



Bob Gibson and Stan Musial,
Spring Training 1961, Tampa Bay

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

SEASON XXXVI



Angry no more.

FROM THE BULLPEN

2020 Campaign

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MEMORY LANE: 2010 REVISITED

This past Tuesday, with not a darned thing on my calendar to keep me in Omaha, I decided to visit another Nebraska courthouse and thus took a short trip south and west to Wilber, Nebraska, county seat of Saline County. It was a terrific day for a drive, traffic was light, and in no time I was at the intersection of West Third and South High Streets where the Saline County Courthouse was built in 1927.



Constructed in the classic revival style of that era and built with Bedford limestone, Saline County Courthouse is a reflection of the hard-working populace of Wilber and Saline County, tough, sturdy, plain, utilitarian. No fancy frills here. But for the no-nonsense citizenry of *The Czech Capital of the USA*, it's just right.

Driving through Wilber (population 1855), I was reminded that I was last in the community in the summer of 2010, when Joe and his Mt. Michael baseball teammates played in the Legion State tournament a few miles down the road at DeWitt, Nebraska, at the Tri County Legion baseball field. So with nothing stopping me, I drove the 12-15 miles to check on the status of the ballpark, and located it just where I had it in my mind's eye.



I pulled up to the concession stand located behind the backstop and got out of my vehicle to take a few pictures. Just then, I saw these two ol' boys who were working on field maintenance down the left field line jump into their vehicles and come bearing toward me to see who I was and what I wanted. When they got to my vehicle, I told them who I was and that I was there for a little bit of reminiscing about the 2010 State Legion tournament there that one of my sons had played in, and one of them immediately began bringing up details about that particular tournament, which was won by the Wakefield Nebraska Legion Nine. I commented on how beautiful and well-groomed their facility was, both now and then, and they proudly informed me that they had just paid off the mortgage on the field last year, retiring

the debt on schedule and without a single taxpayer dollar used in the construction or the maintenance of this fine complex, the pride of the County.



One of the pair informed me that the field was named Cody Field after the son (Cody John Essman) of his counterpart, who tragically died at age 14 in a skateboarding accident. See the below tribute to Cody on the Tri County Legion program website:

A TRIBUTE TO CODY JOHN ESSMAN

Cody Park - Legion Field



Cody John Essman

Nathan Essman, the oldest son of James and Jeanene Essman and Cody's older brother, was playing his final year of Little League baseball in the summer of 1994. A number of parents, including Nathan's, decided with their players that they weren't quite ready to stop playing baseball. That decision, along with the support of the three local Legion posts and the leadership of Little League coaches Bill Waltz and Jeff Reynolds, began the formation of Tri County Legion Baseball.

The field, of course, would be named to honor our soldiers and the sacrifices they made. As exciting as it was for the Essmans to be part of the building of Legion Field and Tri County baseball, they had no idea how important that field and the surrounding park would become to their family.

Cody, the Essman's second son and for whom the park is named, loved sports. He played football, ran hurdles, loved wrestling, held a 1st degree black belt in Tae Qwon Do and had played baseball since he was five years old - even winning a championship with his team. He was fearless, happy and was determined to do everything his older brother Nathan had done. He teased his little sister, Jenna, as brothers do and with his friends was as busy and carefree as fourteen-year-old boys are. His death in a skateboarding accident in the summer of 1998 took away a life of expectation and adventure. Cody's family decided that even though his life was short he deserved to be remembered for the young man he was and for the man he would have become. They know, if he had lived, he would have played Legion baseball just as the brother he idolized did. They, too, are proud to memorialize his short but full and happy life with the building and naming of Cody Park. A picture of the team Cody would have been a member of is proudly displayed in the Essman family room.

To everyone watching these athletes today - be proud and respect our soldiers, support your Legion team and remember our son, Cody.

The family of Cody John Essman

He then volunteered to me that his program co-founder committed suicide in 2017, so it was just these two ol' boys left to take care of their legacy. He also lamented that they had decided in light of COVID-19 to cancel this year's Legion program in their area.

As I left the ballpark complex for the next stop on my road trip, I complimented my two new Saline County friends for the beautiful work they had done and for keeping baseball going in the Tri County area. I invited them all to come visit our beautiful baseball complex at Elkhorn St. Michael if they are ever in the area, and they said they would take me up on it the next time they are in the area. Something tells me that they won't be in the Omaha area anytime soon, these two fine old salt-of-the-earth denizens of Southeastern Nebraska.

