



## ***Indy-ball employees, players truly in it for 'love of the game'***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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JOLIET, IL -- The boss never rests when the boss is also the help.

After he directed and participated with a small crew in laying down the tarp in front of an approaching shower, a sweat-soaked Paul Rathje leaned against the folded-up batting cage and told of front-office work in independent baseball.

“Our front office is a dozen (full-timers),” said Rathje, the Joliet Slammers’ director of park operations at spiffy Silver Cross Field. “Our groundskeeper is full-time, others are part-time. Our front-office is basically the grounds crew. Everyone in the front office who is physically able (helps on the field if needed). We clean if we have to. We wipe seats. We sell tickets. We take tickets. We help the customer.”

That description basically describes the independent pro baseball teams that have sprung up around the Chicago area in the past decade-plus. They feature small staffs, modest compensation and working much closer to the concept of “for the love of the game.” That also goes for the young, eager players on the Slammers, Schaumburg Boomers, Windy City Thunderbolts (Crestwood-based) and Gary-South Shore Rail Cats.

“My motivation is I like to compete,” said Steve McQuail, top run producer (13 homers, 41 RBIs in 65 games) on the Boomers, who’d play the Slammers through a rain-soaked game in a few hours. “Whether it’s ‘indy’ ball, affiliated (regular minor leagues from



**Silver Cross Field is a gem of a stadium that has already hosted two independent baseball teams.**

rookie-level on up), men's league, it's team vs. team, me vs. the pitcher, and the competitive aspect is the most exciting to me."

Folks at the Class-A Midwest League Kane County Cougars prefer you don't call the Slammers, Boomers, et. al. "minor league." That designation, they feel, is for clubs affiliated with big-league teams, not the latter 20<sup>th</sup> Century, early 21<sup>st</sup> Century boomlet in professional, independent clubs and brand-new, first-rate stadiums like Silver Cross built to host them.

But don't try to get haughty with independent-league players, who range from fresh-out-of-college hopefuls to recently-released Class-A and Double-A prospects to recent big leaguers like East Chicago native Jason Repko and buddy Brett Tomko, a longtime starting pitcher.

### **'Indy' and Class-A 'the same'**

"It's better than rookie ball," said first baseman Nick Akins, the Slammers' top slugger (15 homers, 44 RBIs in 46 games). "It's A ball (level). They're the same. There's not a huge difference in low A and high A."



**Nick Akins, a longtime Dodgers farmhand, now leads the Slammers in homers. He wants to get back to affiliated baseball.**

By whatever classification, independent ball is easily-accessible, economical entertainment for fans looking for a summer night out with the family without spending the several hundred bucks required for gas, parking, tickets and concessions at big-league games. Slammers tickets are \$12 for the first four rows, \$10 for all other seats and \$5 for lawn seats on the berms adjoining left and right fields.

In an age of impossibly-clogged expressways and high fuel prices, the sprouting up of independent teams on the fringes of the Chicago area is serving a market. So much so that original "indy" teams begun in Joliet and Schaumburg – the Jackhammers and Flyers, respectively – went under financially, but were quickly replaced by the Slammers and Boomers.

The attraction of such teams extended to their host communities, which helped build new stadiums. Joliet, Schaumburg, Crestwood and Gary all built new ballparks, all of whom have gotten consistently good reviews. Silver Cross Field, taking its naming rights from Joliet's big hospital when built in 2002, does not have to take a back seat to any major-league ballpark in Chicago. The pressbox, part of a large suite, might be even nicer than the suite housing the inked-stained wretches at U.S. Cellular Field.

Interestingly, more than a touch of big-league experience is felt in both park operations at Silver Cross and in the field itself. Rathje, a resident of south exurban Peotone, spent 25 years through 2007 working in park operations at Wrigley Field – the last 10 years as chief before a sense of burnout prompted him to depart. And why not – he had a one-hour, 25-minute commute through rush-hour traffic each way to Clark and Addison.

### **Bossard re-sodded Silver Cross**

Helping him two years ago was Roger Bossard, the Sox’s “Sodfather,” the world’s best sports-field groundskeeper. In early 2012, Bossard and a crew re-sodded Silver Cross Field.

“It’s a smaller venue, but it’s amazing that there are many problems or issues that are the same here (as in Wrigley Field),” said Rathje, who started his career at the Triple-A team in Columbus, Ohio. “It is newer. But it does need TLC here or there.”

Ah, but at least Silver Cross doesn’t need emergency M\*A\*S\*H\* work as Wrigley required when concrete chunks began falling from the base of the upper deck in 2004, requiring an extra layer of netting as a precaution. So the extra puddles that form on the warning tracks at the bottom of the berms after a rain are a nuisance, not a threat to health and safety.



**Paul Rathje has to get more hands-on with maintaining Silver Cross Field with his tiny staff than he did in the same job at Wrigley Field.**

“I like the architecture,” said Rathje. “The steel...Joliet is an industrial city and they took that into account (in the building). The (14) suites are very nice for this level of baseball.”

