

FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

2023: Our 39th Season

Edition No. 15



June 8, 2023

OWNERS:

Ted Bridges
("PAwesome")
Wahoos
Returning Champion

Jeff Bechtolt
("Screech")
Monarchs

Jon Blongewicz
("Sunny")
Blues

Denny Bontrager
("SloPay")
Bears

Jim Buser
("Tirebiter")
Redbirds

Rick Drews
("Big Guy")
Tigers

Dave Ernst
("Skipper")
Senators

Bob Hurlbut
("Underbelly")
Tribe

Scott Krause
("BT")
Saints

Mike Morris
("Mouse")
Bombers

Mitch Pirnie
("Magpie/Tricko")
Bums

Chuck Sinclair
("Shamu")
Cubs

John Thielen
("Itchie")
Skipjacks

STAFF:

Publisher and Editor
Dave Ernst

Webmaster and
Assistant Editor
Linda "Chief" Koftan

Brethren:

Here are the standings after ten weeks of play and the point totals for Week 10:

WAHOOS STILL IN LEAD;

TRIBE STILL IN CELLAR;

BEARS ABOIL

HSL STANDINGS THRU WEEK 10 ENDING JUNE 4, 2023

	Team	Points	Pts Back
1	Wahoos	4854.0	-
2	Saints	4616.6	237.4
3	Skipjacks	4392.7	461.3
4	Bums	4331.4	522.6
5	Bears	4276.5	577.5
6	Bombers	4259.3	594.7
7	Cubs	4221.6	632.4
8	Tigers	4183.4	670.6
9	Redbirds	4100.3	753.7
10	Blues	4028.2	825.8
11	Monarchs	4020.7	833.3
12	Senators	3959.0	895.0
13	Tribe	3553.7	1300.3

POINT TOTALS FOR WEEK 10

	Team	Pts
1	Bears	563.9
2	Skipjacks	466.2
3	Wahoos	465.5
4	Bums	465.4
5	Tigers	424.3
6	Blues	407.8



7	Bombers	406.2
8	Senators	399.9
9	Cubs	371.8
10	Monarchs	365.3
11	Saints	348.9
12	Redbirds	337.0
13	Tribe	323.1

Ho, hum. Now let's talk about something much more interesting, like my trip to Pennsylvania this week.

KANVASSING THE KEYSTONE STATE

This is the week of my yearly sojourn to Pittsburgh for my annual pancreas screening test at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center,¹ and with HQ out of town and in the Galapagos Islands for ten days to paint the turtles with 41 of her Marian students, I said to myself, "Self, what better time would there be for a self-guided junket to the Keystone State for a little bit of exploration?" Although rhetorical and not in need of a response, my reply was, "No better time." So here I am.

IN PRAISE OF READING AND FIRSTENERGY STADIUM

I flew into Philadelphia bright and early on Tuesday morning and then drove the hour and 15 minutes to Reading (pronounced RED-ding)² and checked into my nearby Residence Inn as a prelude to heading over to the ballpark to watch the Reading **FIGHTIN' PHILS** take on the visiting Binghamton (New York) *Rumble Ponies*. Sounds like quite a mismatch, doesn't it?

Once I arrived at FirstEnergy Stadium,³ I was immediately in minor league ballpark heaven. I instinctively genuflected in the general direction of home plate, thanked my lucky stars, and then went inside to see this giant candy store of baseball history for myself. From what I had read about it ahead of time—nothing but glowing reviews—I had high expectations. I wasn't disappointed.

As usual, the pictures (see below) will tell the story better than I can, but let me at least touch on a few of the highlights. First of all, as soon as one walks into the ballpark, one is greeted by sort of an outdoor mezzanine area similar in some respects to the area around Fenway Park. There are beer and food vendors everywhere, and lots of activities for families and kids and just a whole mass of humanity enjoying themselves even before making their way to their seats for the game. The first area that I encountered was parallel to the first base side of the field, but I later discovered that there are similar areas outside the playing field itself on the third base side, where many fans congregate to eat, drink and enjoy the company of their fellow

¹ And our annual junket to PNC Park with our doctor and good friend, Randy Brand.

