

'Low Ball Harry' left lasting impression on young players

UMP, From 1B

swing at low pitches when he was behind home plate.

"The kids just loved him," she said.

After shocked coaches and league officials learned of Udvare's death on Friday, they faced the difficult decision of whether to cancel the game he was scheduled to officiate that night — a showdown to decide first place.

Kozicki said he persuaded everyone to do what Udvare would have wanted: Play ball.

"I kind of asked them if they wouldn't mind playing in honor of Harry," Kozicki said. "That's what Harry would want us to do."

Born in Milwaukee and raised in Cudahy, Udvare served in the military and worked a factory job until a workplace injury in the mid-1970s forced him onto disability. Plagued by chronic back pain, he never worked regularly again.

He and his wife, Judy, settled in Muskego and had two sons. The marriage ended in divorce in 1987, although family members say the ex-spouses remained on friendly terms.

Both sons, Eric and Chris, had played baseball in the Muskego Athletic Association, a league that attracts about 750 boys and girls ages 5 and up each summer.

The league soon became Udvare's passion. "Baseball was pretty much it," his son, Eric, recalled.

Udvare joined the league's board of directors and become president of the all-volunteer group in 1990. Not only did he manage the day-to-day business, he organized fund-raisers, arranged team photos, stockpiled supplies in his home and tended to other details.

"He was the heart and soul of the organization," said Tom Seidl, the

league's vice president.

In a game filled with traditions and superstitions, Udvare also introduced Muskego youth baseball to some of his rituals. He always umpired on the same field at Bay Lane Middle School, and he always arrived one hour early to set out the bases and other equipment for team managers.

The equipment was kept in a storage bin along the third-base line at Bay Lane Diamond No. 1.

"Harry had a routine," Seidl said. "It gave him something to do. Baseball gave him purpose."

Already suffering from his back injury, Udvare discovered later that he had heart disease. He was scheduled to undergo another treatment this week.

At about 5 p.m. Friday, colleagues arriving at Bay Lane Diamond No. 1 found Udvare lying on the ground not far from the storage locker. The bases and other equipment were arranged in their places, just like always.

"Low Ball Harry" had called his last strike. A parting tribute is planned during the Muskego Athletic Association's all-star games Saturday at Halfaer Field, the youth baseball diamond at Miller Park.

After that, league officials will begin contemplating how they are going to tend to all the little things that Udvare handled.

"That was his ritual: He was always there," board member Art Benotti said. "He made life easier."

A memorial service is scheduled for 4 to 7 p.m. July 26 at Advantage Funeral Home, 11030 W. Forest Home Ave., Hales Corners. Other details and obituary information were not immediately available.

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Glenn Kozicki,
friend of Udvare