

History of Kiwanis Baseball League

Well do I remember a Night in October 1963 that Ted Nehlsen, Owner of Nehlsen's Sporting Goods , George Pflueger, one of Kenosha's finest and myself were out on the town when we began talking about starting a baseball league for boys 13-15. *George and I had been managing teams in the Jaycee Baseball League for many years and Ted was the supplier of sports equipment for most of the athletic teams in Kenosha. The Jaycee Baseball League had been poorly managed for some time so I submitted our idea of a Kiwanis Baseball League to our Kiwanis Club at the next board meeting. The idea was well received by the board so now what was left was to line up 4 sponsors and managers for 4 teams. Ted Nehlsen would supply all the start-up uniforms and equipment with a three year pay off to get us started and Jim Trebbin, the Kenosha Recreational Director would provide the playing schedules and umpires. Jim Angelici, a Kiwanis member, worked with me that first year to help get everything started.*

We held tryouts for players, but the Jaycees had held theirs a week earlier than Kiwanis so they supposedly got the better players. Their 14 and 15 year old players had much more playing experience than the Kiwanis boys only because their league had been established some twelve years earlier, but the season progressed very well.

Our 4 sponsors were Ralph Ruffolo's Triangle Appliance, Isermann Bros. Clothing Store, Southport Lumber Co. and Nehlsen's Sporting Goods. The managers of the four teams were Norm Hughes, Fred DeWitt, Dick Irish and George Pflueger and their assistants. The sponsor's fees were sufficient to pay all the bills.

The Jaycees were not all that happy about Kiwanis starting a league of its own as they felt we were encroaching upon their territory. Moreover, some of their coaches and sponsors came over to our Kiwanis League. However, as the season neared the end, there was talk about an All-Star game between the two leagues. Their best players against the best of Kiwanis. Because their league had many years on Kiwanis, I believed the game would be one-sided. The game was a night game to be held at Simmons Field in August. All the players and coaches sold tickets and the park was filled. George Pflueger, whose team won the championship in the Kiwanis League, was selected to manage the Kiwanis All-Stars. Ray Berres, a former major leaguer from Kenosha and pitching coach for the Chicago White Sox under owner Bill Veeck(Veeck as in wreck) in the 1959 World Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers, attended the game along with Johnny Cooney, another long time and well known major leaguer.

Jim Angelici, a fellow Kiwanian, bet Fred Chiapetta, who was the Jaycee commissioner at that time, that Kiwanis would win. I told Jim we would not win, much less, we'd probably get killed. As the game progressed, I could not believe what I was seeing. Our fourteen year old pitcher, Mark Fennema, a nephew of fellow Kiwanian Andy Fennema, surgically decimated the Jaycees as Kiwanis won 11 to 4. This unexpected win instilled a great spirit into our new

league and Jim Angelici won a steak dinner. He can eat enough for ten people, so Fred must have paid a fortune. However, the next few All-Star games were won by the Jaycees until Kiwanis had been established for a few years.

At the end of that first year, 1964, we had a chicken dinner banquet at the CYC for all the managers, players and parents. Dizzy Trout, formerly a pitcher with the Detroit Tigers, was the main speaker. He had won two games for Detroit in the 1945 World Series against the Chicago Cubs. That was the last year the cubs won a pennant. Having known Dizzy previously, I thought he was one of the funniest people I had ever known, however, he gave a very serious talk. It was almost religious. Later, I understood why as he passed away shortly thereafter. He was probably not in the mood at that time to be humorous, but his inspirational talk was excellent.

The following year, 1965, we increased our number of teams from four to six and the rest is history. I remained on as commissioner of the league for ten years and in 1964 relinquished the reins to Sam Perri who did a remarkable job. Several years after Sam took over as commissioner, the Kiwanis League absorbed the Jaycee League and the two leagues have since been known as one under the name of Kiwanis. Sam was also solely responsible along with the late Santo Principe, the Kenosha Parks Director at that time, for the development of The Kiwanis Baseball Complex which is now reputed to be the finest anywhere.

Our Kiwanis Club of Western Kenosha made an initial contribution of \$100,000 to the City of Kenosha for seed money to begin its construction. Prior to the complex, league games were played at Simmons Field and Red Arrow Park. Baseball teams from all over the U.S.A. enter these Kiwanis arranged tournaments here and take our Kenosha story back home to tell others about this very elaborate complex with its pristine playing fields, bleachers, electronic scoreboards, two story concession stand with comfort stations and meeting room, playing lights for night games and fence-divided diamonds with backstops, not to mention the public address system and landscaping.

Dr. Frank Pisarik came aboard in 1983 to work with Sam P. Sam left in 1986 leaving the job of commissioner with Frank who, with his foresight, has overseen the growth of the league to a total of 21 teams and approximately 325 players. Games are played up to the end of August at the complex with the remainder of its games being played into October at Poerio Park.

Frank is assisted by Jim Hamilton who performs the work of many. A large part of this heavy work schedule is managing the teams' coaches of which there are many, lining up sponsors and collecting their fees, preparing and organizing the tournaments. While this may not seem on paper to be so much, it is a tremendous job and requires untold amounts of time, dedication and work by all those involved.

Jim Zurek Sr.