² Think: Otis Redding, he of the *Dock of the Bay* classic, and you will never again be embarrassed by making the faux pas of mispronouncing it while playing *Monopoly* with your grandchildren. Quite to the contrary, you can now magisterially correct them when they mispronounce it. You're welcome.

³ Opened in 1951 as *Reading Memorial Park*.

baseball fans outside the actual viewing area of the ballpark. As you would imagine, there were numerous different types of draft beer available throughout the ballpark, including one of my personal favorites, *Yuengling*.⁴ I could hardly wait to get to a concession stand for myself to see what kinds of delicacies they were offering. Stay tuned.



FirstEnergy Stadium in Reading, PA

NO SALTED PEANUTS?
WHY, THAT'S DOWNRIGHT UN-AMERICAN!

You read that correctly. To my abject horror, I learned during my first stop at a concession stand to buy my first brät—which was in fact delectable—that FirstEnergy no longer serves salted peanuts. When I heard this, I'm sure that my head spun around like Linda Blair in the *Exorcist* as I blinked and sputtered and said, "What? No peanuts? Why? That's downright un-American!" The apologetic concessionaire, a nice older woman who reminded me of BT's mom, told me that the "powers that be" had decided to stop selling salted peanuts at their baseball games because of the proliferation⁵ of peanut allergies *and* the mess created by careless

⁴ In which I unfortunately could not imbibe because of an MD-ordered one-week, pretest prohibition against all beverages alcoholic. Hey, it used to be a month, so I'm thankful that it's now only a week. Still . . .

⁵ Okay, that wasn't the exact word that she used, her being from Reading and all.

shuckers. Sad though she was to break this news to me, she then smiled and said, "We do have Crackerjacks!" Cold comfort, to be certain.⁶ The salted peanuts scandal aside, I give the concessions at FirstEnergy park two thumbs up, in large part because of the sheer quality and availability of said concessions, but also because of the variety and taste and friendliness of the hawkers.

Lots more that I could share about the ballpark and the experience that have nothing to do with the game itself, but let's see if I can narrow it down to a handful:



I absolutely love the Fightin' Phils nickname and logo.



The F-fist logo faultlessly typifies the fanbase in this very blue collar area of Pennsylvania, brash, rugged, fearless, probably not all that smart, but ready to fight. Perfect. I wanted to come back with a Fightin' Phils souvenir tee shirt from the gift shop, but they had so many options and I had so little time that I was totally overwhelmed. Next visit.



There is a building in the outfield known as Redner's Event Center, pictured below, which looks like it has been used as a viewing area for the game in the past, but was not open for business Tuesday night, and I'm not even sure that they still use it for that purpose. It looks a little rundown. But in its heyday, I can imagine how many honkers and hooters and fanatics were poised inside this building and hectoring the opposing team's outfield.

⁶ Confession: I did purchase and wolf down a sack of Crackerjacks. Not a fan. I mean, they're tasty and all that, but they're *not* salted peanuts. Can I get an amen?



As shown in the picture below, a fan can stand just outside the outfield fence and even has a perch for his beer on the fence, and watch the game only a few feet above field level. I spent a couple of innings poised in this area and thought it was about as good an outfield view as I have ever had at a ballgame. However, if one is standing parallel to the left field foul line, as I was, one is in harm's way should there be an errant throw over the head of the catcher in the visiting team's bullpen.⁷



⁷ Shades of my *Schrader v. Omaha Royals and City of Omaha* lawsuit from about 20 years ago. More on that later.



A concerned Skipper hopes to avoid a bullpen beaming.



The close proximity to the bullpens of each team in this ballpark is remarkable, and wouldn't fly with today's safety standards. But on Tuesday night, it gave me an unfettered view of the pitchers warming up, and that was pretty entertaining. Starting in about the 4th or 5th inning, several of the Rumble Ponies relief pitchers started getting up and stretching and pulling and hopping and engaging in all kinds of gyrations to get loose, or perhaps to just show off, but they were putting on quite a show whether it was for the manager, the pitching coach, their fellow pitchers or the fans. I reminded myself that these are Class AA players who are mostly in their early 20s and still dreaming of making it to The Show someday, although very few of them will. Their exuberance was refreshing.⁸



Like most minor league games these days, the Fightin' Phils had a number of gimmicks to try to attract and keep their fans, such as referring to the team as the *Keystones* for this game as a nod to the past; and such between-inning capers as a beer vendor with a getup that makes him look like he is riding on an ostrich as he scampers around the diamond delivering beer; and in a tip of the cap to the heavily-prevalent teutonic heritage of Pennsylvania folk, a vendor with a Germanic dummy⁹ who yodels loudly while distributing packages of German-style pretzels to exhilarated recipients.

