

The Chiefs are reborn: Al Smith rejuvenates the legend
by BRIAN P. HEILMAN

In the fifties, the Winona Chiefs were boss.

With relatively little else to do in pre-television Winona, residents flocked to Gabrych Park in droves to see the exploits of their favorite hometown and adopted heroes.

"You could head down to the ballpark for a night game, and at about quarter to seven there would be cars everywhere," recalls Chuck Williams, the radio voice of the Chiefs.

"It really united the town behind a ball team in much the way that major league ball clubs became the life of big towns," he said.

In addition to imports Emil "The Tiger" Nascak, crooning catcher Gabby Horman and legendary coach Hugh Orphan, Winonans could cheer on some of their own superstar sons.

Hard-hitting local boy Lambert Kowalewski played side-by-side with Cotter grad Johnny Michalowski and Senior High standout Paul Giel, who went on to a career with the major league Giants.

In classic Winona fashion, every time Kowalewski hit a home run, his mother gave Williams a free lobster dinner at the Hot Fish Shop.
"That was a real treat," Williams recalled.

However, when Milwaukee acquired the major league Braves squad in 1956, interest in local ball waned. The Chiefs struggled to afford pros of any big-name repute, and eventually fell out of the public's consciousness.

Sadly, the Chiefs floated in and out of existence for the next twenty years. While there was always a squad willing to be called "The Chiefs," throughout the sixties and early seventies attendance numbers fell from 2,000 per game to 20 on a good night.

A few dedicated amateurs kept the team alive, but their management and bankroll was in disarray for nigh on two decades.

Until Al Smith came along, that is.

Al Smith, a 2005 inductee into the Minnesota Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame and the most revered baseball personality Winona has ever seen, took over the frail Chiefs in 1977, bringing them back into the public's field of vision through clever marketing techniques, business savvy, a commitment to on-field excellence, and a contagious baseball spirit.

To this day, Smith is proud to call the 55-year-old Chiefs "the longest running show on

Broadway," knowing in his ever-humble heart that without him, the curtain would have closed on the Chiefs' show long ago.

"When I took over, the club was in disarray," Smith said recently, twirling his glittering emerald Hall of Fame ring around his finger.

Under Smith's guidance, array and achievement came in a hurry, as his efforts to "put fannies in the seats" and "make the game fun for everybody" led to a Minnesota Baseball Association state championship in 1981.

"In 1977, everything was so helter-skelter, I made up my mind that I'd straighten the club out and make it a viable part of the city," he said.

Smith worked closely with local businesses like Watkins Inc. to develop sponsorship relationships, while also offering fans incentives to attend the games. To this day, Smith maintains season tickets to Minnesota Twins baseball games solely for the purpose of donating them.

Giving away Twins seats was one of many ways Smith's alluring personality and practices brought popularity back to the boys at Gabrych.

"Any time I talk about the Chiefs, it's never enough," Smith said after two solid hours of storytelling and reminiscing.

"I always figure that the heyday of the Chiefs wasn't the years of the most fans, but when we won the most games, as the modern Chiefs," Smith said, comparing his amateur clubs of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s with the superstar 1950s squad.

In addition to their Minnesota state title in 1981, the modern amateur Chiefs have won Wisconsin Baseball Association state titles in 1992, 1997 and 1999.

But although the great on-the-field successes were exciting, Smith values his real legacy as the human connections he made with everyone involved with the organization.

"The championships were great," he said, "but they were secondary to the camaraderie.

"I wanted everybody to feel connected to the team, because they were all important, from the fans to the players to the scorekeepers, bat boys and shaggers," he said.

"For me, it was a great teaching experience. I tried to be a friend or fatherly-type person to the players."

Smith also assumed a so-called fatherly role in the stands during the Chiefs' true heyday. Donning a black shirt with a fake priest's collar, Smith played Father Fungo, using his cheeky sense of humor to connect with fans.

Named after a long bat used for infield practice, Father Fungo actually convinced some fans that he was legit.

"People would ask me, 'Father, where's your parish?' and I'd reply, 'Right here at Gabrych,'" Smith recalled.

"They'd ask, 'Do you have services?' and I'd tell them that I heard confessions in the dugouts after the games. Some people actually believed me!"

Smith's humor also helped him form friendships with his players and excite the community at large. For fun, Smith assigned every player a slew of nicknames, which he used exclusively in his "Chiefs Chatter" column in the Winona Saturday Morning Post.

The column, which had the ostensible purpose of updating the community on the Chiefs' successes, often turned into a string of witty puns and jokes for the baseball literate.

Current Winona State University football coach Tom Sawyer, during his Chiefs playing days, became known as "The Storybook Kid," who according to the Chiefs Chatter column would "paddle to the park on a raft with Becky Thatcher."

Smith coined the name "Boom-Boom" for longtime Chiefs star Jim Boynton. This slugger inspired many Chiefs Chatter gems, such as: "Boom-Boom Boynton gave his regards to Broadway with a long drive," or "Boom-Boom delivered a deep shot on the Great White Way."

Only the genius of Al Smith could combine clever nicknames, classic show tunes and American literature references with such panache.

The playful Smith, in all seriousness, credits the help of his late wife Patty, all his coaches, his former announcer Darryl Smelser, the Winona Parks department, and many others for the Chiefs' revitalization.

But truly, without Smith at the helm, the club would likely have sunk before Ronald Reagan ever entered the Oval Office.

And the legacy he leaves behind includes lighthearted fun, a commitment to Winona, and championship quality baseball.

1950s Chiefs coach Hugh Orphan once told Smith that "the modern Chiefs could give the pro Chiefs a real battle."

"They're faster, in better shape, and every bit as good as we were," Smith recalls Orphan saying.

Smith was reluctant to let go of his proud club, coming out of retirement to manage the Chiefs through the early 2000s. But now, after handing over his club to a board of

directors including Bruce Brinkman, Greg Zaborowski, Ryan Buhler and Dean Beckman, Smith knows that the longest running show on Broadway is in good hands.

"I am so grateful to them," he said. "Right now I can take a deep breath."

Truly, no Winonan connected to baseball ever deserved a deep breath more than he does.