

# RUSS BORTELL

**Nominated as: Player**

**Nominator: John Haney**

**References: Dave Cooper (HoF 2015) & Will Kowalski**

**Nominee reviewed by Trustee: JD Hinson (HoF 2016)**

**Trustee comment:** Russ Bortell is nominated as a player / manager / organizer even though he has played in the RHWS since 1997. Several things stand out about Russ.

He is passionate about the game, and he feeds that passion by taking seriously the responsibility to make it possible for others to play, both in his home league in Battle Creek, Michigan baseball what Corn Flakes is to Kellogg's, which was founded in Battle Creek.

To put it simply, Russ Bortell is a baseball legend in the Cereal City. Please review his list of accomplishments; I think they speak volumes.

## **Achievements:**

The following accomplishments/statistics fall into three categories, as compiled by nominator John Haney:

- 1) verified through research with institutions, newspapers and individuals
  - 2) very educated guestimates based on research and trusted baseball sources
  - 3) anecdotal, based on word of mouth from trusted baseball sources including RHWS HoF members.
- 25 consecutive years (1997 - 2021) of participation in the Roy Hobbs World Series, as a player and as an umpire 2017-2020.
  - 35 or more RHWS tournaments - played multiple weeks as he became age qualified.
  - His teams won 17 championships and played in at least 20 championship games; All championships were at the AAAA or Elite level. Russ has generally been at the top of the pitching rotation for each of these teams.
  - Sanches Construction Championships 1998, 1999, 2001 (2nd place 1997). Russ pitched a complete game victory Sanches vs New Jersey Dodgers in the 1999 Championship Game
  - Border City Championships 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 2018 (2), 2020
  - Pittsburgh 2018 And 2020
  - Stars Baseball (2011 2nd Place), and he may have been on the 2017 championship team
  - WinBerg Construction (2019 2nd place) honorary member in 2019
  - Based on Guestimates by John Haney, Dave Cooper, Randy Moselle and catcher Phill Merrill, Russ pitched 65 or more wins vs maybe 5 losses.
  - Russ almost always pitched pool play game #1 and then would comeback for 1 or 2 playoff games on the weekend. His teams always made deep runs, so, the chance of him pitching 3 games each week are pretty high.
  - Russ was team MVP in 2011 and I am sure he was many more times over the years.
  - Just from what I know, Russ is likely to have a career ERA of 1.50 and likely had a 10 to 1 strikeout to walks ratio.
  - 450 wins in 17 years as head coach at Kellogg Community College, including 122 wins in his last 3 years before handing the powerhouse he built off to his assistant coach. Bortell was instrumental in making KCC a national power in baseball, guiding the Bruins to several NJCAA World Series appearances and a national runner-up finish in 1999
  - Also an assistant coach/pitching coach at Ferris State University, University of Evansville and Central Michigan University.
  - Russ played and coached in the very strong Battle Creek Men's City Majors. His teams were almost annually the Host team for the AABC Stan Musial World Series. This World Series was played in Battle Creek from 1939 to 2005. After that the NABF made Battle Creek its World Series home.
  - He was the League Most Valuable Player and Most Valuable Pitcher as well as an All Star many times over the years.
  - Kellogg Community College retired Russ' Jersey number 35 in 2011
  - Member of the Battle Creek Area Association Amateur Sports Association Wall of Fame
  - City of Battle Creek names Bullpen at famed Nichols field at Bailey Park after Russ.

## **Nominator comments:**

Nominator and references responded to questions. What follows are their responses to the questions or their letter of reference. (Some of this material has been edited for redundancy.)

## **Nominator: John Haney**

### ***1. Please tell us how this individual and his character affect the game of baseball and his baseball colleagues on and off the field, and why. Use CONCRETE examples.***

**Haney:** Russ Bortell is to Battle Creek, Michigan baseball what Corn Flakes is to Kellogg's, which was founded in Battle Creek. To put it simply, Russ Bortell is a baseball legend in the Cereal City.

