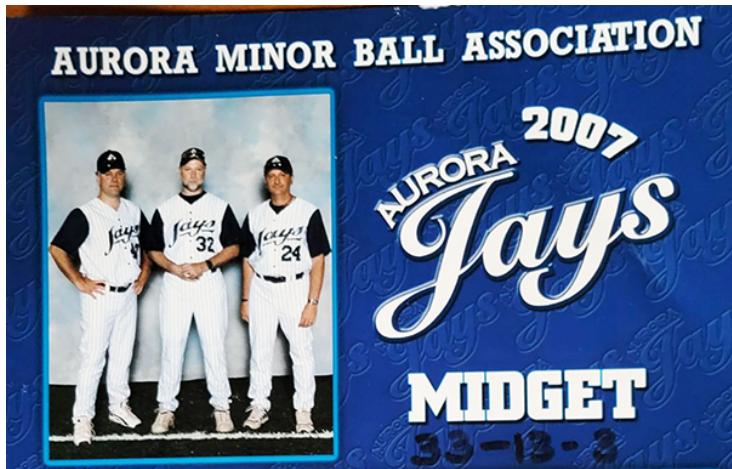


Ken Wakeman, much-loved Aurora Jays, Newmarket Hawks, and STL Lions baseball coach dies at 63



It is with sadness that I announce in these sports pages of The Auroran the untimely death of Coach Kenny Wakeman, who graced my coaching staff of the AAA Newmarket Hawks, the AAA Aurora Jays, and the YRAA STL Lions for almost 20 years.

?Coach Kenny,? as he was known to a generation of local baseball players, passed away on Thursday night at Southlake Regional Health Centre after being diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer seven weeks ago. He was in his 64th year.

Long-time Aurora Jays Coach Paul Barker, our mutual dugout partner for parts of two decades in Aurora, was by his side and delivered me the news when this great sporting spirit passed on.

Coach Kenny was a players' coach. My players loved him. My coaches loved him. So did I.

He was a brilliant pitching coach who raised and nurtured our excellent mound staffs in Newmarket, Aurora, and Richmond Hill.

We were undefeated in Michigan at the 52-team Great Lakes Shootout Tournament when an exasperated US Coach with a great drawl asked me: "Skip, where'd you get all that great pitchin'?" I pointed to Kenny and said, "He grows them in the gym all Winter in Canada and they always bloom in the Spring and Summer!"

Kenny not only developed great pitchers, but he was also a great communicator who would deliver memorable and colorful ?Sunday Sermons? before big games at tournaments.

Our goal as an elite AAA ball club was to "make it to Sunday" so we could hear Kenny's motivational sermons and win championships. He was a selfless volunteer coach.

Kenny coached first base while I coached third base with the Hawks, the Jays, and, remarkably, he also joined me across the infield as a Community Coach for STL Lions high school games in Richmond Hill. It was always great seeing him across the diamond, an enthusiastic and fun voice for our players. We coached hundreds of games together and got the most out of our athletes.

According to our STL Lion Captain Jason Te, Ken Wakeman's in-game influence was felt by players.

?I remember Coach Kenny by our side at every Lions game. A knowledgeable, inspirational, and player-friendly coach that every team needs. My condolences, Coach. Every player on the roster could turn to the end of the bench and take some of Kenny's time.

Usually the conversation took our minds off the game for a split second, allowing us to enjoy where we are in that moment. Thank you for everything, Coach Kenny.?

These kinds of tributes have been pouring in from across the communities he served.

Coach Kenny was also a heck of a Junior Hockey player in Quebec ? an enforcer, too, as needed on the ice ? and he brought some rink fire and great grit with him to the diamond.

We had a memorable moment against Hamilton. Their coach was looking for trouble during the post-game handshake after our pitcher Dylan Kelly threw a no-hitter. The frustrated coach went after Kenny after jawing with him all game and I stepped between them before Kenny could throw one and said "I just saved your front teeth, Coach. You should know better than to fight the Quebec Junior Hockey League penalty minutes leader. Walk away."

As he left, Kenny got a verbal dig in and said, "You still look like that horse's ass,? pointing to an old plough horse grazing next to the ball field in Mississauga. The Horse's Ass story was born and has enjoyed numerous embellishments, but a melee was avoided that day, a coach's front teeth were spared, and we won yet another big game at a tournament on a Sunday.

Coach Kenny and I won our fair share of regular season pennants, tournament championships, and YSBA championships from Mosquito to Midget ? the last title team is pictured here when we went 33-13-3 in 2007 and won Aurora's first AAA YSBA championship. Kenny is on my right in the Coaches' photo with Coach Mario on my left. That was the final rep AAA team we coached. It was a good way to close it out and we stuck to HS games after that until I ?unretired' to Head Coach Team Ontario's 16U squad in 2015-2016.

Kenny and I celebrated our good times on the diamond, especially in London at our favourite restaurant called The Budapest. Luckily, we toasted our good fortune very often and most frequently it was at our local pub, now known as Wicked Eats.

We had our coaches' table by the fireplace ? it's still there, thanks to proprietor Robert Stewart ? and we'd savor those moments with our sons, Alex and Eric, as well as fellow coaches, players, and parents.

We would fill the place with Hawks or Jays jerseys. Super servers Alicia and Judy would look after our team and they'd secure nightcaps for Kenny and me. It is fitting, then, that a Celebration of Kenny's Coaching Life will take place at Wicked Eats on Wednesday, August 30 at 7 p.m. I look forward to breaking bread and hoisting ales in Kenny's memory with my Alumni Hawks, Jays, and Lions ballplayers, coaches, and parents.

On a closing personal note, rest in peace, Coach Kenny. It was an honor to work the coaching boxes and dugouts with you for parts of three decades. Thank you for your community volunteer spirit and your positive, diligent work with our teenaged athletes in three towns in York Region. You were a much-loved coach and awesome coaching partner.

A toast to a vital ingredient in any healthy community: the selfless volunteer coach!

By Jim Stewart