

The old ball game: Emil "Tiger" Nascak has memory like an elephant
by BRIAN P. HEILMAN

He stood barely 60 inches tall and weighed a smidge over 80 pounds, but to Winonans of the 1950s he was nevertheless "The Tiger."

When he wasn't mistaken for the Winona Chiefs' batboy, that is.

Emil "The Tiger" Nascak is one of the few remaining members of the storied Winona Chiefs baseball teams of the 1950s. And the New Jersey-native-turned-lakeside-Winonan still recalls his ballplaying years as some of his best.

Truly, his abilities in recalling his baseball career rival even his statistics.

"I was signed up by the Boston Red Sox in 1941, and went to play ball in the Eastern Shore League," Nascak recalled of his first stint in pro ball. "All I did was take infield practice and batting practice, but finally I got a chance to play against the Yankees' farm team.

"The coach said, 'Go in at second and bat eight,' so I did," Nascak still remembers. "I went four-for-five with three doubles that day. It was my best game in pro ball, and it was my first."

Nascak can recite in a flash his batting performance, place in the batting order and specific coaches' comments from individual games that took place over 60 years ago.

But his off-the-field memories are often more colorful.

"I remember the manager sold me to New York," he said. "When I got there and met the manager, he said, 'We don't need no bat boys, who the heck are you?'"

"I said, 'I'm your third baseman!'"

Nascak's Boston manager had listed him as five feet seven inches, 160 pounds, in the trade documents. Nascak stood five foot two and weighed 82 pounds.

Nonetheless, the mighty Tiger was a veritable wall against ground balls, a sharp hitter and speed demon on the bases.

When he joined the Navy during World War II, he kept his baseball career alive by sneaking onto an Army roster at Guadalcanal. At the time, he was working as a guard in a prison, which the sailors called "the big."

After a narrow defeat in the service league championship game, a senior officer engaged Nascak in a conversation he recalls verbatim, as follows:

"He says, you're in the Navy.
I says, yeah.
He says, what you do?
I says, I'm in the big.
He says, how'd you like to work for me?
I says, what do you do?
He says, I'm in recreation."

In addition to getting the Tiger a new job in the service, this officer arranged for Nascak to try out with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He played in spring training with the Pirates that year, but failed to make the roster.

Legend has it that Nascak's wife was so enamored with Winona on a brief train ride respite that the couple chose to move here. While Mrs. Tiger enjoyed the peacefulness and beauty of the river, lake and bluffs, Nascak joined the Chiefs ball club, the legends of 1950s Winona.

"Just to give you an idea of how much the town loved us," Nascak said, "I got a job at a clothing store and the owner went out and had two thousand cards made up about me. It was a postcard with a picture of me fielding a ground ball.

"That just shows you how crazy they were," he said.

Another time, Nascak and fellow players Jack Haines and Ralph Sobotta stopped in a tavern in Independence.

"The bartender said to me, if you hit a home run tomorrow, I'll give you a box of cigars," Nascak recalled.

"I'll be darned if I didn't hit a home run that day, but I'm still waiting for the cigars."

Nascak also remembers how fans overflowed into the outfield during playoff games at Gabrych Park, leaving the ground crew with no choice but to put up extra fences.

Prior to Nascak's celebrity streak in Winona, he had several chances to make the big leagues, most notably on one surprise trip to Wrigley Field in Chicago.

"One night when I was playing in Waukegan, the manager says to me 'Bring your glove and shoes,'" Nascak remembered.

"He picked me up and here we start driving to Chicago. I said 'Where the heck you going?' and he said 'Wrigley Field!'"

Once at the storied grounds on Chicago's North Side, Nascak found himself in the presence of legendary 1930s Chicago Cubs shortstop Billy Jurgens, who by that point was coaching for the Cubs.

Jurges was in charge of a workout for young prospects that day, which Nascak said he never would have attended had his manager not duped him.

"After the workout was all over," Nascak recalled, "Billy says to me 'Emil I wanna hit some ground balls to you.' I said 'fine,' and for a half hour he couldn't get one by me.

"Afterward he told me that he'd recommend me to AAA and that I'd be with the Cubs the next year. 'You're the greatest infielder I ever saw,' he said. But it never worked out."

So the young Tiger, who was perennially on the verge of major league stardom, returned to Waukegan and eventually to Winona, where he made himself a baseball legend, and a home.

Nascak recalls the friendship he made with broadcaster Chuck Williams, whom the players loved because he always made reasonable excuses on the air for their errors, as well as his brief experiences of star pitchers Moose Skowron and Mel Parnell in farm ball.

He recalls how he could never find baseball pants to fit his 26-inch waist, and how he coached the Winona American Legion team to within one inning of a state championship.

He recalls feeling like Babe Ruth as he gazed upon packed bleachers at Gabrych Park.

Emil "The Tiger" Nascak still recalls a lot of things.

And Winona ought rightfully to recall in return this slight superstar, this "greatest infielder ever," this elephant-minded Tiger, as one of its most prized possessions.