

## **The Saskatoon Masters - A Tradition Of Success For More A Quarter Of A Century**

The date was July 15, 2012 and the most disappointed team in our province by far had to be Saskatoon Allied Denture Masters. Coach Rick Ruzesky's crew were trying for it's 26<sup>th</sup> consecutive provincial title, but the rain wiped out play just before the first game of what might have been a two game final series. Allied Denture Masters had suffered a Saturday afternoon loss to Moose Jaw that placed the Giants first in preliminary round and forced Saskatoon into a semi-final. On Sunday, after easily dispatching the Parktown Padres in the semi-final, Allied had their lineup stacked and momentum on their side. However, the diamonds were just too wet to play any further and Moose Jaw was declared champion based on the standings at the end of preliminary round play. It was the first time a team from the Saskatoon Masters organization had tasted defeat in the provincials in a very long time and it did not sit well with anyone involved. Their streak of 25 consecutive Provincial championships had been broken. However, after a long winter and the return of long-time coach Roger Malmgren, the Masters regrouped and not only regained the provincial championship but went on to claim the 2013 Western Canadian Masters men's title, as well as maintaining their tradition of success.

In 2014 the Saskatoon Amateur Softball Association was celebrating it's 50<sup>th</sup> year. It seemed particularly fitting that a team with so much history help the SASA celebrate as the AGI Masters again won provincials. Led by the event's top pitcher James Zuk, top hitter Jason Hodgson and MVP Terry Wiebe, they followed the provincials win with a Western Canadian title at home in Saskatoon. It took them three more provincial championships to again claim the title but they come to nationals as the Saskatchewan champions this year.

The memories are almost endless for many of the long-standing members of the Saskatoon Masters organization. Perhaps the one with the most to remember was Roger Malmgren, who had been with the team throughout almost all it's long history. Roger first played with the team when they were known as the K and K Olson Masters in 1986. Although he was getting to the end of his playing career he had to sit out the provincials that year because he was not 40 yet. In 1987, as the Sutherland Bar Masters, they began their streak of 25 consecutive titles. The sponsor's names and coaches changed but the winning tradition continued. In 1989, Keith McLean took over. He was

followed by Carl Reimer who was later joined by Bob Ferris and Gordie Cooke, who alternated the duties for a few years

In 1995, Les Howey, who now is Team Canada Assistant Coach, took over and was followed by Malmgren a year later. Roger continued to the present with the one year hiatus in 2012 year when Rick Ruzesky was in charge. Over the years the team's nickname changed as the sponsors did. They went from K and K Olson to Sutherland Bar, to Great West Transport to Norland Denture Clinic, then to Allied Denture Clinic and now are known as the AGI Masters.



**1993 Sutherland Bar Masters**

Roger admits that winning the provincial title for so many years was far from easy. There were times they had to come back from the B side to win and one year had to recover from 2-1 deficit in the best of 5 series against Conquest in which they won back to back games on Sunday.

Because they won so many provincial titles, their greatest memories seemed to be of their last big event of the year, the Western Canadian championship. A particularly clear memory was of the 2006 Westerns in Whitehorse. Where, after surviving a 36-hour bus ride, they found themselves down 3-1 to BC in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning of the final. They proceeded to score 8 runs in the top half of the inning and shut them down in the bottom with two strikeouts and an easy pop-fly making the long bus ride home much more tolerable. In 1997 they came back from the B side to win in BC. They never left the diamond from 8:00 am Monday, until the final in late afternoon winning four straight games. BC

teams have always been a thorn in the side of the Masers, making the most recent victory particularly gratifying. Last year in Kelowna, the Allied Denture Clinic Masters had to beat 3 different BC teams in the playoffs, including the Richmond Steelers who had the always tough Rich Haldane in the circle. Not all vivid memories were of victories as Malmgren (seen below) also remembers the year in Calgary when the team toughed it out through 5 tournament ending injuries and another player eliminated because he had his truck and all his equipment stolen. They got to the final but lost out to Alberta who had the always tough Bruce Marshal in the circle. Malmgren remembers facing many great players over the years. Throwers like Rich Haldane recently, as well as long time greats like Stan Kern, Andy Konopacki and Mike Piechnik, created trouble for the Masters but did not prevent them from winning 20 medals at Westerns including 8 gold.



His greatest memories however are of the over 200 players that have played for him. National teamers like Pat and Keith MacKintosh, Dean Holien, Rob Scheller, Terry Wiebe and Gene McWillie brought their tremendous talent and profile to the team. Lesser known players like Brian Banga, who beat Hall of Famer, Mike Piechnik in the 2004 Westerns Semi-final and Bob Boeschen who hit a 2-run homer in the final of the provincials to keep the streak alive. He named Gene McWillie, Dennis Dauvin and Terry Wiebe amongst the best players he has seen in his many years around the local softball scene. McWillie was a fireballer who at one time was amongst the top 3 pitchers in the world, Dauvin was the epitome of a work horse with a great change up and Wiebe is still the smoothest shortstop around even now over a decade after joining in the Masters (see Terry in the picture – this year he was elected to Softball Canada Hall of Fame as part of the 1992 Canadian Men's World Championship Team).



He has coached some real characters over the years but the first one that comes to mind was Dwayne Heidt. According to Roger, his mouth often saw him disliked by the opposition, but helped make him a real leader for the Masters.

Malmgren attributes 2 key factors to the success of the Masters organization in Saskatoon: recruiting and the clubhouse. Malmgren and his coaching staff are renowned for getting the best talent available. When recruiting players that are 40 and over they can count on a very strong local talent pool. The long term success of the program and the long history of great players also help recruiting. Malmgren says the team clubhouse is another key factor in maintaining players in the organization. Located in the Harold Latrace Arena just a few blocks from the Bob Van Impe Stadium, Malmgren says it creates a family atmosphere around the team. The players' wives and kids can feel comfortable there and the players don't have to feel they are making the same kind of family sacrifices many of them did when they were playing in their younger days.

This year's team will be loaded with former Team Canada type players. Terry Wiebe will do his thing at short stop, Keith MacKintosh will be a strong bat and will shore up the middle infield and Dean Holien will provide a hard thrower out of the bull pen and will produce his world-renowned power at the plate.

