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TEN YEARS AT THE COVE

Minor league a home run with fans

By CURT RALLO
Tribune Sports Writer

When South Bend's minor-league baseball team played its first season in 1988 at Coveleski Stadium, some fans in the area weren't all that sure of what minor-league baseball was all about.

"That first year, I'd get calls from people in the area asking if their softball team could scrimmage us," said John Baxter, South Bend Silver Hawks president.

But South Bend learned that its minor-leaguers were Class A farmhands, three steps away from the major leagues. Amidst all the uproar in 1985 and 1986 about spending tax dollars on building Coveleski Stadium, many people in South Bend weren't sure just what kind of team would play there. Semi-pro? A step better than fast-pitch softball? Could they beat Notre Dame?

Now entering its 10th season in 1997, South Bend knows what minor-league baseball is all about. Residents have seen championship teams and future pro players like Roberto Hernandez of the Chicago White Sox and rookie sensation Alex Rodriguez of the Seattle Mariners. They've also seen the dreams of young ball players die in a veil of tears.

South Bend fans have seen legendary Sox catcher Carlton Fisk here in 1992 on an injury rehabilitation assignment. They've also seen the White Sox leave after nine seasons in South Bend, to be replaced by the expansion Arizona Diamondbacks.

And, the South Bend fans have seen other sides of minor-league baseball, such as the Famous Chicken, fireworks and the Flying Elvises.

Through it all, South Bend has supported its minor-league franchise to an average of more than 200,000 fans a year. And with a well-kept and modern facility like Coveleski Stadium, South Bend will continue to be a good home to minor-league baseball.

When the Chicago White Sox ended its nine-year relationship with South Bend this past fall, the phone was ringing off the hook with major-league teams wanting to put a team in South Bend. South Bend ended up joining the expansion Arizona Diamondbacks' family.

Early on, Baxter had an idea that minor-league baseball would catch on in South Bend.

"When the stadium was finished, before we were going to host the Pan-Am Exhibition Games in 1987, we needed to test the lights," Baxter said.

"So we turn the lights on and we're out there with the guys taking the meter readings," Baxter continued. "We're walking around the field making sure there aren't any dark spots, and I happened to look up.

"There at the gates, all of the gates, were crowds of people," Baxter said. "These were people who were just driving by, saw the lights on at the stadium, and drove over to take a look at it. There must have been a hundred people, maybe more."

Baxter said that South Bend has learned that the minors are a very competitive, if inconsistent, level of professional baseball.

"The only bad thing about the minors is the name minors," Baxter said. "The minors name has a bad connotation.

"But people who come out and see our kids play see some exceptional athletes," Baxter said. "They may not be as consistent as the major leaguers, but the fans see great baseball and they see kids who are hungry to play."

South Bend Silver Hawks owner Alan Levitt, who purchased the team from Eric Margenau in 1990, made a commitment to a family-oriented approach at Coveleski Stadium. Baxter said, "It's something fun to do, it's not expensive and it's safe."

As South Bend has built up time in the minor leagues, more and more names of major leaguers, both for the White Sox and other teams, are recognizable to local fans.

"You hear a lot of, 'Oh, I remember when he played here,' type of talk," Baxter said.

"Me, there's no way I'd make a scout," Baxter said. "When I was at Oklahoma City, we had Bob Dernier and Ryne Sandberg. I thought, 'Wow, that Dernier is going to be in the Hall of Fame, and that Sandberg guy, I guess he's OK.'"

And despite all the early doubters, there are also plenty of people around South Bend saying, "Yeah, I knew it would make it," when talking about minor-league baseball in South Bend.

Opposition and support: What community leaders were saying

Team physician

DR. STEPHEN F. MITROS
South Bend orthopedic surgeon.

"I love baseball," Dr. Stephen F. Mitros said, who became the orthopedic physician for the team after Jeff Carr, the team's first trainer, suggested Mitros for the job.

Mitros said he saw the opportunity to work with the South Bend White Sox as a way to expand his interest in sports medicine. As team physician, he also developed a close relationship with the Chicago White Sox organization, which resulted in spring training trips to Florida.

"I'm still doing it 10 years later," Mitros said.

Economic impact

JOHN E. PECK
Retired economic professor at Indiana University South Bend

John E. Peck did a study on Coveleski Stadium in an effort to predict what kind of economic impact the ballpark would have on South Bend.

"We had to have people show up at that place," Peck said, noting a study of 14 stadiums around the league at the time indicated attendance would have to be at least 1,650 for Coveleski to be a success. Average attendance the first year was around 2,500 and has increased almost yearly.

