

# ED DOLEJS TRIBUTE

Ed Dolejs, who has died in Nelson at the grand age of 90, was a gold medal coach – arguably the greatest in New Zealand softball history -but his influence ran much deeper than his unmatched on-diamond success.

Ed guided the New Zealand women to four world championships medals from 1978 to 1990 - including a first and only title in 1982. It is no coincidence that New Zealand has not been near a medal since Ed stepped down almost 30 years ago.

As New Zealand's national director of coaching for 17 years, Ed stamped his mark on softball from Northland to Bluff. He spread his love of softball, and taught its fundamentals, to everyone - gang members, borstal inmates and disabled people included.

An incident at a national tournament in Christchurch in the early 2010s underscored the extent of Ed's softball reach. A man approached Ed while he was watching a game with friends. He said he had attended a Dolejs coaching clinic in a rural North Island town over 30 years before. "You're the reason I got involved in softball," said the man, whose daughter later represented the New Zealand White Sox. Proof few people ever forgot an Ed Dolejs coaching session.

Colin Ward – Ed's longtime coaching assistant – played for New Zealand and later coached the White Sox. He's been steeped in New Zealand softball for 70 years and has often said: "Ed's the best coach New Zealand has ever had".

Ed never lost his strong American accent despite living in Nelson for 54 years, but he always insisted he built his deep knowledge of softball in New Zealand, not his native United States.

Born on June 30, 1929 – in the year of the Great Wall Street Crash - Edward John Dolejs' father Edward Barney Dolejs came from a family with Czech heritage. His mother, Ivy, was a Canadian who moved to Ohio as a teenager.

Ed grew up an only child in Northfield, near Cleveland in Ohio, although his cousin, Al – six months older – became like a brother to him all their lives.

As a boy, Ed enjoyed the outdoor life in the wood and creeks adjoining his Hazel Drive home. He became a baseball, American football and basketball star athlete at Northfield High School where "Coach" Bill Boliantz, a World War II veteran, became a mentor for life.

## **Ed against Ernie Banks**

An accomplished baseball catcher and power batter, Ed once had a trial for his beloved Cleveland Indians Major League team. In his 2011 autobiography, *Diamonds In The Sun*, he said he and friend and fellow trialist Tom Anderson "used to joke that the Indians made a big mistake overlooking us."

After school, Ed continued his sporting career while serving in the United States Army. He captained his Charlie Company team to battalion championships in baseball, football and basketball on a tour of duty in Germany in 1951. Ed became an outfielder on the battalion baseball team in an eight-team military league. He won the league batting trophy with a .387 average – no mean feat

considering his opposition included future Major League Hall of Famer Ernie Banks and he had to face fastballs from Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Curt Simmons.

Ed's active sporting career stalled on his return Stateside. He married childhood sweetheart Ruth Watson, a Canadian he had known since she was three and he was 10 years old.

### **Family life**

The couple settled in Ohio where Ed established a building business and confined his sporting pursuits to social tenpin bowling leagues and a one-off boxing bout with a bowling rival. Ed – derided by his opponent as “Grandpa Dolejs” due to his prematurely greying hair – won a points decision. His rival left the ring muttering: “If anyone tells me to fight Ed Dolejs again, I’ll tell them to go to hell.”

Ed and Ruth Dolejs decided to emigrate in the mid-60s to seek a better climate for their young family – sons Danny, David and Dennis and baby daughter Dixie. An intelligent man and analytical thinker, Ed made a serious study of overseas options, poring over library books before settling on New Zealand. He had heard good reports about New Zealand from wartime GIs who had recuperated here after battles in the Pacific. The Dolejs’s minds were made up after meeting and quizzing a teenage exchange student from the North Island.

In typical Ed Dolejs fashion, he and a friend, who was also contemplating emigration, subscribed to seven New Zealand newspapers before he and Ruth decided Nelson would be their future home.

They caught a boat from Los Angeles to Auckland in January 1965, accompanied by Ed’s parents.

Ed never regretted the decision, describing “sunny Nelson” as the Dolejs’ family’s “South Pacific Paradise”.

The family settled in the suburb of Stoke – Ed’s home for 54 years. He began work as a builder, later setting up his own business and earning respect throughout the Nelson community for his integrity and craftsmanship.

### **Softball start**

Ed “had no idea New Zealanders played softball” until he arrived in Nelson, where softball had only been formally established in 1962. On a drive one sunny Saturday, the Dolejs family stumbled upon softball games on the domain beside Tahuna Beach. The following spring Ruth told Ed she had heard a radio advertisement seeking prospective players for a new Stoke team.

