



One Memorable Month August Lays Down the Foundation for a Decade of Softball Success



Softball in Saskatoon was rising to its peak of popularity in the 1980's. When the decade ended 10% of the city's population was playing the sport, almost 20,000 people. The quality was excellent as well, with almost unparalleled pitching depth in the men's divisions led by Gene McWillie of the All-O-Matic A's and a world championship calibre team on the ladies front with the Harmony Centres. The month of August, 1980 was one of the most memorable ones in the 50 year history of the Saskatoon Amateur Softball Association. It saw teams, officials and organizers from the SASA make national softball history in the two biggest showcases of Men's and Women's softball in the country; the Sr. A Canadian Softball championships.

Saskatoon Harmony Centres win Ladies Nationals

The temperature was 100 degree Fahrenheit in on early August day in Hull, Quebec and the Saskatoon Harmony Centres were forced to come back through the B side to win the Canadian championship Two morning victories advanced them to face the A' side winners Agincourt Shamrocks, who they had to beat twice. Coach Bob Stayner's (**see his picture to the right**) squad was a veteran crew that knew how to win. A month earlier they had to beat out a very tough Lashburn Bluebirds just to get to the nationals. Although the Harmony Centres team had broken the run of the legendary Vancouver Doc's Blues in 1978, this year's team was different and only had 5 hold overs. It took them 11 innings to win the first game, with Bluebird pickup and former Harmony Centre pitcher, Brenda Staniforth combining with Shan McDonald to earn the 2-1 win. First baseman Ann

Tkachuck led off with a single and later scored the winner on an error.

"You've got to remember it's 100 above," as Stayner set the stage. "They are older and heavier and it's hot. We squeaked by the first game and now we have to play the final, and they didn't have a chance, because the heat had just wilted them. Our kids don't wilt, so



we won that." (p.195 Safe at Home; A History of Softball in Saskatchewan by Jenni Mortin). Veteran Irene Wallace was in the circle for the 2-0 win. Wallace was later quoted by Star Phoenix reporter Theresa Kirkpatrick as saying; "I just remember the excitement of going all

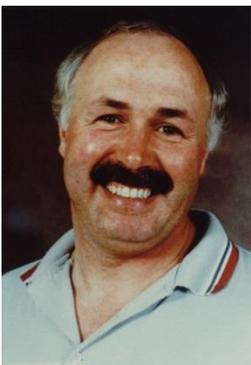
the way...". The Harmony Centres had won their second National Championship in three years and the fourth by an SASA team since national championship play had begun. They certainly did it the hard way with only five players who played on both the 1978 and 1980 teams. A trip to a tournament in Holland for which they fundraised over \$20,000 seemed to help pull them together and the additions of Shan McDonald and Noreen Murphy from Ontario and Darlene Sollie from Regina helped rebuild the talent pool. They had to battle just to get there as they won the Saskatchewan championship, coming from behind to beat Lashburn in the final. By winning the Canadian title, they qualified to represent Canada at the 1981 World Games in Santa Clara, Calif., where they played very well and lost, 2-1 to the powerful team from the United States in the final.

1980 Harmony Centres

Marilyn Donald, Nancy Bretnell, Jay Kost, Bonnie McAskill, Shan McDonald, Sherry Loubardias, Irene Wallace, Noreen Murphy, Sheryl Kleckner, Brenda Staniforth, Patti Rowley, Diane Lynn, Darlene Solie, Sharon Klassen, Ann Tkachuk, Kim Cudmore, Pat Wegner, Peter Loubardias (Coach) , Bob Stayner (Coach)

The Most Memorable Men's National Ever

Just a couple of weeks after the success of the Harmony Centres, two SASA men's teams were to make even more history. On Friday August 29th more than 2,500 fans filled the stands at Gordie Howe Fastball Field to watch the SASA's Arnie's Angels, play the Cold Spring Cats from Ontario in a 21 inning game that lasted 4 hours and 41 minutes. Angels pitcher Dale Gunderson, a pickup from Saskatoon Bonanza Steak House, pitched 20 scoreless innings but had his heart broken on a single up the middle that scored the Ontario runner from 2nd. The Angel's were already battling the tragic death of catcher Dennis Guenter who had passed away while fighting the Queens Hotel fire on May 31, nevertheless they persevered throughout the nationals. As tournament hosts they were not expected to challenge but had made it to the playoff round and into the game that set seven national championship records and tied 3 more, including the longest game in innings and time, the most innings pitched by a pitcher and the most strike outs, shared by Gunderson and Cats pitcher Steve Virag.



However, no one would have predicted that an SASA Team and a pair of veteran SASA pitchers were going to break many of those records just 2 days later. A pair of local legends, Rob Guenther and Gene McWillie (**see his picture to the left**) locked into a 20 inning pitcher's duel in the semi-final, that many described as the best

game ever played in Saskatoon. Coincidentally it was to take place just 2 days after the previous best. The two had at one time been All-O-Matic A's teammates and earlier that year had pitched Canada to a Silver medal at the ISF World Championship and both have since entered Softball Canada's Hall of the fame in the same year 1998. It took a 2 out double by Larry Pavloff in the bottom of the 7th to tie the game at one and send it to extra innings and into the history books. The game was the longest ever played in the Canadian championship 4 hours and 58 minutes, Guenther set a record for strike outs with 23, the All-O-Matics A's had a record number of hits in 17 and Wayne Wallace set a new record for striking seven times in one game.

Wallace however, was to get revenge for all those K's when he finally caught up to the pitch that had been beating him all day, Guenther's rise ball, and drove it for a double to score Greg Flasch from 1st for the 2-1 win. McWille gave up 11 hits and had 21 strike outs for the win. He was quoted for Mortin's book as saying 'If you can stay in a game long enough something will happen. The guys kept battling and won it. I was tired after the game and don't think I would have much good in relief in the final'.

That national championship was particularly bitter sweet for Don Funk, (**seen here below**) the man who formed the team. Despite being a perennial national power house they never won a national championship. The All-O-Matics won 5 provincial titles during the 80's but lost in the national final in 1980 to Brooksfield Elks, 1981 to Edmonton and in 1982 and 83 they lost to Victoria.



The tournament had it all: huge crowds, brilliant play by the home teams, excitement suspense, and disappointment. It was such a financial success, that the finance manager Morris Smysniuk, had to be

escorted out of the park by Police on the final day with over \$20,000 cash to avoid the huge crowds who waited outside the gate hoping to get into the final game. Even our local officials got into the act as Jim Grant was at third for the first of the two marathon games, Ed Bitz acted as the Umpire in Chief for the event and Dave Moore was also a member of the Blue Crew for the most successful Canadian championship ever held in Saskatoon and likely anywhere in Canada

The spark given to the local softball community, as a result of this event, combined with success of the Harmony Centres, laid a foundation for the 1980's to be a very successful decade for SASA softball. This was the decade in which Saskatoon hosted 2 national championships, 2 world championships and the Jeux Canada Summer Games. The 80's also put on display many great players, including 9 players from A's, rival the Rempel Brothers, that were on the 1987 Men's national team who won Pan Am gold. It also produced two of the most successful teams in SASA history, the All-O-Matic A's and Harmony Centres.