



Catholic's Smith passes away after 22 years coaching

Longtime Catholic baseball assistant coach PJ Smith passed away Wednesday after battling a heart condition for the past 20 years. A fixture in the Catholic High dugout, the 72-year old Smith spent 22 years as a volunteer assistant coach at Catholic while touching the lives of each player that passed through. And with head coach Richard LaBounty, he helped mold the baseball program into a state and national power. During Smith's tenure, the Crusaders earned 16 district championships, 12 final four appearances, three state championships, three state runner-ups and a national championship in 2013. The retired firefighter and baseball umpire was often referred to by LaBounty as the "straw who stirs the drink" in the Catholic High baseball program.

"He was a great coach, a great man...and he always did things the right way," LaBounty said. "He built special relationships with every player who came through the program. He helped develop boys into men. He will be sorely missed. Not only by us at Catholic - but I really believe by the whole community."

Smith wasn't just influential in the Catholic High dugout. He often reached out to opposing players, helping them in their game. A big baseball fan, Smith could often be seen at Pensacola Blue Wahoos games, on nights when the Crusaders weren't playing. When news of Smith's passing broke Wednesday night, players from all across the Pensacola area took to Twitter to offer condolences and kind words for Smith. According to LaBounty, Smith played a key role in LaBounty's personal life, too.

"He (Smith) is like a brother to me," LaBounty said. We not only spent time on the field, but off the field, too. And I'll miss him every day. He's touched my life and I'm a better person because of being around him. Catholic High baseball, we're one big family - a large part of that is due to (Smith) being a part of it."