



Hail to The Chiefs

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Four decades have come and gone since a group of South Side kids known as the National Electric Chiefs surprised the amateur baseball world if not themselves, but mere decades haven't changed them one bit.

The team members may be older, a bit grayer and a few pounds heavier, but mention their accomplishments today, and their faces brighten like so many scoreboard lights just the same.

"There was an uncommon bond among us, and aside from talent, that's what set our team apart," said Lou Pasierb, who along with his cousin John anchored the pitching staff. "We were a very dedicated group, and it showed on the field."

The Chiefs were the brainchild of Rocco Fiore, whose son Bob played for the Pequods, a successful team in the Connie Mack League for 16- to 18-year-olds, which was the last hurrah for many high school players. In 1965, Fiore approached Pequods sponsor Ed Farmer, whose son of the same name played for the Connie Mack team before he went on to become a major league pitcher and White Sox broadcaster. When Fiore suggested that they provide an alternative for those 19 years and older, Farmer was all ears as usual.

"Ed Jr. would always joke that his father liked the Chiefs better than his own son's team," said former left fielder Ron Lamb, who also was a St. Rita High School product. "Mr. Farmer could be demanding at times, but he loved kids and baseball. He always was well-dressed and made a point to attend as many games as possible. He and Rocco were like fathers to us."

Little did anyone know that, only two years later, the result would be a star-studded cast



Lou Pasierb, Dennis Ludden and John Pasierb (left to right) reminisce about the National Electric Chiefs glory days.

that was the equivalent of a Class A minor league team, one that would overtake the Cubs and White Sox as the hottest in the toddlin' town. In 1967, the Chiefs became the first local squad to capture the American Amateur Baseball Congress championship. (The annual event became known as the Stan Musial World Series three years earlier.)

Even more dominant the next summer, the Chiefs did it again. They remain the only repeat Stan Musial World Series champions from the Chicago area. In the 76-year history of the tournament, no team has won three consecutive times.

“When we're asked who was our best player, we look at each other,” John Pasierb said. “There's no obvious answer. Any of us could be our best player on a given day. We were strong at every position. That's what made us so good.”

About the only thing that the Chiefs lacked was numbers. Of the 16 players on the roster, a dozen also played college ball. While the limited options made for some sticky situations especially on long, hot afternoons, they played no small role in the close-knit bond among them.

“Everyone had a set role and played a lot,” recalled Dennis Ludden, a Brother Rice High School product who played center field and served as co-manager for the team. “There was no jealousy among us. We cared about one another. To a man, that's what we like most about those teams.

“All of us lived on the South Side and had known one another for a while. All of us got along. Scouts would attend our games, but unlike in college, every one us played for the team and not to impress somebody.”

Said catcher Dennis Sienko, “What was there not to be happy about? I had always wanted to play for a team that was as talented and dedicated as this one. I had a smile on my face for two years.”

The all-in attitude was a far cry from the previous season. The Chiefs groused their way to the Midwest Regional in Beloit, Wis., where the host Blues eliminated them in a double-elimination tournament. Months later, Sienko (Kelly High School), Lou Pasierb (Brother Rice), pitcher John Dillenburg (St. Ignatius), second baseman Ernie Pederson (Evergreen Park) and outfielder Ed Staron (St. Rita) were added to the roster and the talent base was bolstered considerably. As the oldest team members, Ludden and Staron were selected to manage the club.

When Ludden got a glimpse of the team at the first practice, he nearly had to be administered smelling salts.

“My immediate reaction was “Holy, bleep! This team is loaded!” Ludden recalled. “At that point, most of us knew that we had a chance to do something special.

“Did we believe that we could get past the regional? Yes. Did we think that we were good enough to become national champions? Probably not. Having never been to the championship round, we didn't know what that encompassed exactly.”

The Chiefs would find out soon enough.

A SEPTEMBER TO REMEMBER

Every championship team has a bitter rival, and 2 ½ hours to the south, the Chiefs had theirs. Formed in 1962, the Blues were the pride of Beloit, a shot-and-beer town that straddled the Illinois-Wisconsin border.

"We were just another team in a big city, but the Blues were treated like the only team in town, which they were for the most part," Ludden said. "They played on a nice field and drew large crowds. The local newspaper covered their games. I have to admit, some of us were a bit envious of them."

Yet the Chiefs couldn't get ahead of themselves even if their 40-5 record suggested otherwise. Six regulars hit .300 or higher in the regular season. The list didn't include Lou Pasierb, who was limited to mound duties despite a .378 mark that lead the team. At 37-4, the four-man rotation of the Pasierb boys, Dillenburg and Fiore had been practically unbeatable, largely because of an air-tight defense that Ludden, Pederson and pepper-pot shortstop Tom O'Neil anchored up the middle.

