

The Joys of Baseball

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If there is any question that baseball is still America's Pastime, one need not look further than the baseball diamonds of Northwest Wisconsin. From t-ball up through the Northwood's League; on any given day you can find games being played. Lost in the plethora of options are some of the states most competitive amateur teams, made up of men who continue to play the game they love with little fanfare.

In Wisconsin, the map is dotted with dozens of towns that field amateur baseball teams. In Northwest Wisconsin there are two leagues, the 12-team Chippewa River Baseball League and the 13-team St. Croix Valley League. They are part of the larger six-league, 66-team Wisconsin Baseball Association (WBA) that has been the governing body for amateur baseball in the western half of Wisconsin since 1949. However, the game goes back much further.

Baseball is tied into the history of cities, town and villages all over Northwest Wisconsin. In most areas ball teams were put together before local government was even formed. Chippewa Falls and Eau Claire were incorporated in 1869 and 1872 respectively, but in September 1867 the two cities played the first recorded game between the two cities. No record of the game between the Clear Water Boys and the Chippewa Nationals remain, but who won is less important than the fact that organized baseball (or "base ball" as it was known then) was now afoot in the Chippewa Valley.

In the opening decade of the 1900s the first leagues in the area formed, when the Chippewa Valley League and the Dunn-St. Croix League started play. Since then, there has been consistent league play but for a few years during World War II. Thousands of men have played for local teams.

Today the leagues consist of former high school players, current college athletes and the occasional minor or major leaguer on his way to or back from the higher level. Two of the most notable names to play for their hometown teams were Major League Hall of Famer Burleigh Grimes, who played for the Clear Lake Yellow Jackets from 1908-1911 and five-time Major League All-Star Andy Pafko who played for Connersville in the late 1930's.

In 2009, Andy Niese, released the *Chippewa River Baseball League Record Book*, a superb overview and in-depth statistical analysis of leagues in the Chippewa Valley. Niese, 38, is a 19-year league veteran. An Eau Claire Native, he manages the Chippewa Falls Lumberjacks, serves as the league secretary and is the unofficial league historian. He spent six years on the project and comes out with a new edition each year, updating statistics and inducting new members into the league Hall-of-Fame which he started in 2009. The induction ceremonies are held each summer at the League All-Star Game.

The Chippewa River Baseball League (CRBL) returned to the use of wood bats in 2001, the WBA followed suit in 2002. The move greatly altered game strategy. Rather than relying on hit-hap aluminum bats, teams now play a more traditional style. The decision hasn't effected participation, in fact it has increased. Since then three teams have joined the league. The Whitehall Wolves joined in 2005. Last year the Cadott Red Sox, a longtime member, returned after a decade and a half absence. This season the Stanley Slammers entered league play, the first team in Stanley since 2003 when the Loggers last played.

The fraternity of amateur baseball is rich in the Chippewa River Baseball League. Former players often return to watch from the stands. Several current umpires also played in the league. It's not uncommon to see generation after generation playing for one town. The Bloomer Fightin' Woodticks' player/manager Scott Stuckert has been playing in the league for over two decades. He now plays alongside his sons Wes and Brett. To top it off, Bloomer plays their games at "Stuckert Memorial Park," named after Scott's father Jim, who played and managed in the league, and is a member of the leagues Hall of Fame.

The St. Croix Valley League (SCVL) has an equally strong tradition spanning back several decades. One of the prominent names from the past is Lute Pettis. He even penned a book about his experience, *Managing Baseball in Osceola: 1943-1962*. In the book Pettis describes his two decades at the helm of the Osceola Braves, including recruiting a young pitcher named Bud Grant. Grant went on to coach the Minnesota Vikings and was enshrined in the NFL Hall of Fame in 1994. After his playing days Pettis had an honorary seat in the Osceola Braves dugout at his disposal.

The St. Croix Valley League continues to provide writing fodder for today's players. In 2011, Josh Eidem, manager of the River Falls Fighting Fish published *Beyond the Fence*, a novel inspired by his decade playing in the league. The book is described as, "An honest and unapologetic examination of the young and not-so-young men who refuse to grow old gracefully, it will make you want to cash in that big league ticket and spend the evening in the bleachers with a beer, watching the game as it was meant to be played."

Today, the Chippewa River Baseball League and the St. Croix Valley League provide some of the best amateur baseball around. Last year's WBA championship went to the River Falls Fighting Fish of the Valley League who defeated the River League's Beef River (Strum) Bullfrogs 9-8 in Coon Valley. The 2012 season is now under way. Come out to a ball park near you and take in a game.