“I had barely picked up a bat since my baseball days in Berlin [in 1951],” Ed once said. But when he turned up at the Stoke club’s practice, he was instantly asked to play for and coach the A men’s team. Dolejs demurred and said he would coach the B side - dubbed Dolejs’ Demons. He enjoyed tussles with the “Currie’s Comets” A team, coached by Ron Currie, who became his best friend.

There began Ed Dolejs’ long and rich contribution to New Zealand softball. He was Nelson’s top batter for six seasons till he retired at 41, “when catching got too hard on the legs”.

### **Coaching career**

Ed became Nelson representative coach in the 1967-68 and took them to Lower Hutt for Nelson’s first national tournament. Ed guided Nelson to the Ed Barr Cup C section title and was named coach of the Headifen-Ed Barr Cup tournament all-star team.

That tournament victory put Ed's name on the New Zealand softball radar. Former New Zealand men's coach Alf Whelan became a Dolejs fan.

Ed was elected to the New Zealand Softball Association national council in 1970 and continued to serve for 21 years.

With the backing of the Wellington and Nelson associations – and Whelan's encouragement – he was appointed to his "dream job" - the new national coach role in 1974.

The 30-week position later turned into a year-round job. Ed left teenage sons David and Dennis to run the family building business. Accompanied by Ruth and Dixie during school holidays, he travelled the country in his NZSA Holden Kingswood station wagon, holding coaching clinics for clubs, schools and associations.

Softball was included as part of a national coaching scheme sponsored by the Rothmans tobacco firm. It allowed Ed to mingle with some New Zealand sport greats, including triple Olympic Game track and field gold medallist Peter Snell and master cricket batsman Bert Sutcliffe.

A keen student of sport, Ed picked the brains of his contemporaries for strategies he could transport to softball. Equipped with a new-fangled video camera, Dolejs became a great advocate of filming softballers' at-bats and pitching motions to fast-track their development. "People were much more able to correct and accept their mistakes when they saw themselves on tape," he once said. "The benefits were amazing."

Dolejs' introduction to international softball came in 1976 when he was appointed as trainer-coach to the New Zealand men's team for the world championships in Lower Hutt. His role was to serve as a technical adviser to coach Rusty Hay and scout New Zealand's gold medal rivals, Canada and the United States.

Ed identified the North American batters' weaknesses and developed a pitching pattern to combat their strengths. He wrote notes for catcher Terry Nunns to tape to the side of his softball cleats.

Coach Hay retired after New Zealand shared the gold medal with Canada and the US when heavy rain forced the tournament to be abandoned.

NZSA president Alf Whelan asked Ed Dolejs to take over as New Zealand men's coach, but he declined when he was told wife Ruth could not accompany a male team to overseas tournaments.

"There is no way sport can come before marriage," Ed said.

### **NZ women's team**

Whelan still wanted Ed involved at elite level, so he invited him to join the New Zealand women's coaching staff, saying he had no objection to Ruth touring with the female national team.

"It was a glaring double standard," Ed recalled in his book, but, thankfully, he still accepted.

Initially appointed assistant-coach for the 1977 tour of Australia, Ed found himself catapulted into the head coaching job after incumbent Norm Lawes' unexpected death.

There began the most successful era in New Zealand women's softball history with unprecedented – and still unsurpassed – international success.

Under Dolejs' direction, New Zealand won four medals – gold, silver and two bronze – at successive world champions from 1978 to 1990 – and they earned the respect of the softball world.

His coaching tenure coincided with a golden generation of New Zealand pitchers – Cheryl Kemp, Debbie Mygind and Gina Weber, but other nations had elite pitching too. It was Ed’s coaching acumen which proved the critical difference.

Colin Ward said, in a tribute in Dolejs’ book, that Ed was “always a jump ahead” of other international coaches, who had “great respect” for the New Zealander and often tried to pick his brain. Japanese and Chinese coaches even tried to get Ed drunk so he would spill his secrets, a tactic wasted on a man who was a virtual teetotaler.

Ed initially had to convince his players as to the merits of his methods. Some balked in 1977 when he asked them to do a 800m run to prove their fitness. But, they sooner or later became Dolejs devotees, and it is no coincidence that 10 of his players – Marilyn Marshall, Cheryl Kemp, Robyn Storer, Naomi Shaw, Lesley Monk, Jane Earnshaw, Debbie Mygind, Gina Weber, Rhonda Hira and Fiona Timu – are in the world softball Hall of Fame, as is Colin Ward.