Rathje certainly likes the players. None are the kind of millionaires with whom he crossed paths for several decades on the North Side.

“It’s fun to watch,” he said. “A few are hoping to be signed. Most are hungry. They like to play the game. They give it their all. It’s fun to watch. They don’t get paid a lot. They want to catch on or they’re not quite ready to stop playing and go on with their life in some other capacity.”

They're players like McQuail, a native of New York, and Akins, both of whom played in big-league organizations. McQuail played for two years in the Blue Jays organization, while Akins was just released this spring after 4 1/2 years in the Dodgers system.

"Of course I love the game," Akins said. "I want to get back into affiliated ball. I got as far as high-A. Come back and get another opportunity."

The Slammers' Marquis Riley and Boomers' Sean Mahley are high-average, high on-base-percentage guys looking to open some eyes in a supposedly post-PED era hungry for more fundamentally-sound players.

"For me, it's a chance to prove myself against better competition and show guys I can play and hopefully get to affiliated ball," second baseman Riley said. "Hopefully, you're playing good when the right guy's (scout) in the stands "Middle infield guys who can swing the bat are always needed."



**Steve McQuail (left) and Sean Mahley are the long and short of the Boomers' attack.**

Said Mahley: "Getting on base, scoring runs to win ballgames. However I get on, that's it."

### **Giving it one more shot**

Other players are trying to extend their pro careers against the odds. Boomers pitcher Matt Kuna, a year out of the University of Toledo, is a Griffith, Ind., resident and one of three Chicago-area players on his team. Kuna knows his fastball comes up a bit short when big-league scouts take their radar-gun readings.



**Slammers rookie manager Mike Breyman throws batting practice**

"Let's give it one more year, one good shot, let it all hang out," he said of his goal coming into this season. "See what happens. Coming from college, I had a half season here (in 2012)."

Kuna is at least doing it in front of family and friends. Father Rick Kuna makes sure he sees almost every Boomers game in Joliet and Crestwood, along with Rockford and Normal. Kuna's parents live in nearby Plainfield, so they often come to Silver Cross.

Both the Slammers and Boomers don't have the travel challenges of many Class-A leaguers. Many of the Frontier League franchises are a short bus ride away. No overnight trips are needed within the trio of teams in the Chicago area (Gary competes in the American Association). However, losing on the road does mean a longish, quiet bus ride home each night. The Slammers commute to Rockford and Normal, each a 90-minute one-way trip.

When the Slammers and Boomers play each other, from afar they look like home and road versions of the Baltimore Orioles, with various home-white and road-grey forms of orange uniforms. Up close, though, the Slammers have a green tinge on their "unnies." "University of Miami – the 'U,'" said one player.

They don't have the Orioles' food spread or spacious locker room. The Slammers' home clubhouse is, well, cozy for a new ballpark. The tiny kitchen is not stocked with hot food. Open jars of peanut butter and jelly, along with an open bag of white bread, is the tried-and-true minor-league sustenance that Sox star Paul Konerko re-acquainted himself with during a recent rehab assignment. The trainer's room has one whirlpool tub.

### **A bloodhound to sniff out fan fun**

The fans are similarly close to the action in all ballparks. They enjoy wonderful promotions. On this night, a man proposed to his girlfriend, kneeling to her at home plate as both managers and umpires (two arbiters each game) looked on. A local kids' choir entertained pre-game. In the front office, a sweet, red-haired 7-month-old bloodhound named Deputy continued his apprenticeship to become the live team mascot.

"They've accepted them real well, but we still have a lot to work to do," Rathje said of Joliet's welcome mat for the Slammers. "The reception is good. For a family who wants to come out and have a nice night at the ballpark, have fun outside, it's a great deal."

But, say, there might be a limit to the promotional scope his team offers, compared to a quiet arrangement his employer used to offer at Wrigley Field.

Going back to the 1980s, the Cubs allowed some loyal fans to scatter the ashes of their loved ones in Wrigley Field, to follow all-time player and manager Charlie Grimm after his death in 1983.

"We were getting so many requests, why not as long as we do it discretely and quietly," Rathje said. "You'd be amazed. Some were very loyal Cubs fans. What it meant to some of those people, it was incredible. You always had a pretty good feeling after you let



**You're nothing but a hound dog...But 7-month-old Deputy ain't cryin' all the time as Slammers mascot-in-training.**

them do it because you know how much it meant to them.”

A typical ceremony might be at 8:30 a.m. Sunday when the Cubs were on the road. The rule of Rathje and predecessor Tom Cooper: no publicity and no hype. And no dumping of ashes into the vines. “That was bad for the ivy,” he said.

Give that time at Silver Cross Field. “We haven’t yet had a request here,” Rathje said.

Don’t talk about departures around the independent teams. They feel they’ve just arrived.