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THIS DAY IN REDS HISTORY

1957-The Reds trade Ted Kluszewski to the Pirates for Dee Fondy. Big Klu, as he is fondly known, spent 11 years with the Reds, batting .302 with 244 doubles, 23 triples, 251 home runs and 886 RBI

THE ATHLETIC

Growing up Larkin: Legendary Cincinnati brothers made each other great By Shannon Russell 3h ago

CINCINNATI – The Larkin family house in Silverton was perfect for all manner of rough-housing and sports-playing and that’s how they spent their childhoods, brothers Mike, Barry and Byron. Robert and Shirley Larkin had five children but the three wedged in the middle were so sports-crazed that they would wage intense games of football, basketball and baseball in the yard an hour before heading to organized team practices.

Byron was the youngest of the three and yet eight years older than family baby Stephen, who was still a kid. Eldest sister Robin wasn’t interested in her brothers’ maddening battles. So Byron took his lumps playing “21,” the basketball game won by the first player to score that number of points. Make a basket, get two points and a trip to the free-throw line. Convert a maximum of three free throws and earn three points and the ball back. Miss any of the free throws and it’s a rebounding frenzy, a fight to track down the loose ball and score again.

That’s where Byron become an expert in relentlessness. The circumstances demanded it.

“I remember just being too small to get the ball from those guys and they would never give me the ball. Sometimes you would think they would feel a little compassion, like, ‘He’s been out here three hours and he hasn’t touched the ball. Here, get a shot.’ No. There was none of that,” Byron said. “I learned to hone my competitiveness from dealing with my brothers. Competing against other people was nothing compared to older, stronger, bigger brothers that I had to deal with every day.”

Byron Larkin, of course, went on to become Xavier basketball’s all-time leading scorer. The former shooting guard, now 53, scored 2,696 points in an XU Hall of Fame career from 1984-88. He led the Musketeers to a program-first NCAA Tournament win in 1987, and his jersey, No. 23, was the first to be retired. It hangs from Cintas Center’s rafters.

Byron came of age before the rise of travel basketball and the AAU circuit but truth be told, he didn’t need it. His goal was to become better than Mike, who went on to play Notre Dame football, and Barry, who played baseball at the University of Michigan and became a Reds shortstop and National Baseball Hall of Famer. The three brothers roamed Moeller High School’s halls at the same time one year; Mike was a senior, Barry a junior and Byron a freshman. They returned home to grapple for familial dominance in every sport, every single day. Rain or shine.

“I think where we really competed was in our basement,” said Mike, 55, who now owns a lumber equipment company in Mississippi. “We would be down in the basement playing whatever sports after it was time for us to go inside when it got dark. The basement is where I think I’ve got most of my memories of us – Byron competing to do whatever Barry and I were doing.”

They played Nerf basketball on their knees and used their brown plaid couch as a goal line for football. Their boisterous play yielded a cacophony of noise. An occasional thud merited a visit by their father.

“He would see if someone was beaten or what was broken. I recall him coming downstairs saying, ‘Smells like a gymnasium down here!’ I mean, because we really were sweating. It was war,” Mike said.

Someone would usually end up hurt or crying but there was a shared code. Don’t tell Mom. Don’t tell Dad. By the time one reached the top of the basement stairs, one’s tears best be dried.

“There was no trying to get help from anybody on the outside because then you would really get beat up,” Barry said, laughing. “Every day I remember feeling like, ‘Whatever I’ve got to do today to win, I’m winning.’ Every single day. We would be fighting, trying to win. Somehow. Some way.”

It was an idyllic childhood, the kind filled with adventure-quenching summer freedom and endless hours of mischief-making. The Larkin boys played “batter on a bounce,” ricocheted baseballs off the Silverton School and dreamed up games to pass the long days. Sometimes Mike caught bees and chased his brothers with them. When the sun slipped away, they’d smash lightning bugs to make their Wiffle Ball bat glow.

Games of 21 continued outside where the basketball post met the cement. Frustration flowed and fights ensued but the brothers stopped short of face-punching.

