

## Ralph Tucci



With many of his former baseball players having already been honored by the Norwalk Old Timers, it seems only fitting that Ralph Tucci, their one-time coach, will be reunited with all of them tonight.

The popular Tucci was one of the most successful coaches in the old Norwalk PONY League during its early years, winning six straight championships from 1957-62 with the Bowlers Skate team, which later became Rip Van Winkle.

He also coached the all-star team for a number of years and in 1958 guided the Norwalkers to their first district championship in just the league's fifth year of existence. Two years later, Tucci's all-star team swept the state, district and New England titles and came within one win of advancing to the 1960 PONY League World Series.

Three of his all-stars during those years were Al Buchta, Mike Santa Lucia and Steve Gulyas, all Norwalk Old Timers honorees. Three more all-star players who were also part of his championship Bowler Skate/RVW teams were Bill Granata, Billy Howard, and his nephew Pete Tucci, also Norwalk Old Timers award winners. Santa Lucia was honored in 2002, Granata in 2003, and Buchta,

Gulyas, Howard and Tucci all last year.

Tonight, their former coach joins them.

"He taught me everything I know about baseball," said Pete Tucci, who won 199 games as the head baseball coach at Central Catholic and Norwalk high schools, including a pair of FCIAC championships. "He knew the game as well as anyone I know, him and 'Skipper' (Matregrano).

"No. 1, he was a guy who could always relate to young kids," Tucci added. "Unlike me, I never saw him get mad at a player. I saw him get mad at parents who got on their own kids, but never at one of his players. That's unusual for a great ballplayer because usually they don't have a lot of patience. Things always came easy to them when they played.

"But Uncle Ralph was always a fun guy. You really enjoyed playing for him. He made the game fun for everyone."

The elder Tucci was quite a baseball player himself growing up in the 'Whistleville' section of South Norwalk on Lexington Avenue. A good-hitting outfielder, Tucci played for the Springwood AC and the Junior Aces AC teams, and was impressive enough on the diamond that Jack Farrell, a longtime scout with the Yankees, showed an interest in him when he was only 16 years-old.

The following year, however, Tucci broke his wrist and didn't play baseball. But while one promising career ended, another one started as Tucci turned to fast-pitch softball and played centerfield for St. Vincent's in the summer of 1943.

In fact, in his very first game, at the age of 17, Tucci faced the legendary 'Cannonball' Baker, regarded as one of the best pitchers in the country who was from Milwaukee but was recruited to play for a Westport team. All Tucci did that day was belt a long home run and a pair of doubles to lead St. Vincent's to an upset victory.

'Cannonball' was so impressed that after the game he made it a point to seek Tucci out.

"He said, 'Hey, kid, nobody ever hit me like you did,'" Tucci recently recalled with a proud smile on his face.

He and Baker eventually became teammates and played in several national tournaments together.

Tucci would patrol centerfield the next three years with the Jim Shield's Eagles, a local powerhouse, and then three more seasons with Pote Builders, another Norwalk softball power.

Then from 1950-58, Tucci played for Lou Nistico and the Arrow Restaurant of Westport, winning the MVP award in the 1956 Connecticut state tournament by batting .391 with six home runs and 19 RBIs in 10 games.

When he wasn't playing softball and coaching baseball, Tucci worked for the city of Norwalk in the Recreation and Parks Department. Fittingly, one of his main responsibilities was the maintaining of athletic fields throughout the city.

Now retired, Tucci, who turned 82 years young on Oct. 24, has been married to his wife, the former Gloria Conklin, for 60 years. They have three children, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

And, of course, Ralph Tucci has a number of former players who still think of him as their coach.