⁸ In quite a contrast to, say, a crusty old veteran like Lee Smith who would be woken out of a deep slumber in the bullpen to be informed that he was being called into the game, would take a couple of drags on a cigarette, and then lumber toward the mound to notch his next save.

⁹ Don't even go there—not all of us of German heritage are dummies.

AND THEN THE CROWD GOT UGLY

I noticed almost immediately upon entering the ballpark that this was an *ugly* crowd. No, I don't mean mean or misbehaved, I mean U-G-L-Y. Okay, that sounds mean-spirited and judgmental, even if accurate, so let's modify that by saying that this was a *motley* crowd. Yes, that's better. And by that I mean that this was a working man's, blue collar crowd, with people who were unconcerned about their appearances and showed up dirty and sweaty after clocking out at the rock quarry or changing a tire down at the filling station or wiping noses at the local daycare. No one was concerned about getting cleaned up or dressed up to attend the ballgame, and come to think of it, that's probably exactly how it should be.

Isn't it great that there is cheap, fun, wholesome entertainment available for working class families such as populate places like Reading, PA, and the mothers and fathers don't have to worry about getting all gussied up and getting their kids cleaned up before heading to the ballpark for some fun. I'm all for it.

But it was a motley crowd, take my word for it.

BUT WHAT WAS THE BEST PART, SKIPPER?

I'm glad you asked. FirstEnergy Stadium has the most phenomenal historical tribute to this franchise and to the great game of baseball that I have ever seen. Ever.¹⁰ In the hallways and catacombs that make up the foundation beneath the grandstands, there are photographs and newspaper articles and giant-sized baseball cards and just all kinds of great stuff which would literally take hours and hours of careful inspection to do justice to them. There is one section which has a team photograph and a team roster for every Reading minor league team that has played in this ballpark. There is another area that includes enlarged baseball cards of every Hall of Fame player who has taken an at-bat or thrown a pitch in this ballpark. Some of the major leaguers depicted on the stadium walls include:

Larry Bowa, Philadelphia (1970–81), played in 155 games for Reading in 1967–68
Greg Luzinski, Philadelphia (1970–80), played in 141 games for Reading in 1970
Bob Boone, Philadelphia (1972–81), played in 112 games for Reading in 1970–71
Mike Schmidt, Philadelphia (1972–89), played in 74 games for Reading in 1971
Willie Hernández, Philadelphia (1983), played for Reading in 1975
Mark Davis, Philadelphia (1980–81; 1993), played in 28 games for Reading in 1980
Ryne Sandberg, Philadelphia (1981), played in 129 games (as an SS) for Reading in 1980
Julio Franco, Philadelphia (1982), played 139 games for Reading in 1981
Darren Daulton, for Philadelphia (1983; 1985–97), played in 113 games for Reading in 1983
Juan Samuel, Philadelphia (1983–89), played in 47 games for Reading in 1983
Mickey Morandini, Philadelphia (1990–97; 2000), played in 48 games for Reading in 1989
Mike Lieberthal, Philadelphia (1994–2006), played in 86 games for Reading in 1992
Scott Rolen, Philadelphia (1996–2002), played in 81 games for Reading in 1995–96
Pat Burrell, Philadelphia (2000–08), played in 117 games for Reading in 1999
Jimmy Rollins, Philadelphia (2000–14), played in 133 games for Reading in 1999
Nick Punto, Philadelphia (2001–03), played in 121 games for Reading in 2000
Geoff Geary, Philadelphia (2003–07), played in 51 games for Reading in 2000–01
Marlon Byrd, Philadelphia (2000–05; 2014), played in 137 games for Reading in 2001
Brett Myers, Philadelphia (2002–09), played in 26 games for Reading in 2001

¹⁰ Well, let's exclude Cooperstown for the sake of this argument, but stick with historical tributes inside ballparks.