In this nomination, I will include Russ' baseball achievements as a player and teammate as well as a college coach, mentor and as a family man and a friend to all whose lives he made better by knowing him. After reading the nomination criteria, but not knowing all that is involved in the nomination process, I spent 3 months contacting various baseball people for character references and comments on Russ Bortell.

**Dave Cooper:** There is no "proof" of Russ's actual stats, mainly because we never kept them. You have the right idea about guesstimating them by seeing the championship teams he was on and knowing he threw at least 2 games in every tournament. I had the pleasure of having Russ be part of the Border City Brewers from 1998. I met him while playing with Lansing Sanches Construction in 1998 in the 40+. The Brewers were a 28+ team at that time and Russ joined us.

In that time, we became great buddies. Like most players on the Brewers, he was a "baseball junkie" whose passion for the game came ahead of most other things in life (other than family).

Russ never started a championship game for the Brewers, although he did save or win a few. This was simply because you had to use him to get to the championship game! The last one was 2018 53's when we came through the loser's bracket. Russ pitched all 9 innings in the morning semi-final to get us to the final, where he came in relief in the 4th inning of that game vs the Massachusetts Chiefs and finished off a win! At 61 years old, Russ pitched 15 innings on the final day.

Russ had a love- hate relationship with his teammates. He spared nobody when it came to riding a player. It was comical to all, but you didn't want to be in his way. He kept everyone loose no matter the game situation and for that he was invaluable. In the words of former teammate Tim Karazim, arguably his best friend, "if you want to shut Russ up, just give him the ball". These words couldn't be truer.

**Perry Costello-40 plus years NCAA and Professional umpire:** Russ Bortell has been a leader in promoting baseball as a great game to be respected, but also promoting exceptional character from those he came into contact with on a daily basis. Russ Bortell stood out because of his character, not once in a while when all was going well, but every game and to both teams and even the umpires.

When I tell you Russ stood out to me, I am really saying something very special here. I have umpired as a professional for 11 years and Division 1 Baseball for 30 years. I have been assigned to 8 College World Series in Omaha, 20 Super Regionals and 30 Regionals in the NCAA. I was also assigned to the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the Pan-Am Games 1998. Those bona-fides are not for my benefit, but to impress upon this committee, that if someone with my extensive experience as an UMPIRE endorses candidate Bortell as truly an exceptional baseball leader who "gets it", then this body should know I don't do this lightly.

**Ian Mosher-Long time Border City Brewers Teammate:** Russ was consistent. He did the difficult work of keeping giant egos in check on a team that almost never needed it. Like his style or not, he put himself out there for all of us and we were better off for it.

Since my first game as a Brewer in 2003, I was always a comfortable target for his antics and sarcasm. In the beginning like many others, I took offense and didn't get the act. Seventeen years later, I appreciate just how much he motivated me to be the best I could be. In his own way he pushed us all to keep working out and playing long after our "best if used before" dates had expired.

### ***2. What qualities and/or accomplishments make this individual special ... that they STAND APART from their peers and should be recognized through induction to the Roy Hobbs Baseball Hall of Fame? Use CONCRETE examples.***

**Costello:** Years ago while finishing a game in Battle Creek, Michigan that Russ was managing/playing in, I did something to this day I am not proud of. The room where umpires kept their gear during games was locked at the end of the game as it was late at night. I lived an hour away and there was no one to help me get into the room. I lost my temper and I kicked the door in anger and the door flew off its hinges, much to my embarrassment. I was surely to be in trouble.

Mr. Bortell who had stayed behind to try and find help said " don't you worry I will speak to the Superintendent explain what happened and pay for any repairs. Go home as I know you have young children to get to. That IS exceptional character!!

