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Profile Richie Hehner: Little League To The Majors

Starred For Four Seasons In Hockey And Baseball At Norwood High School

By FRANK WALL

"I still remember when I was a nine-year old kid playing at the Father McAlleer Field in Norwood and starting out in Little League baseball in Norwood. I used to rush home every afternoon and turn on the radio and listen to the Red Sox. I used to dream in those days of playing Major League baseball but I guess every kid has that dream and I never thought I would have the chance of getting this year," said Richie Hehner, Norwood and the Bay State League's first to the majors as he gets ready to play third base for the Pittsburgh Pirates this season.

Since he was nine and right were five boys in the Hehner family and the athletic in him. He said that he had a great interest in sports from a young age. Hehner was an avid sports fan and the kids were playing baseball at all times.

On the playgrounds Richie played on his team for four years in batting, and was soon to make his name known in Norwood when only a 10 year old he was playing Little League baseball in Norwood. As a nine year old he was a starting shortstop for the Flyers with a .665 average. That was the year that he went to the state finals and ten year olds were not allowed to play in a tournament making this feat something else again.

As an eleven year old he again led the league in hitting and was on the all star team that went to the state quarterfinals. He and Skip Lockwood teamed up to lead the powerful Norwood team. The Messenger headline in 1959 read: "Hehner, Lockwood struck out 13 Americans over Dedham 9-3 and allowed one hit and three run home run." In his last year in Little League he again was the batting champ and perhaps his biggest thrills came on the town Championship game against our Braves when he pitched a five hitter, struck out eight and had three hits including a three run home run.

In reviewing the career of Richie Hehner one could write a book of over 1,000 pages. We will list the highlights of his career from his childhood 1959 read: "Hehner, Lockwood struck out 13 Americans over Dedham 9-3 and allowed one hit and three run home run." Hehner had four hits including a three run home run.

Started in Little League. "Richie was born in St. Elizabeth's hospital in Brighton on November 26, 1947. He was living in Norwood and he didn't play any baseball or hockey in junior high school, as he attended St. Catherine's Parochial School for his first eight years of school. He didn't miss playing much baseball as a youngster. He was down at the Norwood School and Father McAlleer's playground every day and night with his older brothers Billy, Brian and Robbie and younger brother Dennis. There the help he gave me and

he played on the ice with me at Father McAlleer's rink. Hehner was a star on the ice and in the field. He was a natural leader and a team player. He was a great role model for his teammates and a great friend to his friends.

ON TO HIGH SCHOOL Now it was to Norwood High School and Hehner was to make a mark at Norwood High which may never be duplicated. He played for four straight years as a starting hockey player and baseball player as well.

Perhaps Richie Hehner has his biggest impact on sports at Norwood High in the hockey field where he was the talk of the Bay State League for four years. He scored 60 goals in those four years with the shorter schedule in two of them, and every time he carried the team to the top and stand and thrill at his hockey prowess. He was strong and would push other players out of the way with his great determination to score and win.

In his first game as a freshman he scored the first time he came on the ice against Framingham when he took a Dana Maus pass and fired it home. Perhaps his biggest thrill when only a 14 year old freshman came on Saturday, Jan. 19, 1963 when he scored three goals in the 5-10, 176 pound frosh, he batted left and threw right and



MCCOLGAN AWARD WINNER — Richie Hehner was the first winner of the Paul P. McColgan Memorial Award presented to Norwood's outstanding senior hockey player. The award was presented at the banquet for the Bay State League Hockey Champs of 1966. Left to right, Frank Wall; Mrs. Annette McColgan, widow of Paul McColgan; Lennie Cieslarski, Clarkson C. Alcott hockey coach and former Norwood High hockey coach, who presented it to Hehner, at right.

He had 10 goals in his first year, and then came three more great years on the ice.

As a sophomore he led Norwood to the Bay State crown. In his junior year at Norwood High the Mustangs only lost three games all year and they were all to Walpole in two regular season games and in the state finale. He packed them in at the Four Seasons Arena in Walpole every time he played hockey, and his number 18 was magic on the ice.

In Richie's senior year he was simply fantastic. He led Norwood to another Bay State league crown and in his four years at Norwood the Mustangs had a 47-11-5 record.

Hehner received perhaps his highest honor in high school in his senior year when Norwood was knocked out of the state tournament yet he was selected as Most Valuable Player in the tourney.

He has had many thrills in sports in high school and in the minor leagues, and still his biggest came on a January night in 1966.

"I'll never forget that night. We had always been a big rival of Walpole and it seemed the entire sports fans of both towns just lived for that game. That goal has to be the biggest thrill of my life and I never expect another like it," Richie added. "I used to time running out, Hehner, who was a marked man in every game he played, took the puck behind the net and fired through the entire Walpole team and fired a bullet into the lower right hand corner of the cage and Norwood won the game 1-0 in one of Hehner's and Norwood hockey's greatest moments.