Carlos Silva, Philadelphia (2002–03), played in 28 games for Reading in 2001
 Carlos Ruiz, C, Philadelphia (2006–16), played in 153 games for Reading in 2003–04
 Ryan Howard, Philadelphia (2004–16), played 102 games for Reading in 2004
 Michael Bourn, Philadelphia (2006–07), played in 215 games for Reading in 2005–06
 Gio González, Oakland (2008–11), played in 27 games for Reading in 2005
 Lou Marson, Philadelphia (2008–09), played in 94 games for Reading in 2008
 Domonic Brown, Philadelphia (2010–15), played in 102 games for Reading in 2009–10
 Michael Schwimer, Philadelphia (2011–12), played in 37 games for Reading in 2009–10
 Aaron Nola, Philadelphia (2015–present), played in 17 games for Reading in 2014–2015
 Rhys Hoskins, Philadelphia (2017–present), played in 135 games for Reading in 2016
 Scott Kingery, Philadelphia (2018–present), played in 106 games for Reading in 2016–2017
 Darin Ruf, Philadelphia Phillies (2012-2016), played in 139 games for Reading in 2012

Check out this Greg Maddux baseball card prominently displayed in the Hall of Fame showcase.



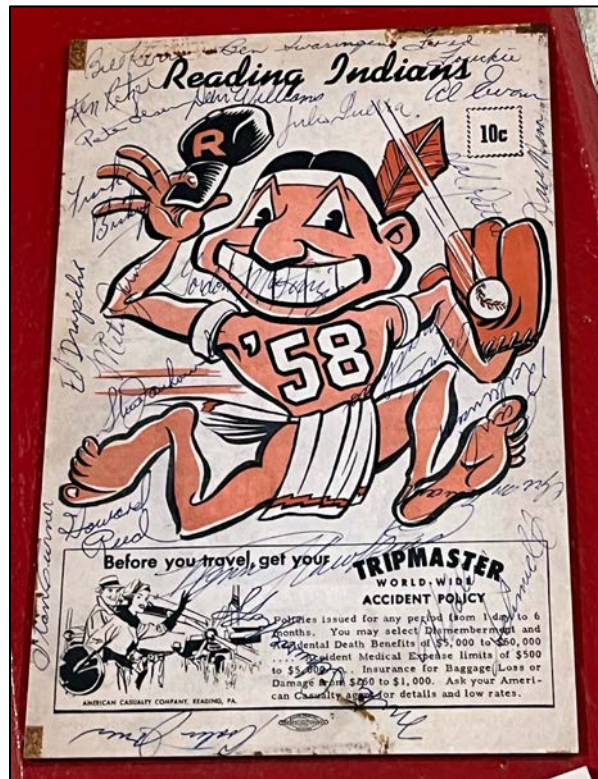
I'm sure he's proud of that wispy little mustache that he was sporting in his early days.



If we ever have another Hot Stove League Trip to Philadelphia, we absolutely should have a side-junket to Reading and a docent-led tour of this historic ballpark.



Reading has not always been a farm club attached to the Philadelphia Phillies, although they have been partnered with the Phillies since 1967, making this their 57th year in partnership with the parent club. However, when the current ballpark first opened, the Reading Nine were attached to the Cleveland Indians and the Reading Indians played at the ballpark until 1957, counting among their rostered players Rocky Colavito and Roger Maris. In 1962, the team became affiliated with the Boston Red Sox and were known as the Reading Red Sox for two years, until they moved to Pittsfield and the team became known as the Reading Indians for one more year.



Other professional baseball teams that called Reading home were:

The Reading Athletic Club
The Reading Actives

The Reading Coal Heavers
The Reading Pretzels
The Reading Coal Barons
The Reading Chicks

OH, YEAH, THE GAME

I was fortunate enough to see a whale of a back-and-forth baseball game between the *Keystones* and the *Rumble Ponies* with the visitors notching three runs in the top of the 8th inning to go ahead by the score of 10-5, with the *Keystones* pushing across 3 in the bottom of the 8th to make it interesting. The crowd was juiced for the bottom of the final frame as the first hometown hitter reached first, but a double play produced a cacophony of groans, and the final *Keystone* hitter made an out to the collective chagrin of the Reading Royal Rooters. A terrific night at an absolutely charming ballpark.

