

FORMER BASEBALL STARS COME TO THE LEHIGH VALLEY

BLUE, JENKINS STILL TOSSING GOOD STORIES

The former major league pitching stars headline weekend events for the BEST Scholarship program.

BY KEITH GROLLER OF THE MORNING CALL

Neither Ferguson Jenkins nor Vida Blue were announced as members of any “Franchise Fours” when the Mount Rushmore of each Major League Baseball team was revealed prior to the start of Tuesday’s All-Star Game in Cincinnati.



Yet, anyone who followed baseball in the 1970s certainly remembers them and could identify them by their first names alone.

Even though both pitchers are long retired — Jenkins’ last MLB pitch came in 1983 and Blue’s final delivery came three years later — they continue to be well-spoken ambassadors for the game and they’re both looking forward to coming to the Lehigh Valley to headline the 7th annual BEST (Building Education Support Teams) Scholarship “meet and greet” and celebrity golf tournament.

The 501c non-profit organization was founded by teachers Billy Staples and Judy Tierney to aid students needing financial assistance to fulfill their dreams of obtaining a college education. The event always brings in top names from the sports world in general, and baseball in particular.

The meet and greet, which will also feature former Phillies president Bill Giles and more than 20 former Phillies, Mets and Yankees players, will take place from 6:30 to 9:30 Sunday night at Moravian College’s Johnston Hall. The golf tournament follows Monday with a 9 a.m. start at Silver Creek Country Club.

Andre Dawson, Lee Smith and Jim Rice are among the former stars who have come to the Lehigh Valley to support BEST in recent years as the organization has helped 41 area students go to college.

But perhaps few fit the program better than Jenkins and Blue, who prove that anything is possible.

Jenkins, according to his Wikipedia biography, was raised in Ontario, Canada, by a father who immigrated from Barbados and a mother who was a descendant of American slaves who escaped through the Underground Railroad.

Blue was raised in Mansfield, La., the oldest of six children. He was a star football player who received numerous college offers, but signed with the Oakland A's to support his family after the sudden death of his father.

Both overcame long odds to become two of the best pitchers of their era and will have lots of great memories to share and stories to tell this weekend.

Jenkins was 282-226 and notched 3,192 strikeouts in his 19-year career. He played with the Philadelphia Phillies, Chicago Cubs, Texas Rangers and Boston Red Sox and became the first Canadian ever inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame when he was enshrined in Cooperstown in 1991.

Blue, a hard-throwing lefty, was 209-161 in a 17-year career that included six All-Star appearances, and won both the American League Cy Young Award and MVP in 1971.

The two are friends and it was Jenkins who invited Blue to join him in the Lehigh Valley.

"I'm looking forward to making some new friends and playing some golf," Blue said from California where he works as a Giants TV pregame and postgame analyst for the Bay Area's Comcast SportsNet.

"I'm always out and about in the Oakland area doing community service work. Any time there's an opportunity to do some fundraising and help out kids, I'm happy to be involved. It's what I love to do."

Blue said he was thrilled with the Golden State Warriors' recent NBA title, but added that the Giants winning three championships in the last five years has been "pretty cool, too."

He knows a thing or two about world titles because he helped the A's win three straight from 1972-74.

"The Giants have drafted well, they've developed well and most of the guys in their starting lineup are homegrown guys," Blue said. "They're kind of a blueprint for how to get it done these days. Three out of five titles is great, but I do like to remind some of my co-workers that three in a row isn't too shabby either.

"You can't talk about those three titles without talking about [owner] Charlie Finley. He was considered the mastermind, but that was another case where they drafted well."

Blue said there was a collection of spirited personalities on the Oakland title teams, but said that at its core it was a group that still played "good, old-fashioned baseball."

He notes that a lot of things have changed about the game today.

"It's very lucrative for the players and owners," he said. "There's a lot of money to be made."

Blue never had the opportunity to pitch for a big-market team like the Yankees.

"Some guys can handle the big-market stage," he said. "Growing up in a small town in northwest Louisiana, it would have been a challenge for me to pitch there [in New York]. But it would have been exciting."

Jenkins spent 10 years with the Cubs as a player, three as a coach and said he's still working for them.

He was signed, however, by the Phillies in 1962 and made his debut with Philadelphia in 1965.

"I learned how to pitch under the tutelage of Cal McLish when he was the pitching coach for Gene Mauch in Philadelphia," Jenkins said. "I was 21 years old when I got traded and trades are part of the game. I think I could have won just as many games for the Phillies as I did for Cubs, but unfortunately I got traded and we'll never know."

Both Blue and Jenkins, who played in an era that included some of the game's all-time greats like Willie Mays, Henry Aaron and Johnny Bench, said there are a few guys today — Mike Trout and Buster Posey in particular — destined for greatness.

As for the guys tainted by steroids, Jenkins doesn't believe any of them are headed for Cooperstown.

"The individuals who put chemicals in their system to enhance their careers ... I really don't think they deserve it," Jenkins said.

Jenkins, on the other hand, thought it was great that Pete Rose had a moment of glory in Cincinnati.

"It's really unfortunate that he's banned for life, but with the new commissioner, I still think it could happen for him," Jenkins said.

Meanwhile, Jenkins considers his friend Billy Staples, who wrote about him in his book "Before the Glory," to be a Hall of Famer.

"I've known Billy for quite a while and he's quite a guy," Jenkins said. "He's changed the lives of a lot of youngsters through this organization. He's put so many of them through college. He's done miracles for them. He's made a difference and that's why I'm happy to be coming to his area."