"I'm confident it has had a greater economic impact than we thought it would have," Peck said.

Had to move

WILLIAM B. FORSTON
President of Universal Painting Co., the only business relocated because of the construction of Coveleski

"Naturally, moving any business causes changes," William B. Forston said. "But I think the city tries, particularly if you want to relocate in the city, to do everything they can to make it as painless as possible."

Forston said he has been to several games since the stadium was built. "I've thoroughly have enjoyed it," he said.

Positive contribution

T. Brooks "Tom" Brademas, community activist and local developer said, "It does not appear there has been a major drain on the taxpayer." He credited city officials at the time for moving ahead with the project.

"From my vantage point, Coveleski has been a positive contribution to the community, and I see it continuing," Brademas said.

Don't look back

ROGER PARENT
Mayor of the city of South Bend at the time Stanley Coveleski Region Stadium was built.

The decision to build Stanley Coveleski Regional Stadium had to be made quickly in the mid-1980s, but once it was, there was no looking back, said former Mayor Roger O. Parent.

City officials had only three or four days to respond to the request of Midwest League franchise owners Robert and Debby Staly and John Wendel to build the facility that would allow them to move their team here, Parent, mayor at the time, recalled in a recent interview.

"They really didn't give us much time at all to make a decision. In government, you don't always have the luxury of commissioning studies," he said. "I did ask, 'How are we going to do this?' We concluded there had to be a way to do it. You have to have faith."

Parent, now development director for the Indiana Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross, found his faith merely tested at times by the Cove project.

Acknowledging he is not a big sports fan, Parent felt nonetheless that Class A baseball could succeed here.

"The only thing I knew in my gut is that sports is big in this town and that people would support it," he said. "We made the right decision. We built it, and they came."

Skeptical of future

Michael Waite, at first, strongly supported Coveleski baseball stadium when approached by former Mayor Roger O. Parent. But, like Beverly Crone, Waite turned to opposing the stadium when the administration announced they would sell bonds to finance the project then, later, built it on a lease-purchase agreement.

"I'm really skeptical about the future of Coveleski stadium," Waite said. But he's disappointed with the loss of the Chicago White Sox affiliation.

"I don't think the Arizona Diamondbacks are going to have any loyalty here," Waite explained. "They (Arizona) needed a place to land and we were here."

Opposed process

Though Beverly D. Crone, South Bend Common Council member, was never opposed to the stadium itself, she was opposed to the process that, at the time, Crone said didn't give the public enough input into the project.

Like Brademas, Crone said the project has not been that much of a drain on taxpayers, despite taxpayer financing of the $11.5 million lease-purchase agreement needed to fund construction.

Great decision

James R. Seitz, former South Bend Parks and Recreation Department superintendent, recalled the battle over whether the stadium should be downtown or outside South Bend. Seitz said supporters felt strongly the stadium be built downtown to bring people into the heart of the city.

"The decision to build it downtown has been a great decision," Seitz said.

Tribune File Photo

In 1989, former South Bend Mayor Joseph E. Kernan, left, and South Bend White Sox Manager Rick Patterson celebrate with a few laughs and a trophy as the area team won the Midwest League championship.

STADIUM SUCCESS

Here is a breakdown on attendance at Midwest League baseball games at Stanley Coveleski Regional Stadium since 1988 and the revenue having a team has generated for the city.

Year	Attendance	City Receipts
1988	171,444	$179,208
1989	202,197	201,996
1990	221,485	191,786
1991	221,071	258,482
1992	213,951	215,713
1993	237,578	237,360
1994	258,424	272,401
1995	225,999	205,509
1996	214,721	205,967*

*Through Nov. 30

FACTS ABOUT COVELESKI

- The two millionth visitor this season will pass through gates at Stanley Coveleski Regional Stadium this season. It averaged more than 217,000 fans a year in its first nine seasons here.
- This summer, the South Bend Silver Hawks will surpass the $2 million mark in revenue paid to the city.
- Initially, it was projected the project would create up to 375 direct and indirect jobs and pump more than $2.5 million a year into the local economy, making it worth the investment.
- Under current contract, city gets 10 percent of the first $750,000 in revenue, 15 percent of anything between $750,000 and $1 million, and 17 percent of anything above the $1 million mark. The city receives a percentage of include ticket sales, food and beverage sales, program sales and program advertising, advertising on the stadium fences and scoreboard, souvenir sales, and rental of the suites.
- In addition, the city receives a flat 6 percent of revenue at the Upper Deck dining and reception area atop the stadium.
- The city's share of stadium revenue goes into a separate fund dedicated for its maintenance and improvement. As of November, there was some $516,000 in the fund, enough to pay for all of this year's planned upgrades, with a substantial amount left over for coming years.
- Original $5.5 million stadium lease agreement was funded by a tax levy. The city made the final payment on the lease on March 1 and it holds clear title to the stadium. Payments ran about $850,000 a year.

