



The Summer of 69 - When Saskatoon was at the top of the Softball World



The summer of 1969, it was the time that man first walked on the moon and the time when two SASA softball teams walked all over the best competition in the country to claim the only two national championships played. For the first time ever two teams from the same local association had won the Senior Men's and Women's national crowns. Not until 2009 did anything like that happen again, that was when two Sr. teams from Kitchener won nationals. What made the success of the Saskatoon Merchants and the Saskatoon Imperials so much different than anything that has been done since is that they were made up of almost exclusively from local players who got their uniforms dirty playing local softball. Their efforts made Saskatoon the center of the softball universe in 1969.



1969 Canadian Sr. Men's Champions Saskatoon Merchants

Front: Cam Hutchison (bat boy) Left to Right:
Front Row: Paul Kuzma (trainer), Harry Hopkins,
Pete Zacharias, Blaine Knoll, Al Norris, Everett
Wood, George Lacoursiere, Bob Lacoursiere (coach),
John Hutchinson (president) 2nd Row: Peter Bacala
(sponsor), Dick McDonald, Ed Swiderski, Ted
Lucuik, Nels Rissling, John Stuart, Felix Miller, Bob
Bentley, Glen Hersikorn, Ken Rissling.

For the Merchants, earning their place at the top of the heap was particularly satisfying, as they were to finish their season at home, in the cozy confines of Gordie Howe Park. Although they could stay at home for the nationals they had to survive a long journey over a lot of quality teams to get the chance to play there. By the late 60's Saskatoon boasted what many people considered to be the most competitive men's league in the country and in order to advance to provincials they had to get out of their league. They won a nine team tournament beating teams like: College Lads, Burnells, Medallions and K and K Olson. In the provincials they lost their first game to the Medallions and had to come back the hard way. They eventually made it all the way back with seven straight wins,

including 4-3 and 12-3 wins over Weyburn – a team that had the core of players that won the nationals 3 years later. Not long after provincials they represented Saskatchewan at the first ever Canada Summer Games. They returned from Halifax tired and disappointed having only finished 9th. Nonetheless with just 5 days rest they were determined to prove something at nationals. After taking the hard route through the league the Merchants took full advantage of the local talents and picked up two players from the College Lads, the best hitter in the league Ed Swiderski and the best pitcher Pete Zacharias. They put rivalries aside as the Merchants and College Lads faced off for the city title 7 times in 10 years in the early years of the SASA.

The Merchants began the tournament with four straight wins. In the first game, Zacharias came in relief of Glen Hersikorn to win 4-3. In game two, Bob Bentley stole home in a throw back from the pitcher to get the only run Zacharias needed to beat Winnipeg 1-0. Bentley got on base with a walk, advanced to second on a Harry Hopkins bunt, then got to third on a pass ball. The other two wins were far from easy including a huge upset over the favorites from Windsor 10-4 and 3-2 win over Hull. Their only loss came in the preliminary round versus the Calgary Power Chiefs 2-1. With four wins they advanced to the sudden death final against Hull where Zacharias continued his dominance and the Merchants shut them out handily. Zacharias was named MVP and All Star pitcher after getting victories in 4 of the Merchants five wins and the save in the other. He gave up one earned run in 22 1/3 innings and, all the while being caught by 16 year old George Lacoursiere. It was no fluke that the Merchants won it all. They were a testament to hard work, hustle and desire and played as a true team. Coach Bob Lacoursiere in an interview for the Star Phoenix later described them as “a group of guys who were a team... a bunch of real muckers who never quit”



1969 Canadian Sr. Ladies Champions Saskatoon Imperials

Left to Right: Front Row: Tanya Clarke, Vera Pezer, Joan Duprey, 2nd Row: Marlene Ackerman, Val Fawcett, Illa Shore, Val Jensen, Judy Garman, 3rd Row: Gail Hopkins (coach), Myrna Lewis, Judy Jenkin, Ann Hopkins, Sheila Rowan, Joan Drummond, Brenda Will, Joy Barrie, Judy Knoll, Bob Stayner (coach) Missing: Carolyn Debnam.

The Saskatoon Imperials became a growing threat starting in 1963 under Coach Gail Hopkins. This team travelled to the Canadian Championships for five successive years and pioneered excellence in softball in Saskatchewan through that era. In 1967 and 1968 they were runner-up in the Canadian championships. In 1969, they won all of their 25 games in their league schedule and also beat previously unbeaten Queen and Her Maids 4-2, using entirely local talent. The Imperials had to push themselves every day to get better as unlike the grueling pre-national route taken by the Merchants, they did not have top caliber competition in league play every day and had no provincial play-off, as no one challenged them to the right to represent the province.

However that year, like the Merchants, they were also Saskatchewan's representative to the Canadian Summer Games in Halifax and in the round robin placed third. In the play-offs they unfortunately lost to Toronto. In an interview from Jenni Mortin's book *Safe at Home*, Head Coach Bob Stayner, who had replaced Hopkins for what was to be a short time, commented "We went to Halifax for a week and half and they didn't give us a medal they gave us a pencil"

After the Games, they flew directly from Halifax to the Canadian championships in Port Erie. Playing many of the same teams they saw in Halifax, they rode the hot arms of Vera Pezer and Joan Duprey. In the 10-team tournament, they defeated Toronto to win the Canadian Championship. They had been forced down to the B side and had to win three games in row. But after being runners up for the previous two years they were not going to be denied. Pitcher Joan Duprey was named All-Star pitcher and was awarded the most valuable player award in Canada after earning 3 wins on the final day. She was quoted later as saying "Everything seemed to be going my way all day, and everyone played well behind me". Also selected to the All-Star Teams were Joan Drummond, third base; Joy Barrie, second base; Val Jensen, centre field; and Ann Hopkins, catcher. Beating out every team in the nation also had another perk as they earned the right to travel to the world championships in Osaka, Japan in 1970, where they placed 7th.

Coach Bob Stayner, whose involvement with the team was to end after they won nationals, had this assessment of the team in an interview with Debbie Johnson for a U. of S. paper. He rated Pezer and Duprey among the best pitchers in the country but had even kinder words for another pair, Valerie Jensen and Gail Hopkins. "Valerie Jensen was a superb center fielder with an excellent throwing arm and a strong batter. She was so fast in centre field that when a ground ball was hit through the pitcher past second base she could race up, field the ball and throw the runner out at first base". Jensen showed her speed in the 69 Nationals when she raced in to pick up a line drive off her boot tops and continued forward to outrun the runners and double her off at second. According to Stayner "catcher Ann Hopkins wiped any thought of stealing from opposing runners minds. She was the only women to officially hit the ball over the Gordie Howe Park fence".

In all, the Imperials stacked up 8 provincial and 2 national titles. Like the Merchants, they owed their success to hard work and desire, not high priced imports. For Mortin's book, Coach and Manger Gail Hopkins said "I was strict as far as discipline was concerned. Some of my players left practises red-faced and mad, but they would be back the next day. There were 8 regulars for 6 or 7 years and one girl was there for 12years. I wasn't a coach who just showed up, I worked as hard as the players and I think they saw that and appreciated it".