fuel and Supply (me) and said discreetly: "Fran is telling the guys on the other team where to play on defense."

"What? He is the umpire! He can't do that!"

It was true. The head coach went to Fran to ask about it and to say, "This has to stop!"

Now, there was no little league without Coach. There was no baseball program without Coach. There is a reason that the baseball field is called Fran Holleran Field. He "took it on the chin" and the movement of defenders ended.

His John McCormick moment -- The first year of the "New OFA Gym" we decided to hold our Valley League playoffs at OFA. Morristown, Heuvelton, St. Regis Falls and somebody else. Coach had an elegant voice for singing. Actually, he never needed a microphone or megaphone at any event. He sang the national anthem at a full house, packed gym and it was beautiful! It was unique too. He left out a complete line or two. No one let on. Actually, everyone thought, I believe, "That was a different version, but I don't know what was different about it."

Oh, there is so much more. Honestly, every single story reflects well on Coach. Like all who knew him, I loved the man. His wife. His children. Your pal, Larry Casey.

Lois Langtry, Morristown graduate and retired OFA English teacher

Senior year, 1954-55 -- Fran was our gym teacher and we were all in the gym in those horrible short dresses with bloomers that constituted proper gym suits. When he blew the whistle to get our attention, we were shooting baskets, preparing for a class in basketball. He barked out the order, "All you girls with balls go to the far end of the gym." Can you imagine what our teenage minds in a female only gym class did with that order? A short burst of hysterical laughter didn't phase him one bit. He was a very naive person!

The Great Communicator -- The school secretary was Winnie White, who used to type up all the letters sent to district residents. One letter from Fran came across her desk. Before she typed it, she went to the PE Office and told Fran he could not send out his letter about the athletic banquet. He couldn't understand what she was talking about as he re-read it carefully. He asked her what was wrong and she said it was his salutation. The letter began -- "Dear Athletic Supporter." Winnie explained that he would have to modify that as they would resent being called jock straps!

A mature appreciation -- When I came back to MCS after college, I also took on the job of cheerleading coach. Fran and I set up an athletic assembly, and we had Jim Seymour from OFA as a guest speaker. MCS by this time had added its first female PE teacher, Mrs. Betty Emrich. Fran was emceeding the Assembly and started his introduction of Betty by saying, "And now we will hear from Mrs. Emrich. This is the first time I have seen her with clothes on." There was laughter all through the gym. He tried to cover it up by saying, "What I mean is she never wears a dress when I see her." More laughter. Jim Seymour was sitting beside me and he vainly tried not to guffaw, but he turned to me and said, "He'd be a great comedian!"

That should be enough to show you the lighter side of a wonderful man who meant the world to the students at Morristown, the village of Morristown, all the residents of the school district, the athletes not only in Morristown but throughout the North Country. Long live his memory!

Dave Shea, sports editor of the *Journal-Advance News* and editor of the *Old School Sports Journal*

On my first day of work as the sportswriter for *The Journal-Advance News* in January 1973, the late, great editor-publisher Chuck Kelly gave me a crash course in covering Ogdensburg Free Academy and Madrid-Waddington sports teams in the Northern League, and neighboring small schools Morristown, Heuvelton, Lisbon, Hammond and Hermon-DeKalb in the Valley League.

He told me to contact Bill Powers at OFA for the rundown on the Northern League and Fran Holleran in Morristown for the Valley League. Chuck was good friends with both, and I am sure they are enjoying each other's company as they experience their eternal rewards.

Fran helped me immensely to get started and, 48 years later, I am still using his advice for covering Section 10 teams. Like his son, Jim Holleran, he had a great love for local newspapers.

Fran Holleran was one of many young veterans of World War II who came home and helped make the Greatest Generation. They attended college on the GI Bill and then settled into teaching-coaching-athletic direction-summer recreation positions as schools centralized to prepare for the postwar Baby Boom.

Like some the contributors to this wonderful column, one of my warmest memories of Fran was his heartwarming rendition of The Star Spangled Banner, him cruising down Main Street on his moped heading up to the school baseball diamond for summer baseball, and his directing student volunteers from study hall to the baseball diamond on rainy days to work on the field to prevent a rainout. I also remember him standing in the door of gym, beaming as he watched the daily dodgeball gym class. "People always ask me why we play dodgeball so much and I say so I can pick out my pitchers when they are in third grade. And the kids love it."

