

Steve Jacobsen: Thank You, Harmon Killebrew

Remembering the life, career and contributions of one of baseball's greatest players

By Steve Jacobsen, Hospice of Santa Barbara | Published on 05.18.2011



I have a baseball in a protective plastic case at home. The blue ink signatures have faded during the past 46 years, but if you look closely you can still make out the names. And if you're a baseball fan familiar with the game's history you will recognize that the players who signed it played on the great [Minnesota Twins team of 1965](#).

Perhaps the most famous name is that of a player who died this past Tuesday — [Harmon Killebrew](#). He was a great person not just for the way he played the game, but for the way he lived his life and the way he completed it — by being a spokesman for hospice care.

I was, and still am, a [Dodgers](#) fan. As a result, I was a fan of [Sandy Koufax](#), not Killebrew. Since Killebrew played in the [American League](#), we rarely had to play against him. His ability to hit long and frequent home runs (he is fifth on the all-time home run list) made him a feared opponent.

In 1965, the Dodgers faced the Twins and Killebrew in the [World Series](#). The Twins took the first two games, beating first [Don Drysdale](#) and then Koufax. But the Dodgers came back to win the next three, including a shutout by Koufax in the fifth game.

In the seventh game, Koufax was asked to pitch again on two days' rest. The Dodgers scored two runs in the fourth. By that time, Koufax was no longer able to throw his great curveball effectively, so inning after inning he used only fastballs. The Twins were a great hitting team, and Killebrew could have changed the game with one swing of the bat. But

Koufax prevailed to the end, shutting out the Twins with a complete game shutout. The Dodgers won the series.

Killebrew went on to play baseball for 10 more years. But like all athletes, his career came to an end and he retired in 1975. It was the end of his playing career but not his greatness.

A teammate of his, [Danny Thompson](#), had been a shortstop for the Twins. Thompson was diagnosed with leukemia in 1974 and died in 1976 at age 29. In honor of his friend and teammate, Killebrew began raising money for leukemia research. He used his star power to create the [Danny Thompson Memorial Golf Tournament](#). This August will be the 35th year of that tournament, which has raised more than \$11 million for leukemia research.

Last December, Killebrew was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He began to battle the disease with help from his doctors. But it recently became evident the disease would prevail and his life was coming to completion. Killebrew had become not only an advocate for cancer research but for hospice care as well.

Last Friday he released a statement: “It is with profound sadness that I share with you that my continued battle with esophageal cancer is coming to an end. With the continued love and support of my wife, Nita, I have exhausted all options with respect to controlling this awful disease. My illness has progressed beyond my doctors’ expectation of cure.

“I have spent the past decade of my life promoting hospice care and educating people on its benefits. I am very comfortable taking this next step and experiencing the compassionate care that hospice provides.

“I am comforted by the fact that I am surrounded by my family and friends. I thank you for the outpouring of concern, prayers and encouragement that you have shown me. I look forward to spending my final days in comfort and peace with Nita by my side.”

His final day was May 17.

When I was a young baseball fan listening to [Vin Scully](#) describe that great 1965 World Series through my transistor radio, hospice care did not exist in America. People with cancer, like my grandmother, died alone in hospital rooms. No one helped us know what to say or how to deal with our feelings. No one was there to help us if we wanted to help her die at home close to her garden and family.

Much has changed since then. Now there are thousands of hospice organizations across America that can help families with compassionate care when a loved one is facing a life-threatening illness. People like Killebrew have become an example to others of what hospice care can mean.

Thank you, Harmon Killebrew. Thank you for your great career. Thank you for being a class act through your entire life. Thank you for the gracious respect you showed to baseball fans, including taking the time to sign that baseball I have in the plastic case. Thank you for what you did for leukemia research. And thank you for the encouragement you've given others to make use of hospice care.

— *Steve Jacobsen is executive director of [Hospice of Santa Barbara](#). Call Hospice of Santa Barbara at 805.563.8820 for a schedule of adult and children's groups, or to make a donation. Become a fan of [Hospice of Santa Barbara on Facebook](#).*