

The Fairmont Martins

Baseball is affectionately referred to as “America’s National Pastime,” but how many of you recall what some might refer to as the “glory days” of baseball right here in Fairmont? After World War II, from the late 1940’s to 1960, baseball might have been called “Fairmont’s Pastime,” as the Fairmont Martins semi-pro baseball team was very popular, they played a very good brand of baseball, and they only carried about twelve to fifteen players on the team. They played at Martins Park, which was located in the vicinity of the current U.S. Post Office parking lot at Five Lakes Centre, with the 315 foot right field line aiming out toward Willow Street.

So, who were these “Boys of Summer” of that bygone era of Fairmont Martins baseball, and how did these players happen to come to Fairmont? The Fairmont Martins were a semi-pro Class AA team, and were in Class A during the 1959 and 1960 seasons. They started in what was called the Western Minny League, and then joined the more prestigious Southern Minny League in 1955. Also, the Martins were the Class AA state champions in 1955 and 1957, and the Class A champs in 1959.

The ball club was one of the biggest promotions Fairmont had during those years. The team would draw over 25,000 annually, averaging about 1,100 to 1,200 spectators per game. As the often quoted Yogi Berra, famed New York Yankee of that era, might have said regarding the attendance for Martins games during that time in local history, “If the people don’t want to come out to the ballpark, nobody’s going to stop them.”

Many of the players at that point in time came to Fairmont by word of mouth, and they came from all over the U. S. Some were attracted by the opportunity it presented. They were actually able to make more money than they did playing for the minor league teams, they had regular jobs in the community, and many of them stayed here after their playing days making Fairmont and Martin County their permanent home.

According to a *Sentinel* article from May 11, 1976, building a team was truly big business in those days. “They would run ads in ‘The Sporting News,’ the big league baseball newspaper, in hopes of gleaning players who might be looking for a nice place to settle down.” Sometimes one player would get an offer, and bring a couple of his buddies along, which was the case with Don Dahlke. He signed with the Martins in 1955, and convinced his friends and former teammates, Harry Pritts and Loyal Bloxam, to play for the Martins too. They had previously played minor league baseball in Denver. For Pritts, whose career had taken him all the way up to the big leagues for a brief stint with the Pittsburgh Pirates, it served as an opportunity to continue his career as a star pitcher for the Martins.

Anyone following those Martins teams of that era would surely recall their spunky manager, Jim McNulty, who coached the team for nine of their ten years and also played a “mean” second base. He was a Brooklyn native who spent much of his time hanging around Ebbets Field and was in the Dodger’s chain for years. He truly was “Mr. Baseball” in Fairmont during the Fairmont Martins heyday. McNulty cited a time when Satchel Paige pitched an exhibition game in Fairmont, as reported by the August 31, 1982, edition of the *Sentinel*. “He (Paige) thought we were nobody,” said McNulty, “until Milt Nielsen ripped a three-run homer to beat him. He was making \$100 an inning to pitch and walked off the mound and out of the ballpark after that happened.” Nielsen had been an outfielder in the Cleveland Indians organization and eventually owned an auto dealership in St. Peter, and McNulty, who operated a tavern called Martin’s Nest in Fairmont, later returned to Brooklyn to drive a taxi.

Employment for the players during the off season was often solved by the community and their efforts to keep the players in Fairmont. Salaries during the season were good; in the case of one Fairmont player it was \$500.00 per month, and one pitcher was paid \$1,000.00 per month, which was good money during the mid-1950’s. However, the pay was only for three months, and of course, that left nine months in which to live, eat, and to make mortgage or rent payments. During the off season, some of the players worked on city crews, some found jobs on their own, and some enlisted the help of the team’s board of directors. Just to name a few, Harry Pritts worked for an electric motor business that he later owned, Don Dahlke became a guidance counselor for the Fairmont Public Schools, Al Thune worked for 3M, Bob Yankovich was a car dealer, Spike Gorham, who managed the team during its first season, worked for Anderson Beverage, and stayed in baseball as an umpire.

That era in the major leagues boasted such names as Sandy Koufax, Stan Musial, Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, Warren Spahn, Willie Mays, and many others. However, although the names that will forever be coupled to Fairmont Martins baseball of that time are not necessarily the household names as those previously mentioned, they will be forever ingrained in Fairmont Martins history. Some of those names include Joe Colasinski who returned to plumbing in Detroit, Emil Restino who settled in Florida, Jim King from the Chicago area, and Hank Workman who became an attorney in Los Angeles. Other names include Herb Banton, Bill Dudding, Don Neuenfeldt, Loyal Bloxam, Dick Eaton, Sid Langston, Grady Wilson, Bill Spaeter, Tom Palmer, Tom Idstrom, Myron Hoffman, Hal Snyder, and Dave Ramnes. Another Martin’s player, catcher Ken Staples, went on to be a third string catcher with the Dodgers behind Roy Campanella and was considered by McNulty to be the best player he managed in Fairmont.

That era of baseball in Fairmont has passed, but the memories, as well as some of the players, still remain today. It was a different time, and in many ways a different sport than today's "contemporary" style of baseball with its designated hitters, middle inning relievers, and closers, not to mention the astronomical salaries. To make reference to another Yogism that might have held true to that time, "The future ain't what it used to be." However, that epoch in baseball history will always be nostalgically remembered as "Town Ball" in those communities of the Western Minny, the Sourthern Minny, and other similar leagues throughout the country.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.