After leaving the Tri County Baseball Complex, I zipped into the tiny nearby hamlet of DeWitt to see if the little tavern that we frequented (in 2010) pre- and post-game--The Red Zone--was still in operation. To my surprise and satisfaction, it is still open and keeping the good people of DeWitt and Tri County well-hydrated. There are very few other open businesses in DeWitt these days, but The Red Zone lives on. Some great memories in that there place.

With DeWitt getting smaller in my rear view mirror, I ruminated a bit about the 2010 Legion tournament at the Tri County ballpark. I remember that Joe was a gangly sophomore, and that he was thrown into a starting pitching role early in the tournament, in some forward-thinking coaching strategy to preserve the arms of the team aces. As I fondly recall now, with his father's fingernails being bitten down to the nubs, Joe kept his nerves in check and the opposition at bay and recorded a win¹ for the Knights, his only appearance in the tournament. However, the young Knights were doomed to be knocked out of the tournament by a much more experienced Creighton team, and failed to make it to the championship game. 2010 was a harbinger of things to come, however, as the following season the Knights went to Creighton, Nebraska, and captured their first and only State Legion title.

¹ A 3-hit, 9-1 win over the host team, Tri County, according to the newspaper clipping I was able to dig out of the archives.

RETURN TO BLUESTEM



As I headed back toward Crete, Nebraska and then from there to Lincoln, I decided to pay a visit to Bluestem Lake just a few miles from Crete, where Runza founder Don Everett had a farm; and where I worked for a couple of summers during high school and college, feeding his horses², painting his barn, cleaning out horse manure, installing a three-rail fence with a manual post-hole digger, babysitting his young twins ("Don and Dawn"), and on numerous occasions each summer, driving his boat on the lake and pulling shapely young carhops on water skis. Ah, those were the days, my friends. It is also where I first learned to ski, and I spent many hours behind the boat learning how to slalom and believing myself to be just about the greatest skier in the free world. Like every other 19-year-old male.

Once at Bluestem Lake, I drove into each of the entrances to get several different perspectives on the lake, and looked wistfully out at the speedboat pulling a couple of kids in a tube and wishing I could go back in time to one of those glorious summer days in 1975, 1976 or 1977 and have one of them back all over again.



² Including Tonzarun, most likely Don Everett's most acclaimed racing steed. Somewhere in my memory bank, there is a photo of Don and his extensive family, including Scott, Kathi and me in the Winner's Circle at Aksarben Racetrack. If memory serves, Tonzarun ran in the Breeders Cup in California one season.



After checking out the lake--including the spot where we would put in on the north side of the lake, using Don's temperamental old 1950s-vintage tractor--I drove up to the entrance to Don's farm, now known as *Bluestem Farm*.³

³ In a crazy coincidence, I guess, after having already dictated this issue of *FTB*, I was having lunch with Mouse on Thursday at Jam's and he mentioned his neighbor, David Sjulín, brother of Carl Sjulín, who now owns the Don Everett farm, and he reminded me that he (Mouse) went with me one time to the farm and helped me tear down one of the old barns on the property. My jaw dropped when he said this, and I told him that I had just been out to the farm two days earlier, and that I hadn't even thought about the farm or Bluestem Lake for probably 20 years of so. Crazy coincidence? Or is Mouse the next coming of the Amazing Kreskin?



But alas and alack, the gated entry was closed and there was a sign indicating that the property is monitored by video camera and that trespassers would be prosecuted. I don't even know if the farm is still in the Everett family, and I thought about just ignoring the sign and protocol and taking myself on a little walking tour around the property, but decided not to due to the distinct possibility that the current owner is a fan of the Second Amendment. Instead, I hopped back into the saddle of my Ford Explorer and made my way back to Omaha and, sigh, my office and the 100 emails that awaited me. Talk about wishing one could turn the clock back.

But all in all, a great day to be alive, an American, a Nebraskan, free, and with at least most of my data storage (memory banks) still intact.



EPILOGUE

That's all I got for this edition, lads.

Next issue: *The Making of the President 1968*.

Skipper