COVE

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The stadium could be paid for from a proposed new 1 percent county tax on food and beverage sales that would raise $1 million a year, the mayor said.

Sounding much as Joseph E. Kernan, his successor as mayor, did a decade later with the football Hall, Parent predicted another $1 million could be raised through donations.

It didn't take long for cost estimates for the stadium to start to rise. In a 1985 feasibility study done for the city, Indiana University South Bend economist John Peck said the total cost would be closer to $7.3 million.

Former Common Council Member John Voorde, an early critic, said a team playing at the proposed stadium site would become known as the "South Bend Albatross."

The site on the near southwest side was the wrong location, Voorde contended.

But the stadium would be built only if it was part of an overall inner-city renewal effort around the Studebaker Corridor, Parent decided.

Michael Waite, who a year earlier had spearheaded successful opposition to a proposed $3.8 million city bond issue, also came out early against the stadium proposal. Though he later vacillated on the issue, Waite eventually led a court challenge to the project that ultimately failed.

The city had no business building a stadium for private owners, Waite contended. Anybody wanting to field a team here should construct its own park, he said.

A lot of people shared that belief a decade ago. A 1996 poll by WNDU-TV showed 53 percent of city residents opposed the stadium, with only 34 percent favoring it.

The stadium controversy also fueled creation of the Fair Tax Inc. group in opposition. One of its leaders, Joseph E. Gluentzer, now deceased, at one point called on Parent to resign for misleading the public on the stadium project. The mayor declined and ripped Fair Tax for its tactics.

While the city already owned Plaza Park, where part of the stadium would sit, it had to use its eminent domain powers to acquire 23 privately owned parcels to amass the rest of the 6 acres needed for the facility.

The Indiana General Assembly complicated the project in 1985, shooting down the food and beverage tax proposed to pay for it.

That meant taxpayers would have to bear the cost.

The stadium project would add about 14 cents a year to the city tax rate, Parent said. However, because an older bond issue was about to be paid off, it would not increase the overall rate, he assured taxpayers.

"It's an investment that will pay for itself, one we can't afford not to make," he said at the time.

The taxpayer legal challenge even forced local jurists to weigh in on the issue. In ruling for the city, Circuit Court Judge John W. Montgomery concluded "the net economic impact would be decidedly positive."

City officials originally proposed a bond issue to build the stadium. But, faced with the remonstrance, they signed a private lease-purchase agreement with Security Pacific of San Francisco to finance it.

"We knew we were going to lose and stopped," Parent said of the bond issue proposal.

Original plans called for the stadium to open in 1986. Because of the legal dispute, that was pushed back to 1987. Delays because of the remonstrance probably added at least $1 million to the cost, Parent said.

It did open in the summer of 1987, but too late for the Midwest League. The Chicago White Sox, relocating its Class A team from Appleton, Wis., to South Bend, was forced to play in Daytona Beach, Fla., in 1987 because of the delays.

Despite their optimistic forecasts, the Staleys and Wendel didn't even stick around for opening day in 1988.

They stunned Parent in October 1986 by announcing they had sold the franchise to Eric Margenau and Jay Acton, both of New York City.

"It was like pulling the rug from under our feet, politically," the mayor said.

Parent initially refused to negotiate with the new owners and appealed the sale to Major League Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth. However, Midwest League officials later upheld the sale, forcing the mayor to settle finally with Margenau and Acton.

"People thought I was crazy (for refusing to negotiate with them) but it was a deliberate strategy," Parent said. "It worked. They eventually came around."

The Cove officially opened on July 2, 1987, with a variety of amateur baseball games and other events in its first year. Even in its initial season, the team surpassed attendance projections, drawing more than 140,000 fans.

Officials put the final construction cost at about $9.35 million, which includes land acquisition and infrastructure outlays. With interest on the original issue agreement, the total price tag was about $11 million. The lease itself totered about half the total stadium project cost.

The city made the final payment on the lease on March 1 and now holds clear title to the stadium. Payments have been running about $850,000 a year.

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