"I don't recall many errors by our defense," John Pasierb said. "As pitchers, we knew that, if we threw strikes and put the ball in play, the guys behind us would take care of the rest. We were very strong fundamentally."

First, the Chiefs had to get out of Chicago, which was no easy task in itself. "The most nerve-racking games of all," Ludden called the single-elimination tournament. "There was no room for error." After a close call against the Robbins Indians, they advanced to the regional tournament for the second consecutive year.

Beloit loved its Blues, and when the city slickers from Chicago came to town, the locals loved them even more. As Ludden put it, "I knew two things about Beloit at the time – it was on the state border and we weren't well-liked there." To hear the Chiefs tell it, from difficult pairings to uneven fields to unwanted time slots, local officials made their lives as miserable as possible.

The Blues and their fans were a highly confident bunch, what with their victory of the previous year still fresh in their minds. The Chiefs weren't allowed to forget it, either. Before a pregame warm-up early in the tournament, they were chided from across the way. "You've got new uniforms, but there's nothin' in 'em!" one voice screamed at no one in particular.

It took more than loud noises to unnerve the South Side kids who were no strangers to tournament play. The Chiefs silenced the Blues in the third round, 3-2, then they beat the homeboys again in the championship game, 6-5, as they secured a trip to the World Series in Battle Creek, Mich.

At the trophy ceremony, it was the Chiefs who fired first this time – the winners at the third base line, the losers along the first base line, tournament officials caught in the

crossfire of words between them. The two teams probably hadn't seen the last of one another, as the Blues received a World Series invitation as the No. 2 seed in the regional.

The Chiefs paid an immediate price for the emotional triumph, as Dallas scored a 4-2 victory at Bailey Stadium that put them in an early hole in the double-elimination event. After a blowout versus Waterbury, Conn., 13-4, they had to rally for an 8-7 victory against Nashville to stave off elimination. Then first baseman Arnie Drzonek led the way with four RBI in a 16-7 rout of the Blues that was called off after seven innings.

Still, the Chiefs had their work cut out for them, as the Dearborn, Mich., squad was unbeaten through four rounds. It would take a victories in both ends of a day-night doubleheader to claim the national championship. That is, if the second game had to be played at all. And if it did, Dearborn had lined up highly regarded prospect Dan Bielski for the assignment. The Tigers would draft the Michigan State pitcher two year later.

On Sunday, Sept. 10, while White Sox pitcher Joe Horlen hurled a no-hitter against the Detroit Tigers in the first game of a doubleheader, John Pasierb made history against another Michigan team. In the ninth inning, the score tied at 2-all, he slammed a dramatic walk-off home run to keep the dream alive. The tall right-hander also pitched nine innings to earn the victory.

In the nightcap, Lou Pasierb encountered control problems in the chilly weather. Only hours after Dillenburg came out of the bullpen to hurl six innings against Nashville the previous day, he was called on to pitch six more. He nursed a 3-2 lead into the eighth inning, when Dearborn scratched out a run to tie the score.

In the bottom half of the inning, Staron, Lamb and third baseman Rich Ruzas singled off Bielski to take the lead again. By that time, Ludden was en route to a local hospital, the result of a hard slide into third base that forced to leave the game in the fifth inning.

All of a sudden, Bob Leshyn was thrown into the fire of a national championship game.

"I hope they don't hit ball to me!" the new center fielder pleaded to Lamb before the start of the ninth inning.

"Please don't hit it to me!"

"Be quiet!" Lamb replied in words to that effect. "We'll get through this!"

Gary Schaefer opened off the ninth inning with a surprise bunt, and when Dillenburg unleashed a wild throw, he advanced to second base. The next batter hit a screamer that Lamb did well to turn into the first out.

"See what I mean!" Lamb assured his center fielder.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Keith Spicer drove a pitch down the

left-field line that almost certainly would tie the score. Fearful that Lamb might have a play on the ball, the runner held up momentarily at second base, but the ball bounced off the fence at the 302-foot mark before it died on the warning track.

Fortunately, Lamb had set up deep to prevent a possible extra-base hit and was able to retrieve it quickly.

"When I wasn't able to catch the ball, my only thought was to get it back to the infield as quickly as possible," said Lamb, who gunned down a runner at third base to cut short a rally four innings earlier.

Lamb unleashed a throw that sailed over Ruzas' head and . . . directly to Dennis Sienko on two, maybe three bounces. The catcher caught the ball and tagged the runner in the same motion. When the dust settled, he had the ball in his glove and the hint of a smile on his face as usual.

"The only way that I could make the play was to block the plate while I reached for the throw," said Sienko, who hit a solo homer in the opener. "I knew there would be a collision and it was gonna hurt, but that's what catchers do, right? The other team didn't like the call, but you'll never hear me say the umpire got it wrong."

Dillenburg struck out Rich Harlow for the final out. Game, tournament, championship.

