

Death of Norcatur native big loss for sports world

Eldon Auker excelled in many venues

By STEVE HAYNES

Norcatur's Eldon Auker was remembered as much for being the last man alive to have struck out the legendary Babe Ruth, but he was far more.

Mr. Auker, who died last Friday at age 95, won a remarkable nine varsity letters in three sports at Kansas State College. He may have been simply the best all-around athlete ever to come out of Kansas.

He was All Big 6 in all three sports — baseball, football and basketball — and chosen as a second-team All American at quarterback by the legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice.

An injury in college forced him to develop a unique underarm style of pitching that served him well over 10 seasons. Mr. Auker compiled a 130-101 record with the Detroit Tigers, Boston Red Sox and the old St. Louis Browns, all in the American League.

He last visited his native Norcatur in May 2000, when he spoke at the dedication of a new downtown park named in his honor. As he often did, he told the story of his first day in the big leagues.

At age 22, he'd been called up by the Tigers and joined the team in New York. In the third inning, the starter faltered. The call went to the rookie pitcher in the Yankee Stadium bullpen.

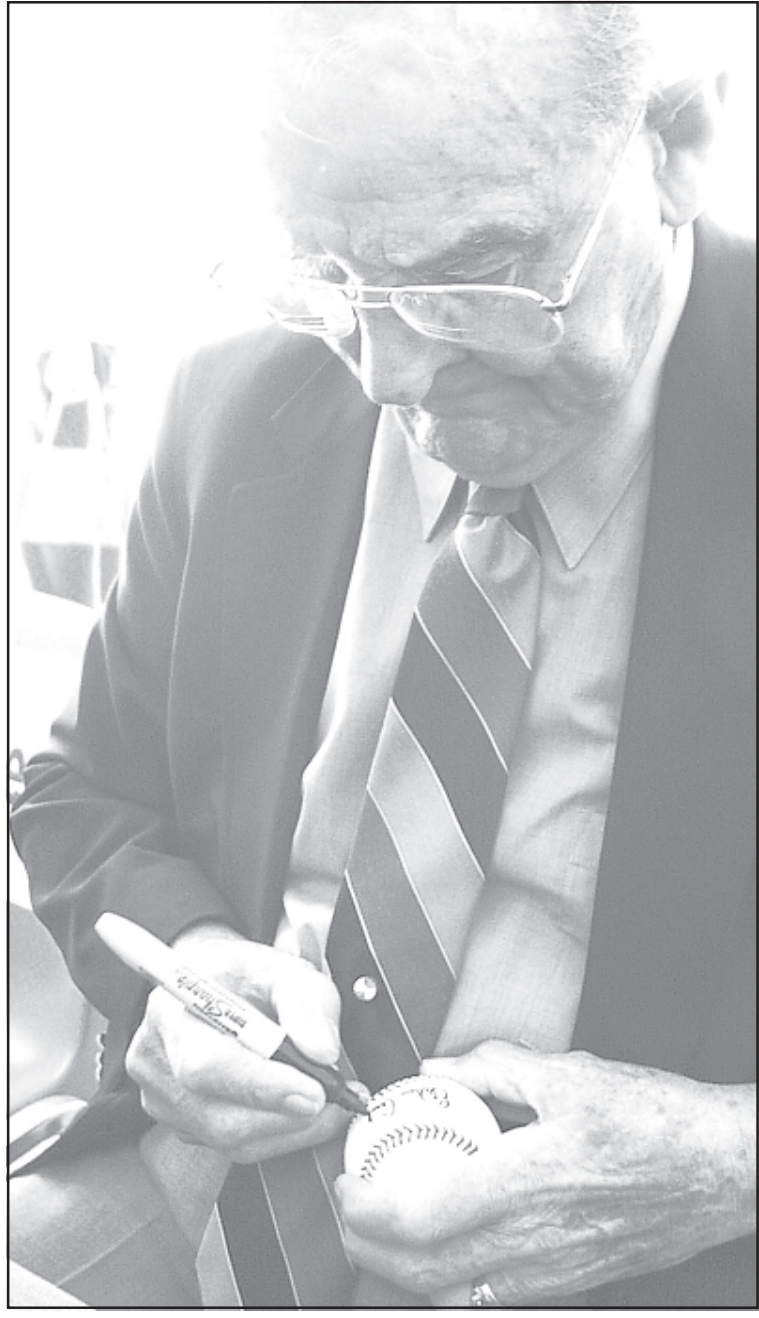
The first man he faced: Babe Ruth. He struck him out on four pitches, but Auker said, he didn't have time to celebrate. On deck stood Lou Gehrig. They didn't call the Yankees' lineup Murders Row for nothing, but he got them out, and recalled getting to relax a little in the next inning.

As much as anything that day, he added, he remembered being crazed by the Yankees' third-base coach, Art Fletcher, who likened his underhand style to girls' softball: "Hey, Bush, you've got the Bam all up set. He said he'd been struck out a lot of times, but that's the first time a damn woman ever struck him out."