I also remember Fran calling me to come up to school one day and take a photo of his team, which won the small-schools division of the one-day Section 10 Boys Volleyball Tournament. I don't believe Morristown ever lost a match, ever.

I got there early and the team was waiting. The team looked like the linemen of a motorcycle gang football team. Big, strong, bearded, chewing tobacco bulging in the pockets of their jackets. Downright intimidating.

Fran arrives and says, "Lets go guys. Mr. Shea hasn't got all day and you guys have a bus to catch."

The group "yes Coach" follows, they assemble obediently like kindergarten students on their first day of school, and then thank me for coming and putting them in the paper.

Fran looks at me and says: "A little rough around the edges, but a really good group. I love these guys."

And they loved him.

Onto the story of the "Hidden Ball Trick," which is a glimpse back in time to an age when youth baseball was part of the fabric of the North Country. Fran ran Morristown's summer baseball program from T-Ball to Junior League for junior high school and high school age players.

Morristown's Junior League was run later in the summer and featured talent from several communities which spent their summers on camps along the St. Lawrence River. Some Ogdensburg youngsters with a great love for the game also participated.

Fran welcomed them all and on each game night they travelled down Route 37 to road for a group of camps owned by the Barr families. Get to that road and Coach Holleran got you to the field.

Many of those players would later play for OFA and each year Fran's Morristown Central Green Rockets teams would play the Blue Devils in a nonleague game. OFA was coached by a young Jim Pinkerton, who like Coach Holleran died way too soon. OFA's Athletic Fields were dedicated in his honor shortly after his untimely death from cancer.

Fran and Jim were brilliant coaches from different generations, and they played this game for keeps.

Memories of the "Hidden Ball Trick" have been clouded by time and maybe even merged. It may have happened more than once and at more than one base.

But my memory is extremely vivid and it took place on a perfect Saturday afternoon for baseball -- 75 degrees, not a cloud in the sky on the OFA diamond adjacent to Route 37.

The umpire was Guy Rocca, who spent his summers at a camp on Black Lake.

With two outs and a man on first late in the game, Fran went to the mound for a conference with pitcher Dan Spilman and his infield. On his way to the bench, he notified the umpire that the Rockets were pulling the hidden ball trick. The ball was in the glove of the first baseman and the runner stepped off the base and was tagged out. Well, sort of.

The Rockets ran off the field and Fran greeted them with hugs and handshakes. The only missing was the call "yer out". The umpire, Guy Rocca, stood stoically in the middle of the diamond and motioned everyone back.

No call.

Fran reacted with the same verbal barrage directed at the TV after a Fran Tarkenton interception.

Still no call.

Fran raced out to the field for a classic Norman Rockwell coach-umpire confrontation painting.

Still no call.

Fran called his players back on the field and headed toward the bench. But he made a quick about face and went back to Rocca.

"I'm sorry Guy, but you are banned from Morristown. Your money's no good there anymore."

In the bleachers one of the fans asked another. "Can he do that?"

Another fan assured, "He sure can. Coach Holleran is Morristown."

The story ends with Dan Spillman getting out of the inning and I think Morristown won the game, 1-0.

After the game Coach Holleran was still shaking his head and mumbling when he approached his antagonist ump and said, "Guy, you can come into Morristown, but man you really missed that call (or no call). I told you it was coming."

Happy Birthday Coach. Until we meet again I can still feel your presence on the sidelines when I cover a baseball game in Morristown and I still feel Jim Pinkerton's presence at OFA.

P.S. -- Louie White once told me that he made one a heck of a block when Fran sent his assistant coach into that football game so many years ago in khakis and sneakers after a star lineman got hurt.

Billy Hockey, three-sport athlete from the Class of '70

My first break – In my sophomore year, April 1968, 30 guys came out for baseball. I was supposed to play JVs. I went down to the locker room one day to get ready for practice and another player was smoking behind the lockers. Coach Holleran walked in and saw me, saw the smoke, then saw the other guy. He walked behind the lockers and said, "You're done. You'll never play for me."