PUTTERING THROUGH PENNSYLVANIA

On Wednesday morning, I woke up in my hotel and tried to get out of bed but was so sore that I thought I had been hit by a truck. As I got up to try to walk to the bathroom in my hotel room, I felt pain in my neck, both shoulders, both wrists, all of my fingers, my low back, both knees and both ankles. Did I miss anything? I had pain pretty much in every joint in my body. I felt like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* who needed oil to get his joints moving, only there wasn't any oil to be found.

It took me a while to put two and two together, but then I figured out that what had happened was that my system had finally depleted itself of any trace of Meloxicam because my doctor in Pittsburgh advised me to lay off it for a few days before our Friday morning procedure. I'm pretty sure that hasn't happened before, because I would have remembered this wretched condition from prior years. I have in the past forgotten to take my daily dose of Meloxicam for a day or two, but probably never so long as this time, and certainly not with my joints as dilapidated as they are now.

Anyway, as you all know at your advanced ages, it's par for the course for all of us to discuss our various maladies, disabilities, aches and pains, treatments and remedies and the like. But right now, I just can't wait for Monday or Tuesday to get here when my system is back full of this wonder drug that I have been taking for about 20 years or so. The miracle of modern medicine.

THE BOONDOGGLE CONTINUES

After crying myself awake, I put on my Big Girl pants and hopped into my rental vehicle for the next phase of the trip, having fallen asleep with my Pennsylvania state map in my hands and having decided to head up to Williamsport for a gander at the Little League World Series field before heading south to State College to take in a baseball game on Wednesday night. An excellent choice. North-Central Pennsylvania is hilly, wooded and beautiful, the only drawback being that the whole area is experiencing extremely limited visibility due to a whole slew of raging and out-of-control wildfires across the border in Quebec. Maybe you have seen it on the news or the weather channel, or in whatever silo you get your information, but it's really quite impressive. It smells like a campfire everywhere you go.

As I drove north on the highway, I entered the very old town of Pottsville and spotted this gigantic building high up on a hill about a mile away from the highway and decided I needed to check it out. Turns out it was the Schuylkill County Courthouse, and it's a beaut. I walked inside for a self-guided tour, hoping for a jury trial in session, but found no active courtrooms. Still, there were some amazing views of the entire area from the upper floors of the courthouse, making it well worth the brief stop. I'm sure if those courthouse walls could talk, they could tell some great stories about cases tried there in the past.



The Schuylkill County Courthouse was dedicated on September 3, 1891. It had an approximate cost of \$320,000, almost \$180,000 over the initial estimate.

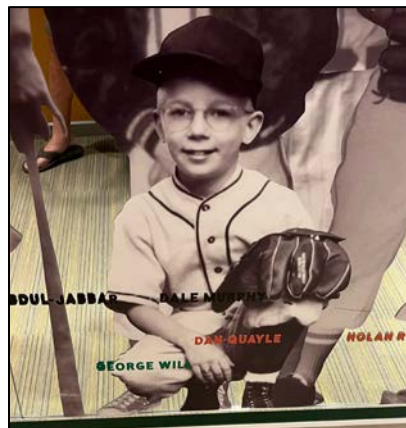
I resumed my drive towards Williamsport, crossing back and forth over the Susquehanna River several different times. Not quite as wide as the Mississippi or Missouri Rivers, the Susquehanna is nevertheless an impressive body of water, and has probably wreaked a fair amount of havoc over the years.

