

[Charlie Verrall](#), the players' umpire.

Charlie Verrall was one of the first softball enthusiasts and someone who is always mentioned by those who were there in the early days of the game. A keen sportsman, a boxer and League player, he was a fitness man who tried hard to live up to top standards (apart from smoking, which he gave away only when affected by illness).

Like many of the early stalwarts, Charles Robert Verrall (5 August 1905-23 May 1974) was born out of Auckland, in Te Kuiti. His father was a blacksmith and moved his family around the country for a while.

The Verrall family lived in Grey Lynn and Charlie left Grey Lynn School aged 12 to start as an apprentice sheetmetal worker. After they married in 1928, Mavis Verrall (5 May 1909-21 May 1979), supported Charlie and her children, in their sports and activities and was club secretary and later life member (1955).

He was a fine softballer who picked up the game late in life, as so many did in those days, immediately leaving rugby league, being too small for the game anyway.

"I was no youngster when I started, " he said. "I was 34 years old when I discovered the game in 1939 and I played for Richmond, depending on the Air Force, until 1945".

During the war he was linked with the RNZAF at various bases around the country, repairing planes. A special jig he designed was used for repairing planes from the Pacific.

Everywhere he went, he introduced or promoted softball. "Everywhere I went I took an interest and often helped to get the game going. Softball was a women's game in the Waikato when I was there and that was where Mary and Ray Dormer gave it a push. I also helped Rotorua and Canterbury get the men's sides going"

Later he was coach or manager of the men's representative team and an outstanding, charismatic umpire whose trademark white gloves stood out, as he intended them to. "The players need to be able to see the signals from the outfield," he said, and they could.

"We all had a wonderful time at softball. The most important step in my softball life was the day I joined the umpire's association as a player-umpire early in 1941. I umpired games throughout the war and had done another 500 peacetime games when a heart attack stopped me completely in 1954.

"My favourite thing was to be the only umpire in a game as I liked to make all the calls and that was a good chance to move quickly around the diamond".

"Another very enjoyable spell was the period when I was in close touch with the Auckland representative team, as manager, coach or selector between 1945 and 1948. Auckland had many great players and we won the Beatty Cup many times. "There were speedball pitchers in those days too and I do not know why the youngsters think they have the only ones ever produced. Mike Allen of Otahuhu was a wizard and Brian Wareham a real iron-man. He had plenty of home runs hit off him as the fast pitchers are hit harder, if you pick out the pitch to hit."

Always the thinker, he devised a hot box for injured players to sit in and developed his massage skills, as well as using low electricity charges through copper plates laid on aching muscles to supplement his innovative work with ultra-violet light. He used these systems from 1937 to 1942. He was also an amateur photographer and boxer.

Charlie gave up sheetmetal work in 1950-51 and started making softball gloves, backstops and bases. His were the best. He cut gloves open to find the patterns and then recreated his own,

including a wonderful catcher/first base mitt which was well ahead of its time. Gear was not available in those days of austerity.

“We made the first backstops in my backyard and we took them out to the park for the first real gear breakthrough in the game. In 1944 I made my first glove, after cutting the pattern myself and basing it on an American glove.”

The bases he later made set a standard which has seldom been bettered and many of them were still being used twenty years later. After this he began to produce gear fulltime.

“There was softball at the table always, and there was softball gear of some sort or other from the front gate to back fence,” said Mavis Verrall.

Charlie used those leather skills, and his familiarity with metal, to good effect but, ironically, it cost him the ASA life membership he deserved. He was making money from the game, he was told, so was ineligible. It was a travesty for someone who had dedicated so much time over the years.

“My biggest disappointment was when the ASA voted against my nomination as a life member. They thought that I was doing all my work for the umpires but that was not right.”  
Charlie was made a life member of the Umpires’ Association in 1953.

After his health scare in 1954, Charlie gave up smoking and took up bowls with the Grey Lynn club. Always a fitness fiend, he was slowed down and did not like it. So bowls became his next and final sporting passion. “Softball was a bit much for me then, even as a spectator, and I needed, as well as wanted, the exercise. Bowls has provided that.”

**Charlie:** Umpired games all around the city. Beatty Cup tournaments, John Lennon series, final trials for men and women’s teams and North v South. Rated as Number One Auckland umpire for many years. Auckland coach 1943, coach 44-45 won Beatty Cup and also in 45-46 as manager, 46-47 as coach and was manager-coach when Auckland retained the Cup in 1947-48.

His children all played and promoted softball at some stage in their lives. Notably, son Gene was a New Zealand player versus the Rest, assistant coach of the New Zealand team before the 1966 world series and won many titles for Auckland, as well as being the youngest umpire in the city for a few years. Daughter Pene was an Auckland player, Auckland coach, ASA president, chairman and national councillor.

By Trevor Rowse  
(Quotations are from Charlie’s interview in the early 1970’s).