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Fargo star baseball player 'forgotten'

By CURT ERIKSMOEN Apr 27, 2014

The most feared slugger ever to play professional baseball for a North Dakota team was a former pitcher. In a little more than 2½ seasons, from 1952-54, Frank Gravino hit 140 home runs, drove in 440 runs and hit for a .322 average for the Fargo-Moorhead Twins of the Northern League.

Among his legion of fans was a young Robert Velline (Bobby Vee), who said that "his hero was Frank Gravino." After hitting 56 home runs and driving in 158 runs for the Twins in 1954, Gravino retired from professional baseball.

Frank John Gravino was born Jan. 29, 1923, in Newark, N.Y., to Domenic and Angelina Gravino. His father was a night watchman for a paper box factory. Due to their large family, Gravino, like many of his siblings, quit school after the eighth grade and got a job.

All of the Gravino boys played baseball and when his brother, Joe, signed a contract to play minor league baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1938, playing professional baseball became Gravino's obsession.

Scouts noticed him because he threw a wicked fastball, and he was signed in 1940 by the Cardinals and sent to Williamson in the Mountain State League. There, he compiled a 10-5 win-loss record with a 4.57 earned run average in 130 innings. What the management found most promising was his power and skill with the bat.

When Gravino returned to Williamson in 1941, he was converted to the outfield where he played alongside future major leaguer Hal Rice. Gravino spent the last half of the season with Batesville in the Northeast Arkansas League. In 1942, he was sent to Albany in the Georgia-Florida League and played as both an outfielder and a pitcher.

Gravino was most effective as a pitcher, compiling a 13-9 record with a 3.52 ERA.

With the U.S. needing more soldiers during World War II, Gravino enlisted on Jan. 27, 1943, and remained in the Army until his discharge on Dec. 9, 1945. In 1946, he hit 17 home runs and batted .334 with Hamilton in the Pony League, and he also hit four home runs and batted .350 with Allentown in the Interstate League. Gravino was promoted to Omaha in the Western League in 1947, but after struggling at the plate for the first couple of weeks, was sent to Winston-Salem in the Carolina League, where he hit 16 home runs and batted .310.

In 1948, Gravino was promoted to the Rochester Red Wings in the International League, which was the Cardinals' top minor league affiliate. He knew that if he had a good season, he would be brought up to the major leagues.

Needless to say, Gravino was very excited to play for Rochester, which was located only 35 miles from his hometown of Newark. He started out the season as the team's best hitter, batting .342 with 12 home runs by the end of June. In mid-summer, he was hit in the head with a pitch that affected his eyesight and caused him to go into a prolonged slump.

During the remaining three months, his average dropped to .277, and he only hit six more home runs.



Advertisement (1 of 1): 0:02

With his eyesight affected, Gravino was no longer able to get a proper read on a curveball, and the Cardinals sent him down to Columbus in the South Atlantic League to work on his hitting. After some success, he was promoted to Omaha, but Gravino's struggle with the curveball returned, and he was released by the Cardinals.

For the next two seasons, Gravino played for the St. Jean Braves of the independent Provincial League. Meanwhile, the F-M Twins were coming off a mediocre 59-65 record and were looking for players who could help their team in 1952. It was decided that Gravino was one of those players, and Jack O'Connor, general manager of the team, called Gravino and offered him \$1,300 a month to play for the Twins in 1952. Gravino accepted the offer.

The Twins, an affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, played their home games at Barnett Field, located at 19th Avenue North and Broadway. The team got off to a horrible start, and when Danny Litwhiler, a former major league outfielder who was playing for Mel Ott's Oakland Oaks, incurred a serious groin injury one month into the season, he was convinced to become manager of the Twins. He wrote that the player who displayed the greatest potential on the team was Frank Gravino.

Litwhiler pulled Gravino aside and began working with him. Before leaving Oakland, Ott had showed Litwhiler how to generate great power with the bat. This information was passed on to Gravino: "Keep your hands and bat in and explode out at the ball."

Gravino saw a dramatic improvement and, by mid-season, made the all-star team. After playing in 94 games and hitting 32 home runs, he was promoted to Cedar Rapids of the Three-I League, but once again, his statistics suffered because pitchers threw many more curve balls.

Back with the Twins in 1953, he was joined in the outfield by an 18-year-old Fargo native, Roger Maras (later changed to Maris). Gravino had an incredible year, batting .352, hitting 52 home runs and driving in 174 runs, (the latter is a Northern League record). In 1954, Gravino batted .301, hit 56 home runs (a Northern League record) and drove in 158 runs.

Primarily because of Gravino, the two best years of the Twins in franchise history were 1953 and 1954, with the team going 86-39 and 85-55.

Realizing that his eyesight would no longer allow him to play at a higher level, Gravino retired in 1954. He worked in construction in Rochester, N.Y. According to Rochester city directories, by 1960 he had become a parking lot attendant. Gravino died on April 5, 1994.

Fargo has done the proper thing in recognizing Maris by honoring him with a museum, an annual celebrity golf tournament and a cancer treatment center. However, Gravino has become one of the city's forgotten sports heroes.

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