WILLIAMSPORT: HOME OF THE LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES

Once I arrived in Williamsport, I decided that I needed to check out the Little League World Series ballpark, and was pleasantly surprised to find that they have an actual museum,

which I toured. I sat alone¹¹ in the museum's film theater as I watched its touching 5-minute introduction about the history and the purpose of the Little League World Series. I loved the statement made by one of those interviewed for the film: "We're not trying to turn these kids into major league players, we're trying to turn them into major league *people*." Sucker for a good line that I am, I believe them. And as I left the theater following the film, there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

The museum has a "Hall of Excellence" which includes photos of a number of well-known athletes and sports figures who either played in the Little League World Series or did something special to be honored therein, including the following:



George Will

¹¹ A late Wednesday morning in early June, a bit early for the tourists, it seems.



*Bill Bradley, Tom Seaver, George W. Bush, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
 (If you look over Tom Seaver's shoulder, you can see
 the photographer snapping this photo.)*



Dick Vitale



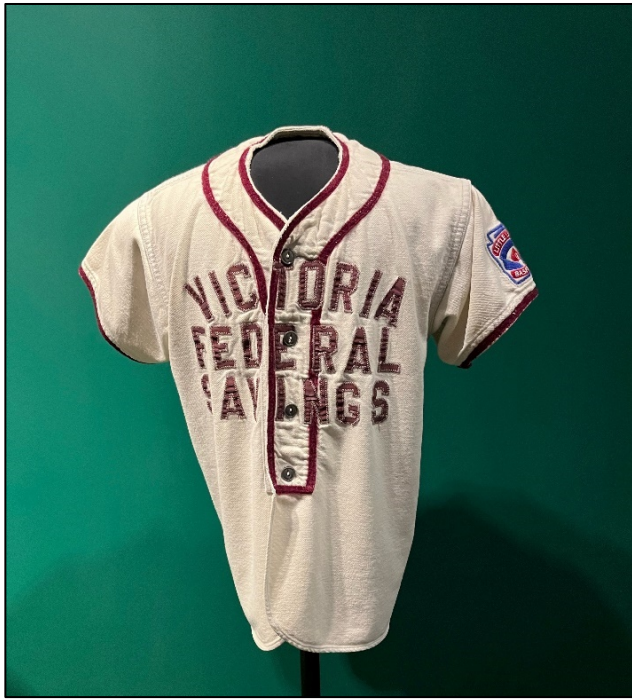
George Will, Dale Murphy, Dan Quayle, Nolan Ryan, Pierre Turgeon, Ross McGinnis, Mike Schmidt, Hale Irwin

Unfortunately, perhaps the famous and most beloved member of this Hall of Excellence only got his name attached to it, without a photograph:

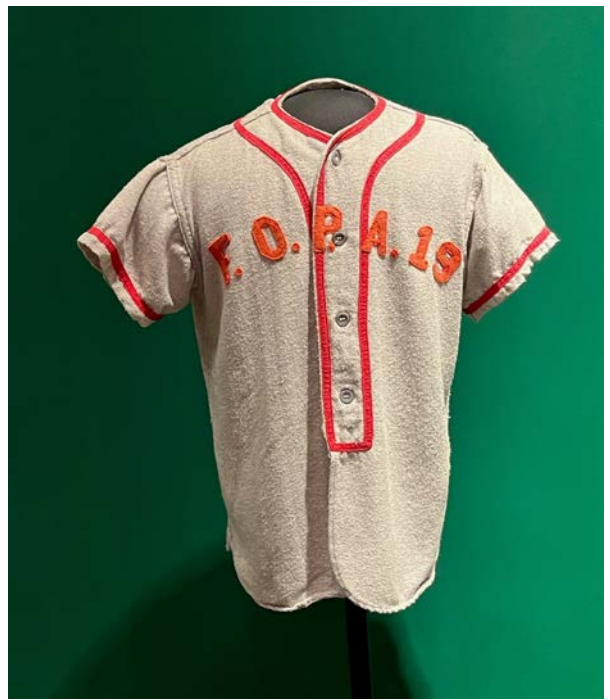


U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visits with a fan in the stands after he was enshrined into Little League's Hall of Excellence before the Little League World Series championship baseball game between Taoyuan, Taiwan, and Chula Vista, Calif., Sunday, Aug. 30, 2009, in South Williamsport, Pa. Chula Vista won 6-3. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster) (/

Another section of the museum contains actual uniforms of several well-known players who went on to have impressive major league careers, like this one worn by Doug Drabek in the mid-1970s, when he played for the Little League team in Victoria, Texas.