That experience actually made me is much more respectful of this game that had been so good to me. That lesson learned, thanks to Mr. Russ Bortell, made me better able to represent the US (around the world). That is a far reaching impact on the game he loved and nurtured. Exceptional character is the definition of Russ Bortell.

**Will Kowalski, sportswriter:** I was first introduced to Russ when one of the B.C. teams he played on, OK Wrecking, came to Lansing to play in a Stan Musial-level weekend baseball tourney. Nice guy, I thought, really down to earth and very funny. Then, in the summer of 1988, just after I'd arrived in B.C., I ran into Russ at the balloon festival at the airport, at a carnival attraction at one of those "check the speed of how fast you can throw a baseball" tents. His throw was timed in the high-80s, and I was really impressed. He then said "Hey Will, you give it a try." My throw clocked at 71 mph. And he said to the effect "Nice arm for a sportswriter in his 30s who doesn't play baseball." And I thanked Russ for his compliment.

**3. From your list of character qualities and /or your line of reasoning in support of your candidate, if you can only pick 2, which would they be and why? These should be compelling, and your stories should demonstrate how your candidate is EXCEPTIONAL.\***

**Kowalski:** Here is a bit about Russ as a man, as a human being, as a person who went out of his way to help others throughout his life.

When my and my wife's house burned down and we lost everything but our lives in July 2019, Russ and Micki were one of the first to come to mine and my wife's aid. Russ and family provided both of us with clothing, food, money, support. And they did it for months, until we were back on our feet. I didn't call Russ to let him know about our situation -- he called me after hearing about our house burning down, and he was truly amazing in our time of need. That's the kind of man Russ Bortell was. Great baseball player and coach, yes, of course, but he was an even better friend and human being.

**Tom Shaw, Kellogg CC athletic director:** Russ Bortell was a main-stay in the community for everything baseball. He was Mr. Everything at KCC for 30 years before he retired. Most people will not know this but he was my Instructor for a class as a graduate assistant my freshman year at Central Michigan University. So, Russ and I go way back. I had the pleasure of working with him for 15 of those 30 years he was at KCC.

Russ and I had a lot in common. Both old baseball coaches, we really looked at life through the same lens. I would describe Russ as a 'Coaches Coach.' What I mean by that is that all coaches would look to Russ to see how to coach. How to treat his players, how to work the umpires, how to motivate his teams and how to do everything with integrity.

Battle Creek is and will always be a baseball town because of people like Russ Bortell and Carl Angelo. They helped create a baseball legacy that Battle Creek can be proud of as a city. Russ inspired others, was a fierce competitor and was a baseball ambassador for the city of Battle Creek and for KCC. His personal class, his positive outlook and his conversations with him when he would get over to the gym for his workouts. We talked about life, hardly ever baseball, family, friends and memories. I will cherish those talks and I am a better man because of him.

**Dave Larson, longtime baseball teammate and friend:**

Russ Bortell was a great friend, coach, teammate and family man. We met 26 years ago playing baseball, he taught me so much about life. He made me a better person on and off the field.

Playing baseball together for 26 years has been a privilege for me. Russ played the game the right way. He had a way of making everyone around him better. His knowledge of the game was endless. And he would share this with anyone that wanted to take it in. Knowing Russ for so long, you come to realize that he is the type of person you want to become. He touched so many lives.

**Eric Laskovy, KCC Head Baseball Coach:** Russ was a mentor and friend to many. He genuinely cared about others and maintained relationships with former players long after they wore the Kellogg CC uniform. He built a national program with hard work and integrity. His teams were always the first to volunteer around campus and always served the Battle Creek community.

Russ was the most important mentor in my life. He gave me an opportunity on his coaching staff and allowed me to grow and develop under his tutelage. When he retired and turned the program over to me, he stayed on as pitching coach. We were National Runner-Up that year and of course pitching was our strength. He was an incredibly selfless person that set high expectations for his players on and off the field. He constantly talked to his teams about the Kellogg program being a lot more than wins and losses.