Kemp and Shaw – both later national coaches – rated Dolejs the best coach the White Sox have ever had, saying his record speaks for itself.

As well as their world championships medals, Ed’s NZ teams won a further five international tournaments, including two in New Zealand before their own fans.

Talk to any NZ player of that era and they will marvel at Ed’s innovations – “the hanky play” to pick a lead runner off at home plate, or the “umbrella play” whereby he pulled in an outfielder to literally stand on second base to cut off a hit up the middle. Ed was never afraid to pull an ace from his sleeve even with a tournament title at stake, and his players always had total trust in his tactics.

Vicki Murray, a 1982 gold medallist, admired Ed’s coaching acumen and valued the “family environment he created” in the New Zealand team. She said in Ed’s book: “He treated Ruth with so much respect and, because of the way he was with her, he got a lot of respect from us,” said Murray, who rated Ed, alongside her father, as the important male role models in her life.

### **Service and legacy**

It was Ed’s devotion to Ruth which led him to retiring from softball coaching – still at the peak of his powers at 61. Ruth suffered a serious stroke in 1991, prompting Ed to resign his New Zealand coaching job and seat on the NZSA council.

He spent the next 17 years caring for her until she passed away in 2008, still very much in love with her devoted “Eddie”.

Together, the couple created a Dolejs softball dynasty.

Ruth became a Nelson Softball Association life member after decades of dedicated service and was briefly a NZSA councillor.

Sons Danny and David became New Zealand Colts representative. Daughter Dixie was named in a New Zealand schoolgirls team. Youngest son Dennis was a longtime Nelson representative pitcher and coach, who pitched in the Lion Red Series national league. Dennis’ son Damien, played on a New Zealand under-19 selection.

Danny and Dennis shared Ed’s love of coaching. Dan became a NZ women’s age-group coach and a national selector and Dennis coached the Junior Black Sox to two world under-19 championships, earning a silver medal in 1997.

After his friend Colin Ward stepped down as New Zealand women's coach in 1994, Ed urged Softball New Zealand to appoint Dan and Dennis as White Sox coaches or the team wouldn't earn a medal for a decade". He had no inkling then that a barren decade would extend to close to 30 years.

Ed said his comments – reported in newspapers' sports pages – weren't nepotism – just common sense. He never altered his opinion. In 2019, he was still insisting it was not too late to appoint his sons because of their understanding of the game and ability to apply their knowledge.

### **Family man**

There was always more to life than softball for Ed Dolejs. Family came first.

Ed tended devotedly to Ruth from her stroke to her passing in 2008. He often said he never regretted a minute of their life together. For 17 years, Stoke residents watched them on their daily walk – Ed pushing Ruth in her wheelchair. They took holidays when they could and even whirled around the dance floor.

From 2010, widower Ed found another loving relationship with Dot Tinker, a widow of his own age with whom he had close to ten happy years. The sprightly pair shared a love of indoor bowling – to which Ed applied his strategic softball mind – travel and family.

Ed's active softball career ended in 1991, but he never lost his love of the sport and its people.

He was humbled when he was admitted to the New Zealand and International Softball Halls of Fame in 1993. His ISF induction was for "meritorious service", the highest accolade awarded by the world body. Ed was even more thrilled when his 1982 New Zealand women's team were inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame in 1995.

His hometown paid him the ultimate compliment when he was inducted as a Nelson Legend of Sport, his citation noting that Ed's team had won medals (two gold, one silver and two bronze) at five world championships and that he had never lost a final in a world-class tournament.

In the final months of his life, he took time to share his thoughts on how the Black Sox could get back on the medals podium at the men's world series and how the White Sox could, once again, become internationally competitive.

It was always uplifting to hear a 90-year-old man say, so passionately, that New Zealand softball must look forwards not backwards and plan for the next 20 years.

Dennis says his father retained an incredible memory for minute details of important games played almost 40 years ago. He never lost the ability to quickly recite the alphabet frontwards and backwards, taking on and beating his great grandson at the game on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Ed liked to insist softball gave him more than he gave in return, but it is hard to imagine another person who has directly or indirectly influenced as many softballers as he did.

As Robyn Storer – a three-time world series medallist under Ed Dolejs – once said: "Ed was New Zealand softball. What a great legacy he has left."

Ed's funeral will be held at 2pm on Thursday November 14 at the Stoke Bowling Club in Songer St, Nelson.



Head coach Ed Dolejs and assistant-coach Colin Ward on tour with the NZ women's softball team.



Ed and Ruth Dolejs created a family environment for the NZ women's softball team.



Ed Dolejs at his induction as Nelson Sports Legend.