"The championship meant a lot to us because nobody thought we could pull it off," O'Neil said. "Nobody thought we could beat Dearborn twice in one day. Nobody thought we could beat the Michigan State kid. But we did it."

The South Siders had brought a championship to Chicago, but there would be no celebration deep into the night. A number of team members had school classes to attend the next morning, and after the trophy presentation, they reluctantly hopped into their cars and headed for home. Dillenburg, Fiore, Lamb and O'Neil were bound to Northern Illinois University. Drzonek returned to Eastern Illinois, Leshyn to Iowa, Pederson to Illinois State, Sienko to the University of Chicago and Tom Grotta to Chicago State. John Pasierb left for Western Michigan, Lou Pasierb for Bradley. Staron was on his way back to Brother Rice, where he was a teacher and coach.

Ludden was enrolled at De Paul, but he was in no particular hurry. After surgery to repair a fractured left wrist, he stayed in the hospital overnight and didn't learn of the victory until the next morning.

JUST LIKE OLD TIMES

The celebration may not have fit the achievement at the time, but the Chiefs have made up for it since then. Many still reside in the Chicago area, and true to their team chemistry, they gather at a local pub to relive the glory days over pizza and adult beverages every few months.

“Funny, but when look you at us now, you would never know what we played baseball once upon a time,” Drzonek said as he gazed around the room. “We weren't too bad, either.”

Invariably, someone mentions The Comeback . . .

On the brink of elimination, the Chiefs erupted for five runs to overturn a 5-1 deficit against Nashville in the seventh inning. Dillenberg earned the victory, his first of two in the final three games.

“I pitched 12 innings in two days, but we didn't pay attention to pitch counts back then,” said Dillenburg, who added with a laugh, “I wouldn't have done it today unless the managers spoke with my agent first.”

And The Home Run, the one that John Pasierb hit to stave off elimination on the final day of the tournament.

The Chiefs liked to consider themselves more confident than cocky, but John Pasierb admitted that he could be “a bit overconfident at the time.”

“John would show the batter the ball and say, ‘Take a good look at it because you won't see it again,’” recalled Sienko, his batterymate. “Then John would blow strike three past him on the next pitch.”

How ironic that John Pasierb never saw the most dramatic moment in his baseball career.

“I knew that I had hit the ball well, but I didn't see it because the sun was about to set behind the center-field fence,” Pasierb said. “I just ran until they told me that I didn't have to run any more. It wasn't until I got back to the dugout that I found out what had happened exactly.”

And The Throw . . .

What started as a 290-foot heave travels a few inches farther each day, it seems.

“Best throw by an outfielder that I ever saw at any level,” O'Neil called it. “Had to be 300 feet on the fly. I was never so happy for somebody to overthrow the cut-off man in all my life. And Dennis made a heckuva play at the plate.”

“It was a rocket, an absolutely rocket,” Lamb played along. “It will be 320 feet in a few more years.”

And The Repeat . . .

In 1967, the Chiefs comprised one-third of the 24-member World Series All-Star Team. Ludden, Dillenburg, Drzonek, O'Neil, Pederson and John Pasierb were first-teamers, while Lamb and Sienko joined Seattle third baseman and future Cubs player Ron Cey

in the second group. The Chicago Park District named them the Team of the Year after the season.

One year later, the same nucleus returned for one last fling. The addition of left fielder and lead-off man Kenny Johnson made for an even deeper, more talented team. Expectations were higher than ever.

This time the Chiefs didn't meet the host team in the Beloit Regional, which it opened with three consecutive victories by an average 13-3 score. Waterloo, Ia., dealt the defending champs a momentary setback, 10-4, but they quickly regrouped for a 5-2 victory in the championship game.

On the return visit to Battle Creek, Dallas represented the only obstacle. After a 3-2 loss in the third game, the Chiefs responded with a 10-3 triumph that clinched their second consecutive national title. Johnson and Ludden paced a 12-hit assault with three hits apiece, while John Pasierb went the distance on a six-hitter and struck out nine batters.

Rocco Fiore didn't stand an inch taller than 5-foot-6, but he felt like 6-foot-8 after his team became only the second repeat champion in Stan Musial World Series history. "When you win two straight in this kind of competition, you've got to be proud," the general manager told the Battle Creek Inquirer afterward. The Chiefs had secured their legacy as one of the greatest amateur teams in Chicago history.

The Chiefs weren't quite the same the next season. The Pasierbs embarked on minor league careers -- John in the Kansas City Royals organization, Lou in the San Francisco Giants farm system -- and the team was without its two best pitchers. For some others, the demands of jobs and college and marriage became too great.

Yet all of them never forgot two of the best years of their lives and those who made it possible.

"We knew it was a special time for us back then, but it's not until you get older that you appreciate just how special it really was," Ludden said. "The stories get more interesting all the time, but do you know what's even better? The relationships get better, too."