Doug Drabek



*Kent Tekulve, Lindenwald
Little League in the late '50s
Hamilton, Ohio*



*Steve Stone wore this jersey when he
pitched a no-hitter on his 11th birthday,
July 14, 1958 in South Euclid, Ohio*

If you are ever in this neck of the woods, it would be well worth your while to pay a visit to the Little League World Series Museum and to the glorious stadium where the Little League World Series is held.



*Howard J. Lamade Stadium,
home of the Little League World Series*

STATE COLLEGE SURPRISE



After departing Williamsport, I made the approximate one hour south drive to State College, PA, home of Penn State University. It was my plan to attend a Wednesday night game between the hometown *State College Spikes* against the *Williamsport Crosscutters* at Medlar Field at Lubrano Park,¹² but about an hour before game time, I learned that the game had been cancelled by the aforementioned smoke from the Canadian wildfires. Although disappointed that I didn't have a chance to see a game in this gem of a ballpark that has been compared to Haymarket Field in Lincoln, I made the best of the situation and headed into the restaurant district to enjoy a fabulous meal at the *Indian Pavilion*. Not as good as a brät and salted peanuts, but not bad, either.

A return visit to State College seems necessary.

¹² Located on the Penn State campus directly adjacent to Beaver Stadium, and also home to the Penn State college baseball team.

JOHNSTOWN, VISITED

The final phase of my Pennsylvania road trip began with a driving tour through the Penn State campus in a little more detail than when we visited it for a Husker Road Trip a few years back, and then it was westward ho to Johnstown to see the rebuilt town from the devastating flood of 1889. Last November I read the David McCullough book: *The Johnstown Flood: The Incredible Story Behind One of the Most Devastating Disasters America Has Ever Known*, and the story was so fascinating that I resolved to stop in for a look for myself the next time I was in the area, which is now.

The *Reader's Digest* version of this event is that a host of 1 percenters like Andrew Carnegie and other Robber Barons of his ilk¹³ from Pittsburgh and other steel- and coal-producing places, purchased a beautiful lake and lodge up in the hills 14 miles away from Johnstown, and formed a summer enclave for the rich and imperious called the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. As the story goes, these callous multimillionaires allowed the dam, which protected everything downstream from the reservoir, to deteriorate and failed to pay for necessary maintenance expenses, and when the clouds opened up and dumped almost a foot of water onto the area during the day of May 31, 1889, the dam predictably burst and picked up steam and essentially wiped out almost every town in the valley below, including Johnstown. Even though warnings were issued, the water came down with such force and intensity that many people were unable to escape to higher ground, resulting in the death of thousands of people and the destruction of most of the homes and businesses in Johnstown.

Having had a chance today to visit the Johnstown Flood Museum and to drive around town and look at the buildings and the landscape, one can certainly understand how this happened and can appreciate the terror caused by the apocalyptic flood.

Shown below are photos of the Franklin Street Church which survived the flood and is a thriving house of worship today, a statue of commemoration to the founder of the city of Johnstown, Joseph Johns, and a memorial to the Greater Johnstown Flood Victims erected in 1977. Both of these memorials stand in Central Park in the heart of the city, which was under 18 feet of water on the day of the flood.



¹³ Not unlike our own monopolists, Bridges & Krause.

SHORT STOPS



If you looked at the list of Top 25 pitchers for the first ten weeks of play, you would see that No. 1 is Nathan Eovaldi of the **Wahoos** with 306.0 points, No. 2 is Framber Valdez of the **Wahoos** with 291.0 points, and No. 22 is Jon Gray of the **Wahoos** with 225.0 points. Wait a minute. And someone is trying to tell us that this league *isn't* based entirely on luck? Getouttahere.



Kudos to SloPay, who has Josh Jung, Jonathan India and Corbin Carroll all on the top 25 hitting list, and who had six pitchers on the Who's Hot pitching list (Logan Allen, Griffin Canning, Zac Gallen, Domingo Germán, Taj Bradley and Louie Varland all making the cut). Who are these people? Now *that* guy is working the system.