Auker later became friends with Ruth, who retired just a couple of years later, and then played golf in Florida. He said he told the Babe about the razzing, and he denied ever saying that. "That's Fletcher," Ruth said. Mr. Auker said the coach was known as a "jockey" because he rode the opposition players so hard.

After leaving K-State, Mr. Auker had to choose among his favorite sports. There wasn't much future in basketball in those days, but he had an offer to play pro football with the Chicago Bears.

He chose baseball, and his rise



A baseball in his hand, Eldon Auker signed autographs in Norcatur six years ago. He will be remembered by many as the last man living who struck out Babe Ruth.

— Oberlin Herald file photo

to the majors was swift. He was at his best in 1934 and 1935, when the Tigers won the American League pennant and their first World Series (in '35). He led the league in winning percentage in 1935, his best year at 18-7.

In 1939, Mr. Auker was traded to Boston, where he played for a year under player-manager Joe Cronin, later president of the American League. He went to St. Louis the next year, finishing out his career with 16, 14 and 14 wins.

In retirement, he moved to Florida and went into the abrasives business. He prospered in business as he had on the field. When he was vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers and Ronald Reagan was governor of California, the governor recognized the former pitcher in the audience.

They talked later, and the soon-to-be president told him, "I'll never forget you in the 1935 World Series." He said Reagan wanted to know if he remembered the young sportscaster who had interviewed him that year.

"The young announcer did such a good job," Mr. Auker recalled in Norcatur, "that they made him the official announcer for the World Series. It was his first break in the entertainment world."

Mr. Auker's memoir, "Sleepers Cars and Flannel Uniforms," was published in 2001. He is a member of the K-State Sports Hall of Fame and the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame.

His visit to Norcatur six years ago apparently was his last. He had not been home since his mother died in 1983, he told the crowd that day.

"I have had several honors," he said, tears welling up in his eyes, "but this is one of the best."

He hung around the unfinished park that day, signing baseball cards, baseballs, programs, anything a fan put before him. And telling baseball stories.

He remembered seeing Gehrig in 1939, shortly before he died of the disease which now bears his name. Gehrig winced when he grabbed him, he said.

"Lou was the kind of guy that could lift you off the ground," he said, "but he was so weak."

He said it was hard to see his buddies grow old.

"So many have died," he said, "or have something wrong with them."

Now, Eldon Auker has joined them, and there's no one standing who can say he struck out Babe Ruth on four pitches.

Norton golfers 3rd at Goodland

By DICK BOYD

A team from the Norton Country Club placed third in the 17th annual KLOE-KKCI-KWGB Classic Golf Tournament held Sunday, July 30 at the Sugar Hills Golf Club in Goodland.

Atwood won the team championship with a 765, followed by Goodland, 781; Norton, 785; Burlington, 791; St. Francis, 844; Oakley, 847; Sharon Springs, 881; Tribune, 893; Oberlin, 895.

Norton placed second last year after winning the championship three straight years.

Each of the nine teams competed with their 11 best available golfers and all teams played "scratch" golf with no handicaps. The top 10 scores were used to determine the winners.

Norton's low scorers were Joe Herman, Mark Klein and Brad Leiker, who shot 76s. Clayton Cox and Tyler Rutherford both carded 77s. Joel Duscher shot a 78. Rich Wahlmeier and Rick Green each recorded 80s. Dave Newell shot an 82, Chuck Vsetecka an 83 and Kevin Largent an 86.

Marcus Grinnan of Burlington won medalist honors with a three under par 68. Colby was not able to field a full team but one of their

players, Scott Focke, shot a 70 for runnerup medalist honors. Focke fired a 30 on the front nine to tie the Sugar Hills record. Tyson Shelley of Goodland shot a par 71.

Other outstanding individual scores were: Michael Terry, Atwood, 73; Kevin Finley,

Atwood, Rollie Halligan, Goodland and John Penny, Burlington, all 74s. Dick Ahlberg, Oberlin; Jon McLean, Goodland and Kenny Rummel, Atwood, all carded 75s.

Tournament director was Kay Melia.

On Saturdays

'Cat practices open to public

By JIM MERRIOTT

Sit tight, Kansas State University football fans. You are not forgotten.

Newly installed football coach Ron Prince knows you are out there and appreciates your support.

Prince, a Junction City native, returned to his home state to guide the Wildcats, who start with their first home game Saturday, Sept. 2, at Bill Snyder Family Stadium in Manhattan.

Saturday, Prince opened a series of three weekend practices to the public.

"Our fans are our base, without them our program would not exist," the coach said. "I am happy to let them get an early look at 105

players currently on the field at this time.

"I also want the people in the western part of the state to know I have not forgotten them. Just after I was hired, I took my wife on a trip to the Colby and Goodland area. She had never been farther west than Salina. It was thrilling to meet with fans.

"I, along with the new coaching staff, also hit the western half over the winter months, talking to the public doing the dinner circuit. Norton was one of the towns we visited, and we look forward to coming to Oberlin and St. Francis."

The Wildcats will practice in public the next two Saturdays starting at 3:30 p.m.

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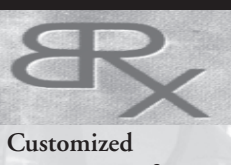


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