We could talk about his hockey days at Norwood High for pages, but let's just say that he was the best player ever to put on skates for Norwood and perhaps the best ever in the state. He was just fantastic with his size, speed, desire and shot. His number 18 was retired and no Norwood player has put on the number since. His number 18 and great deeds on the ice will never be forgotten.

TOPS IN BASEBALL As a freshman Richie Hehner was a starting shortstop for the Norwood High School team. He batted over 300 and had a strong arm, and at this young age was being touted as a sure fire major leaguer. He was batting .343 and was on the 5-10, 176 pound frosh, he batted left and threw right and

could run the bases with the best. In his sophomore year Hehner batted a cool .332 and had four home runs and led the team in runs. He was caught some 350 feet away. He was making his mark as he was walked 14 times intentionally in the 18 game schedule.

In his next two seasons the major league scouts watched his every move and they saw him make some big ones. In high school baseball his two biggest thrills came in his senior year. The first came at Natick when the score was dejected 4-4 going into the eleventh inning and up came Hehner with the bases loaded. He batted the ball some 400 feet over the right centerfield fence to give the Mustangs the win.

The second came on a last game of the year when Norwood needed to beat Dedham to have a chance at the state tourney. Perhaps the biggest crowd ever at a local high school game was on hand and Hehner had one of his best days as he had a single, a double and a home run to lead the Mustangs to a big win, much to the delight of the Norwood fans, and impressive to 29 baseball scouts on hand. He had a 404 four year batting average at Norwood High.

Richie also played 3 years of Legion baseball for Ralph White's Walpole Legion team and has nothing but respect for White, as he kept up his baseball play during the summer months. He played one year of baseball for the Norwood Legion under Gus Petrovsek as a 14 year old, and when Norwood disbanded the program he joined Walpole.

SIGNS WITH PIRATES When his high school career was over Richie Hehner had one of two choices to make. He had to make a decision to become a professional hockey player with the Boston Bruins, or to become a professional baseball player.

He was the first round draft choice of the Pittsburgh Pirates, and he was across the country this had to be quite an honor.

When he signed he had his biggest thrills in it, but I knew the money and the future was in baseball. If I had to choose between two with the same amount of money for both, I would have taken baseball," Hehner declared.

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SIGNS WITH PIRATES — After graduating from Norwood High in 1966, Richie Hehner was the number one draft choice of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Left to right, William Hehner, father of Richie; Ralph Hehner, (Chuck) Wheelan, chief scout of the Pirates, and Richie Hehner.

brother Bill, 26, who is a minor league umpire, a brother Robbie, age 23, and another brother Brian, 25. A close knit family who always stayed together and rooted for each other at all times.

His coaches in high school were Don Wheeler, in hockey, for four years, John Pace, Frank Jacques, and Dave Hartnett in baseball.

"Wheeler was a coach who was just fantastic. He taught me the fundamentals and got me in shape, and he and I had something in common. We both wanted to win," he stated.

TOP OPPONENTS There were many outstanding athletes he played against. He rates Jim Prevett, Joe Iffavany and Jim McCann of Dedham as top hockey opponents along with scout Godfrey and Dave Jones of Needham and Kevin Woods, Brad Brooks and Dick Delaney of Walpole.

The team he wanted to win against the most was Walpole in hockey. Facing a Walpole team coached by Charlie Cunniff was always a challenge and what a rivalry was something. In baseball his two top opponents were Joe Coleman of Natick, now with the Washington Senators and shortstop Vic Gatto of Needham.

Some of his teammates who had a fond admiration for him in hockey and baseball included Bill Hasenfus, Bill Crowley, Blaine Maus, Tim Twomey, Mike Bradley, Brad Higgins, Jack Bayner and many many more.

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BRIGHT FUTURE

Now with his high school and Little League days just a few days gone by, Richie Hehner has his sights on the major leagues. It wasn't long ago that he was slugging that puck into his brother's pads behind his garage; taking the ice to a thrilling roar; hitting that home run at the high school; and a hundred other thrills that not many people in this world can enjoy.

Now comes his biggest challenge. It won't be at Mur-stay Field, in Norwood, Stone Park in Dedham, Memorial Field in Needham, or the Boston Arena or Four Seasons Arena he will be playing in. It won't be 4,000 fans. It will be Busch Stadium in St. Louis, the Los Angeles Coliseum, Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, and it won't be 4,000 fans, it will be 50,000.

With all his success Richie Hehner still thinks of the fans in Norwood and his many friends. His last words were: "I hope I don't let my many friends and supporters down. They have treated me so well and I want to make good for them."

Well, Richie speaking as a person who has watched you play right up from Little League through your big chance and for somebody who has shared many thrilling and disappointing moments as well, all we can say is that we in hockey and baseball included Bill Hasenfus, Bill Crowley, Blaine Maus, Tim Twomey, Mike Bradley, Brad Higgins, Mike Carney, Neil little extra that it takes to be a player and a success. Go get 'em, Pirates.

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COLUMBUS THIRD SACKER — Richie Hehner's last stop on his way to major league starting position with the Pittsburgh Pirates was with the Columbus Jets of the International League last season. He is shown scooping up a ground ball in playoffs.