

Baseball legend participates in Pacifica's Earth Day

By Jean Bartlett Features Correspondent

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Rugger Ardizoia has seven Pacifica Beach Coalition (PBC) Earth Day & EcoFest buttons on his sweatshirt, one for each year he has volunteered. At this year's event, Ardizoia wrote down information as site captains from cleanup spots all over Pacifica came in with results.

"The captains report the amount, type and weight of the garbage, compost and recycling their group retrieved and I track it for the record," Ardizoia said.

At 95, Ardizoia is the oldest PBC volunteer. But then, Ardizoia holds a number of titles. Born in Oleggio, Italy, Ardizoia is one of seven Italian-born ballplayers to play in the Major Leagues. He is also the oldest living New York Yankee. Born Rinaldo Ardizoia, the PBC volunteer is the son of Annunzia and Carlo Ardizoia.

"I came out to California with my mother when I was 2," Ardizoia said. "My father was already here. He had gotten a job in a brickyard in Port Costa. We came by ship and train. I don't know how she did it. She didn't speak a word of English."

When Ardizoia was 4, his family moved to San Francisco. When he was 6, his mother died of pneumonia.

"It was just me and my dad," Ardizoia said. "We lived across the street from Jackson Playground in Potrero Hill. The big kids used to chase me and I would ditch them by running into an area that had all these thistles. They told me I was a rugged little bugger and that started my nickname."

Ardizoia went to Daniel Webster Elementary School and Commerce High School. When he was 11, he started playing baseball through CYO. He then played ball through the American Legion and his high school.

"The priest who started our CYO league married my wife and I in 1942," Ardizoia said.

Rugger met Mary Castagnola at Commerce High School in Italian class. She sat in the seat across from him.

"My teacher used to say, 'Rinaldo, if you paid as much attention to Italian as you do to Mary, you would be an A student,'" Ardizoia chuckled. (Mary and Rugger were married 61 years until her death in 2003. Their two children are Bill Ardizoia and the late Janet (Ardizoia) Crawford. Rugger is also a grandparent and great grandparent.)

Ardizoia was good at baseball but he was great at pitching. A right-handed pitcher — known for his fastball, curveball and slider — Ardizoia made the permanent move to the mound in his junior year and capped off his high school career with two no-hitters. Six months before Ardizoia graduated from high school, he signed a professional contract with the Mission Reds of the Pacific Coast League (PCL). Later, Stanford University offered the high schooler a baseball scholarship, but Ardizoia had already signed.

"My Mission Reds teammates included Roy Mort, Al Wright, Wayne Osbourne, Harry Rosenberg and Louie Almada," Ardizoia recalled.

In 1937, Ardizoia was making \$150 a month. By the time he was 20 in 1940, he had enough money saved, \$6,000, to buy a house in San Francisco (\$5,000) and a new Pontiac (\$1,000). He has lived in that house for 75 years.

In 1939 and 1940, Ardizoia pitched for the Hollywood Stars of the PCL. Ardizoia was called "the best pitching prospect in the Pacific Coast League." In 1940, the New York Yankees purchased his contract. In 1941, his MLB training began. When WWII broke out, Ruggier went into the service for three years. He was with the Air Corps in the South Pacific. He also served as a tow target operator in Hawaii and played ball on the Air Corps team.

Out of the service, Ardizoia played for the PCL Oakland Oaks before heading off to spring training with the Yankees in 1947. On April 30, 1947, Ardizoia pitched two innings against the St. Louis Browns. His teammates included Joe DiMaggio and Yogi Berra.

In his baseball career, Ardizoia said he pitched against more than a few tough players including: Dominic DiMaggio, Babe Herman and Ted Williams.

"Ted and I broke in together in 1937," Ardizoia noted. "He was with the (PCL) San Diego Padres."

Ardizoia retired from professional baseball in 1951.

"I loved playing baseball," Ardizoia said. "Now I love doing my part for pitching in to help the Earth. Doggone it, people need to pay just as much attention to the Earth, and cleaning up their trash, as they pay attention to anything that they love."

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