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## He made a grand slam with his career

■ John Baxter wears many different hats and sometimes uniforms — at the Cove

By SUZI KLIMEK  
Tribune Business Weekly

**SOUTH BEND** — He may not be Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio or even Cal Ripken Jr., and he doesn't have a batting average of more than .300.

OK, he doesn't even play the game professionally. But, John Baxter didn't need to be a famous major league baseball player to know he wanted to be a part of the game.

He made the decision to go into the baseball industry while he was in college at Emporia State University in Kansas. When he graduated in 1979, he took his first job with the Wichita Aeros, a triple-A franchise for the Chicago Cubs.

After working there for about a year, he moved on to work for the Oklahoma City 89ers. In his fifth year with the 89ers, he heard about the newly organized team, the South Bend White Sox.

After working for a few triple-A franchises, he thought he was ready to become a general manager for a team.

He hoped that the people hiring at the South Bend White Sox thought he was as capable as he thought he was.

Lucky for him, they did. They liked that I had triple-A experience," Baxter said.

Before Baxter knew it, he was packing his bags and heading north.

He arrived in town to start his new job as general manager of the South Bend White Sox, which is now called the Silver Hawks, while the stadium was being built.

"I was in town for about a month before they announced I was general manager," he said.

And before long, he was faced with his first challenge. To Baxter's surprise, there was a small but vocal anti-stadium group vowing a lot of negativity about the project.

"But as I got around town, I heard lots of folks excited about the stadium," Baxter said.

Baxter felt the negative feelings about the stadium were due to lack of knowledge.

There were a lot of misconceptions about the ballpark, he said. The stadium was completed in 1987 and about once a month people from other franchises come to look at it.

"We know we did it right," he said.

As he roams through the stands on any given home game, he may even see some of those anti-stadium people sitting in the stands with their family enjoying the game and a ballpark hot dog.

It has been a great addition to downtown and a great addition to the community.



John Baxter, left, and Joseph Jirasek, general manager for the Upper Deck, look out at the new scoreboard from the Upper Deck banquet facility.

First year attendance was 171,000 fans, according to Baxter. And it's gone up every year except for 1993, which was a flood year.

Although the organization didn't change the team name until last season, it seems to have caught on with the locals.

"We decided to change the name to give the team more of a local flavor," Baxter said. By changing the name it would also alleviate any confusion with the Chicago White Sox.

A few names were bounced around, and Silver Hawks was one of them. Being right next to Studebaker, it was only appropriate to name the team after the car manufacturer's top-of-the-line auto.

The name is just one of the many changes and improvements the organization has made over the past eight years.

A noticeable addition is the new scoreboard that lights up the field with colorful graphics and scores during a game.

Another more recent addition was the Upper Deck banquet room, which can be rented year-round for any sort of group event.

"We try to achieve bigger and better," he said. "We want to make one season different from another. We had a good season (last year) — but that was last year. We're always looking ahead to make the place more fun."

By constantly making improvements, like the scoreboard and the banquet facility, Baxter hopes to draw more fans.

But he doesn't want to draw more fans solely for his own benefit. He said drawing more fans allows them to do more charity work.

"We want to give back to the community," he said.

Some of the charity work is done in the form of a food drive, where fans can bring canned food and get free admission to the game.

Ideas like the food drive are aspects Baxter wants to keep improving. Being promoted from general manager to president as well as becoming limited partner of the team, which is owned by Palander Baseball, allows him to spend more time on these projects.

In addition to the Silver Hawks, Palander Baseball and John Baxter also own the newly organized Erie Sea Wolves, which is in the short season A New York/Penn. league.

"They are affiliated with the Pittsburgh Pirates like (the Silver Hawks are) with the White Sox," he said.

He hopes to be involved with additional franchises in the future. There are definitely opportunities to own more, he said.

One of the unique aspects about Baxter's job is the fact that it doesn't involve just baseball. The organization is responsible for everything from concessions to ticket sales. It's entertainment.

This is different from most franchises.

"More and more clubs will service out these jobs," Baxter said. "It's more work to keep it in-

house) but less of a headache."

There are no two-days alike. One day Baxter may be serving hot dogs, another he may be helping a player out with a personal problem.

Baxter's job may require taking care of business, but when the business's core is a team of more than 20 young men, some experiencing their first time away from home, it can get interesting.

"We don't teach them how to hit, but we may help them with other things," Baxter said. "It's like getting 15 to 17 new family members each year."

Although some players come back for a second season, the majority move on to bigger and better things, Baxter said.

Because of this, the organization uses different techniques to promote the games.

"We can't say come out and see so and so play," he said. "We have to promote it as family entertainment."

All of these elements combined have made Baxter's career one he never intends on leaving.

"I've never had a day I woke up not wanting to go to work," he said. "There has always been something to look forward to. When people get into this business, they stay in the business."

"I would be amazed if I left this career. This is a challenge and a lot of fun."

At 37, he considers himself lucky because he knows getting into the business isn't easy. Now he gets a lot of inquiries

### PORTRAIT JOHN BAXTER PRESIDENT, SOUTH BEND SILVER HAWKS

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from people wanting to get involved in minor league baseball.

Growing up, Baxter, like most kids, changed his career aspirations about every two days. As he entered college, he became interested in business and he liked sports.

However, with his towering 6-foot-five-inch frame, he played more basketball and football than baseball.

He didn't know a lot about the minor league baseball industry, but he knew getting into a major league organization was next to impossible.

The first minor league baseball game he ever attended was the one he worked.

"I really didn't know anything about minor league."

He does know now that it really isn't anything like the movie Bull Durham.

"Maybe 10 percent to 20 percent of Bull Durham is realistic," he said. (He hasn't seen Susan Sarandon show up to help train the new guys since he's been around.)

As he spends more time in the minor league, he realizes that not all of the baseball heroes need to be the grunts like Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays.

They can be players that have passed through South Bend for one playing season.

"My heroes are people like Scott Radtke who played here in 1989 and he now plays for the Chicago White Sox. He was diagnosed with cancer almost two years ago. He went through it all and he is now back in the big leagues."

"Those are my heroes. I'm more impressed with people behind the scenes."

John Baxter doesn't feel like he could ask for too much more right now. He has a great job, a wife that works with him in the office, a nine-month-old son and a house. Life is one continuous home run for Baxter.

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