“Whoever’s closest to the guy getting the ball is going to play defense on him, and if he gets past that guy, then he’s got to go through the second-tier defender at the rim. And that normally was Mike, and that normally was a hard foul,” Barry, 54, said. “That’s how it was. Fend for yourself and just get whatever scraps you can get. That was everything that we did. It was very competitive – who got the best grades, who had the most girlfriends, who did their homework the fastest.”

Mike said there were no excuses, no allowances. If you wanted to play, you’d better be ready. Looking back now, would it have paid to be more lenient on pint-sized Byron? Hmmm, Mike said. Nah, Byron turned out alright. (He also grew taller than everyone else.)

“We went hard on him and just didn’t give him anything. If you want to get the basketball, you’ve got to work for it. But he never gave up. He would never, ever just say, ‘I’ve had enough.’ I mean, tears would be coming down his eyes. He’d still be working, trying to get the ball,” Mike said.

Byron loved his brothers but he desperately wanted to “beat their butts.”

“I wanted to beat them so bad and there was just no compassion, like I said, no giving you a chance. You had to earn everything. That made me a better player when I played people my own age,” Byron said.

Byron eventually became an All-American safety and a sought-after prospect by Notre Dame and Michigan. Both schools wanted him for football and basketball. Barry figured football was his brother’s athletic destiny; his own college career started with Bo Schembechler and Michigan football but he starred instead on the baseball team. College football ultimately wasn’t in the cards for Byron, either. He became such a dominating force on the hardwood that he led the city in scoring as a Moeller senior.

“I remember coming home from college and Byron asking if we could play some basketball and I couldn’t beat him. It was like overnight. I leave and go away and come home and Byron’s all grown up,” Mike said. “We were playing one-on-one when I realized, ‘He’s good.’”

Byron was recruited by Wayne Morgan to play basketball for Bob Staak at Xavier. The Musketeers made Byron a priority and so that’s where he went, cracking the starting rotation seven games into his freshman season. He averaged 17 points as a rookie. The things he learned from his brothers, those intangibles like hustle and perseverance and resilience, propelled his rise in the college game.

Staak, now a North Carolina resident and scout for the NBA’s Miami Heat, remembers Byron as an average deep shooter. But he was clever enough with the ball to get where he needed to be.

“What was really good about him is that he could draw fouls and he was a very good foul shooter. A lot of his offense was mid-range and going to the basket and he’d get to the foul line and make foul shots. In this day and age with the 3-point line, I can’t recall him being a great deep shooter but he didn’t need to be. He got the old-fashioned 3-point play,” Staak said.

Byron aspired to play in the NBA after college, but those hopes fizzled when he was encouraged to move to point guard for tryouts with Milwaukee, New Jersey and Cleveland. The gamble came up empty and the 6-foot-3 player went undrafted. He went on to play professionally for the Continental Basketball Association and competed for five years in Venezuela.

Barry, who surprised Byron with a limo ride to the airport when he reported to the CBA, had no idea what professional basketball entailed in South America. He assumed it was a brand of bigger, more physical players. So Barry took Byron to a park and roughed him up as he played, “trying to prepare him for what I perceived was going to be a very physical, professional basketball thing,” he said. Think ultra-physical football but with a basketball.

And did it work?

“You know, I don’t know. I think he came back for more, like, ‘Let’s do it again next year.’ I think it was OK but I remember many years after that going, ‘Man, that’s tough love right there,’” Barry said.

Byron now is in his 21st season as a Xavier basketball radio analyst and he's still competitive on the court as a rec-leaguer. The financial advisor recently underwent knee surgery but when healthy can still rule a court. ("He could beat me on one leg now," Mike joked, and Barry said he's still proud of "the old boy," Byron.)

Byron's innate desire to excel and athletic gifts were crucial in his 121-game college career, which featured three NCAA Tournament bids, but the lessons he learned in his Silverton backyard shaped him for the rest of his life.

"I just learned how to try really hard, to never give up and to keep going even though you fail," Byron said. "That's what I learned playing with my brothers."

Transactions

12/27/18

Washington Nationals signed free agent RHP Anibal Sanchez.
