

2006 Chiefs poised for success
by BRIAN P. HEILMAN

If there's one thing that baseball fans with true mettle all have in common, it's that they're always mulling over one question:
Could this be the year?

The Winona Chiefs amateur baseball club has had a slew of great years, including three state titles in the past couple decades. But general manager Bruce Brinkman can't help but bubble with excitement when he scans through his roster for this season.

"On paper, I haven't seen a team look this good in a long time," Brinkman said. "I have pretty high expectations for us. If we don't get to the state tournament and do extremely well, I'll be shocked."

Brinkman, a former Chiefs player who still suits up if the club is short players, has apparently lost that other hallmark of baseball enthusiasts: superstition. His confidence is absolute, and well-deserved.

The 2006 Chiefs are poised for success, with a roster blending local talent and recruits from other regional amateur teams. Brinkman credits the additional support he's gotten from Winona State baseball coaches and good old word-of-mouth for helping bring talent to the Chiefs.

"The coaching staff at Winona State has started to take an active involvement in recruiting guys for the summer," Brinkman said.

"We've also picked up players from Sparta, Plainview, Austin, and other local clubs."

"After awhile, the players start to talk about us," Brinkman said. "It isn't by accident that we're bringing in quality players from other teams."

The Chiefs' recruiting success comes mostly from the light, young, enthusiastic atmosphere in the organization, not to mention the 55 years of baseball success.

In the handful of years since the legendary Al Smith handed over the Chiefs to Brinkman and a board of directors, the local boys in pinstripes have continued to bring excitement and inspiration to storied Gabrych Park on Winona's far East End.

This year looks to be no exception, apart from the exceptionally talented young men donning Winona colors.

Despite the on-field exploits of his club, Brinkman's proudest moments at the park come when he watches young kids — truly the future Chiefs — shagging balls or playing pickup games across the street.

For this third-generation baseball coach, the knowledge that the national pastime is alive in the lives of young people is a true inspiration.

"There it is, right there, the future of Winona," Brinkman said of these moments of inspiration.

Brinkman credits his family legacy and solid commitment to baseball for being the tools that finally convinced Al Smith to hand over the Chiefs to someone else.

"My dad is in the Minnesota Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame along with Al Smith," Brinkman said.

"Al knew that I grew up with baseball, and that I knew what it took to run a team."

One thing Brinkman has known all along about running a ball club is that it's more than a one-person job. That's why Brinkman has collaborated with Ryan Buhler, Dean Beckman and Greg Zaborowski to form the Winona Chiefs board of directors.

Buhler, whose value in Brinkman's words is "outrageous," serves as field coach. Beckman, a professor at Saint Mary's, coordinates the club's intern program, office needs, and website. Beckman also does the PA announcing at Chiefs home games. Zaborowski, with the help of his wife and family (including son Sean, a player), performs various odd jobs for the club.

This group, a team in itself, runs the club in Smith's wake, although Smith still serves as an advisor to the board.

Sure, they don't draw the 2,000-plus crowds that the professional Chiefs of the fifties drew, but Brinkman is confident that the fans who show up at Gabrych will be pleased both with the product and the experience.

"Now that we're playing for hardcore baseball enthusiasts, we've got to do it right," Brinkman said. "I love the fact that we've got wood bats back."

Although college teams use the more explosive aluminum bats, the Chiefs' amateur league requires players to use wood bats, mimicking the major leagues and giving the game a more old-fashioned feel.

Following Smith's advice, Brinkman is also collaborating with local businesses to boost the classic baseball experience his club offers. Midtown Foods are frequent donors, Brinkman said, and other groups such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are always eager to collaborate.

But whether there's a promotion on or not, Winonans have plenty of reasons to pack the bleachers. The boys in blue are 8-2 with their sights on state glory.

But championship talk aside, every year will continue to be "the year" for the Chiefs, as long as former Chiefs shaggers keep becoming current Chiefs stars, as long as bookkeeping, seed-spitting hardcores keep showing up, and as long as the wooden bats keep knocking deep shots onto Broadway.

Be a part of it. For two bucks, you can't go wrong.