Back to *Green Acres* for a moment. If you haven't seen the episode with County Agent Hank Kimball putting on a slide show about the dreaded "bing bug," you need to YouTube it. Hysterical.



And finally, after watching Nikola Jokić in game 3 of the NBA playoffs last night, I simply have to share with you this recent excerpt from Joe Posnanski on this "Golden Nugget":

Can I just say: I have become entirely obsessed with Denver Nuggets superstar Nikola Jokić. I know it's weird to kick this mostly baseball thing off with the NBA, and I appreciate that I'm super-late to this — I mean, the guy has already won two MVP awards — but I just wasn't paying very close attention to Denver Nuggets basketball. And I should have been. Jokić is my new everything.

Here's why: I cannot believe there has ever been a bigger gap in this sport between how a player looks and how a player plays. Jokić looks like a paunchy big guy who sits at the very end of the bench and sometimes twirls a towel in support of teammates and only enters the game to foul people.

And he plays like Larry Bird-Magic Johnson-Bill Walton-Bob Lanier-and-Shaq combined.

It's mind-twisting watching him play. He's an alien; absolutely nothing about him suggests that he would be good at basketball—he looks out of breath half the time—and yet every single time down the floor he does some genius thing. He's one of the greatest passers I've ever seen. He's a rebounding force. He has Kevin McHale moves around the basket. He can shoot for three.

He makes absolutely no sense at all. Every moment of brilliance—the guy just about averaged a triple-double this season, so there are constant moments of brilliance—he's a little bit of delightful surprise, sort of like that moment when Susan Boyle started singing that first time on "Britain's Got Talent." Watching Jokić play makes me so happy.

It also makes me happy that his nicknames at Basketball-Reference are, in order, Joker, Big Honey, Cookie Monster, Yoke and Big Tipper.

Jokić is proof that you can't judge a book by its cover.

Yeah, what he said. Spot on.

THE RETURN OF ALPHA DOG

Last Friday I had the good fortune to be joined by three of the brethren for 18 holes of golf at Stone Creek in the Annual Mount Michael Alumni Golf Tournament and Fundraiser. Pictured below, our foursome included our beloved Sunny up from Kansas, the always-upbeat Mouse from these here parts, and the voluble and oddly overconfident Itchie, who on this particular day was in full *Alpha Dog* role. Sometimes he just can't help himself.

In any event, the night before our golf, Sunny drove up from Kansas City and after we ventured into Elkhorn for a bite to eat and then repaired to our back deck, J.T. joined us for a libation or two before heading out to the airport to pick up daughter Madge. As the three of us waxed nostalgic about our beloved fantasy baseball league and our incredibly lucky lot in life, Alpha Dog got all philosophical on us and exclaimed that, "This is it, fellas. It's not gonna get any better than this," or words to that effect. In other words, things are really good for all of us at our ages and stations in life, but many of us will soon be venturing down the slippery backside of the slope, and it may not be that much longer.

Seizing the moment, Sunny and I told J.T. that it was precisely because of this that he should join us on the Hot Stove League Trip to Chicago and Wrigley September 8-10, and without batting an eye, Alpha Dog confidently proclaimed, "I'll be there." I believe him.

And with that backdrop, I implore all of you to search your minds and your hearts and your bank accounts and try to find a way to join us in Chicago for the HSL Trip in year 39 of our league. Please let me know if you can make it, and we will make sure we have enough hotel rooms and tickets.

And what about the golf? It was a fantastic day on the links, with beautiful Nebraska spring weather—sunshine and no wind, as the rain held off until afterwards—and three delightful chaps of good cheer who graciously made themselves available to play. Yes, it was free, so there's that. And yes, J.T. was bossing me around as usual, but I understand. Someone else does all the bossing around back at his ranch, so he needs to exert a little bit of control when he can to help preserve his manhood.



And as for J.T., having two golfers in his foursome that he hasn't played with for a while gave him a golden opportunity to try out his 227 golf lines on some fresh meat¹⁴ so there were plenty of laughs for his "Liberace" and "sister-in-law" golf funnies, among others. Got to do that more often.

IN CLOSING

That's all I got to say about that. Have a great weekend.

Skipper

¹⁴ I for one have heard every one of them, more than once.