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October 17, 2011

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The Invisible Fastball

SIX DECADES AGO A MINOR LEAGUE PITCHER ACCOMPLISHED SOMETHING WE'LL NEVER SEE AGAIN

CHRIS BALLARD, OWEN GOOD

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After going 11--8 with a 3.73 ERA at Memphis, he pitched for Houston and Oklahoma City, both in Double A, before finishing his career back in his home state with Winston-Salem and, at 38, High-Point Thomasville. There were memorable achievements: 16 wins for Winston-Salem, a near no-hitter in Memphis, seeing an up-and-coming musician named Elvis Presley while pitching for the Chicks.

But 1953 endures most. As minor league teams became baseball's finishing school rather than destinations, and pitchers became ever more fragile and coddled, Swift's feat grew in stature until today it stands as unassailable. Consider: Since 1965 no minor league pitcher has won 23 games in a season or come close to matching the 321 K's Swift rang up in 1953; it's been nearly 30 years since anyone reached even 300 in a season. The kid who did it played for Lynchburg in the Carolina League. His name was Dwight Gooden.

But it is that one number that stands out: Nearly 60 years since he took the mound against Hickory on a warm North Carolina evening, Kelly Jack Swift remains, now and likely forever, the last minor league pitcher to win 30 games.

How do you measure a legacy? It is a cool afternoon in February 2011, and five of Swift's six children have gathered at the three-story suburban home of Randy, the second youngest, in High Point, N.C. Randy is the one who most resembles Jack, with the same nose and eyes and the same hair, parted and falling forward, fine and now starting to gray. Next to him is Aaron, tall and powerful and red-headed, born too late to know his father. Over at the coffee table, tall and elegant, is Becky Luffman, who lives on a sprawling property with a book-filled study that looks out on acres of tobacco and corn fields. And beside her, spunky, auburn-haired and telling stories, is Linda Steelman, a retired English and French teacher who picked up Jack's love of sports after all those years at her dad's games. She coached high school basketball and volleyball, once winning a state title.

There's one more Swift here as well, wearing a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. He is a short, quiet man with a graying mustache and Jack's long nose. He doesn't speak much, but he smiles often. The boy who wasn't supposed to live to be a teenager is now 59 years old. He remains his father's biggest fan.

The family has gathered to rediscover Jack's life. Betty passed away in 2003, taking with her much of the oral history. So now her children sift through old photos and mementos. Here is the game ball from his 30th win, browned with age. And here is his birth certificate, showing that he was born not in 1922, as is still recorded on websites and as Swift told managers and owners all those years, but in 1920. And there on Randy's finger, where it has been for the last 35 years, is the championship ring Jack won in 1956 in Houston.

As for the other ring, the one forgotten until that man from California called, the family hasn't decided who will wear it, for it has special resonance. Though it is not from that magical season in Marion—they give no rings for winning 30, after all—it is a direct result of it, a Double A championship ring from two seasons later, when Swift helped the Memphis Chicks win a pennant. It is a small, tarnished symbol of what those 30 wins meant: a chance to keep playing baseball, to move back up the minor league ladder, to continue chasing his dream. For now Becky keeps it in a safe place. To her it is a reminder that some things lost can be found again.

Sitting at lunch, the Swifts take turns telling stories. About Jack playing against Stan Musial, whom he called "the greatest guy I ever met in baseball." About Jack taking his kids to pick blackberries, painting their wrists with turpentine to keep away the chiggers, then reveling in the blackberry sonker pies his mother would make. Randy talks about the time, when he was five, that he sneaked up on his father while he napped shirtless on the couch, then poured a glass of water into that depression in his chest. And Linda tells how after her dad stopped playing ball, he helped with a program for kids like Jack Jr. at his high school.



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Linda also talks about how quickly it happened, how one day when Betty was pregnant, Jack complained of a bad headache. How his blood pressure shot up and within a week he was in the hospital. How the doctors tried dialysis, but both of Jack's kidneys were failing. How in February, Betty had given birth to the twins, Aaron and Abbie. And how, less than two months later, at 8:25 p.m. on April 5, 1965, Jack passed away at age 44. The cause of death was listed as "uremia due to malignant hypertension." After all those years of surviving and enduring, Jack just slipped away.

His body is buried on a bluff, near the entrance to a small oval cemetery in Mountain Park. The headstone on his grave is small, flat and reddish-brown. It lists his military service and little else. A church rises across the street, and some old tractors are parked down the road outside a red-topped barn, just up from a sign advertising a catfish pond. From the cemetery you can see the farm where Jack grew up, tilling the rolling lines of tobacco. You can see the old farmhouse where he and Betty raised their children. And there, in the distance, you can just make out the barn where, each spring, Jack returned to throw a baseball, hoping a time might come when someone remembered his name.

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