The kid was apologizing profusely, but Coach told him not to bother going to practice. Then he turned to me and said, "Mr. Hockey, come to varsity practice." Later that year, I got to start at shortstop.

I remember one game we played at St. Regis Falls. They had a good hitter named Larry Danforth. He hit an easy double-play grounder to me and I muffed the throw to second. We were ahead 4-3 and I thought I was going to lose the game for us. The next batter came up and hit a smash up the middle, to my left. I gloved it, flipped to second, and we got the double play. On the way home, Coach said to me, and I'll never forget it, "Billy, you make the easy plays look hard and the hard plays look easy."

Generosity – By the time I was a senior, all the other seniors were working. I was the only senior on the baseball team, and we had 13 players. We played at Brushton-Moira and after the game Coach stopped the bus so we could go to a small market and get something to eat for the ride home. All the guys piled into the store, but one guy (name withheld) didn't have any money. He just milled around the store while the other guys loaded up on chips and soda and cupcakes. Coach was watching him and asked him if he was going to get something, and he said I have no money. So Coach reached into his wallet and took out \$5 and gave it to him. When the guy tried to return the change, Coach knew his situation, and told him to keep it. That \$5 might as well have been \$5,000. That was big. I learned from that.

Toughest days of my life -- This was in 1981. My father committed suicide when he jumped into the St. Lawrence River. I was living in Black River and I drove home. We had the calling hours somewhere in Ogdensburg. All my family was there and it was a very difficult time. Coach walked into the funeral home, all dressed up, with two other teachers, and he was up near the casket. I just walked out. I couldn't stay in there.

I was sitting by myself outside on the front porch and he came out and sat beside me. I looked at his eyes and he looked at mine. Nothing was said. He put his arm around my shoulder, but nothing was said. I knew he cared about me. I just cried. I didn't have any words to tell him. There weren't any words in the English language at that time. He was just there. But from then on, I knew I was going to get through the death of my dad.

Debby Andrews Perretta, retired elementary school teacher

As I sit here this St. Patrick's Day evening, a smile comes across my face. I am sure Coach Fran did a bit of singing in heaven today. I remember the times he would sing over the intercom to celebrate this day. Oh the good old days!

I arrived in Morristown from Rochester in September 1970 to begin my teaching career. At the time, it was difficult to find a job as everyone wanted to teach at that time. My cultural adjustment to the North Country took several years. Fortunately, I met many nice people at MCS and made fond memories.

I must share the one about Coach. He would always greet fellow teachers in the morning as he made his way to the gym. After about a week of him wishing me a good morning, he finally said to John Lynch, "I speak to her every day and she just smiles."

John replied: "Well Fran, if perhaps you called her Debby and not Beverly she might answer you!"

There are still a few people that often call me Beverly and we laugh. Oh, the good old days!

Happy Birthday Coach. You are a legend.

Mary Catherine Spilman, French teacher at MCS and mother of Michael, Paul and Dan Spilman

It doesn't seem possible that Fran Holleran has been gone from us for almost 39 years. He and his wife, Eileen, arrived in Morristown in 1950, and he was a larger-than-life presence in our school and community for 32 years. When I think of his birthday on March 31, I remember that he always would say that he was born one day short of being an April Fool.

He had many gifts, not least of which was his sense of humor. He was also gifted with a beautiful Irish tenor voice, and with St. Patrick's Day this week comes the memory of his singing of "Danny Boy" at countless events and gatherings by request of those in attendance. If I close my eyes, I can still hear his voice. He was also known for performing our national anthem at many events through the years.

Fran's untimely death in 1982 was a shock to the entire community and surrounding area. Everyone knew him, as he had taught and coached two generations of students at Morristown Central. He also ran a summer program of baseball and swimming in which many of the area young people and summer residents participated. His funeral Mass was held outside the old St. John's Church in order to accommodate all those who wished to attend.

Fran Holleran was deeply dedicated to his family, his students, his church, and his community, and those whose lives he touched were truly blessed to have known him.

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