

## From cap to collar

# Why ballplayer turned to God

By MARGARET MILLER

A one-time minor league center-fielder in the Detroit Tiger organization went back to the team's locker room Sunday, this time taking with him the word of God instead of a booming bat and a fielder's mitt.

The ex-player is now a Lutheran pastor, and the Rev. Robert Hoeft took a Sunday away from the pulpit of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Farmington Hills, to conduct worship services for the Baseball Chapel at the Tiger Ball Park.

In that capacity he led meditation for the visiting California Angels and then for the Tigers, each team holding worship while the other took batting practice.

In contributing his services to the chapel organization that operates a dugout church for players throughout the major leagues, Pastor Hoeft should feel right at home dozen or so players from each team who regularly attend the chapel.

He numbered himself among their counterparts of the '40s and '50s when he played on championship minor league and service teams and was considered to be heading for the majors when he quit baseball to enter the ministry.

NOW, When Pastor Hoeft goes out from his ministry at St. Paul to make an occasional banquet lecture, he likes to tell his listeners that "I feel I'm now really in the major leagues, preaching God's word on the most victorious team in the world's history."

But he reached that point in a manner far different from the one followed by most of his fellow clergy-men. It was an "experience with the Holy Spirit" that led to the radical change of direction in the life of young Bobby Hoeft, Detroit's first All-American high school player, a member of the U.S. All-Service baseball team in 1964 and an up-and-coming prospect in the Chicago White Sox organization.

The time was just before his discharge from the U.S. Navy, where most of his time had been spent as a member of naval baseball teams, and the place was the Navy base at Norfolk, Va., where he was last assigned. "I had gone to a Lutheran church off base," he recalled, "and heard a sermon on the topic 'What Are You Doing with Your Life?'"

"That pastor really hit me over the

head, and forced me to think that what I was doing was hitting a little ball around. I could rationalize about the entertainment value that baseball games had for men in the service, but after hearing that sermon I found myself thinking more and more about considering some other profession."

PASTOR HOEFT said that was his frame of mind when, while serving watch at the Norfolk station on the beach at 4 a.m., "there suddenly came the staggering idea that I should go into the ministry."

"There were no voices or figures," he related, "and it was no conversion because I was a believer, what I call now a Sunday-morning Christian."

"But it was a very strong idea that would not go away." Discharged from the service, he went back to his east side Detroit home and discussed with family and friends the possibility of entering ministry instead of going to spring training with the White Sox.

"They all discouraged me," he said, "pointing out I was just to the point where I was really on my way into the major leagues and also pointing out that the grades I made in high school while serving as captain of the football and baseball teams were hardly acceptable for ministry."

"So I went to talk to my pastor, and it turned out he was a fan, too. He urged me to go on with baseball."

With all that advice, he headed for Tampa and the Chicago White Sox training camp, after which he was duly optioned to the Superior, Wis., team in the Class A Northern League. "I was doing all right there," he said, "and even leading the league in runs batted in. But my heart wasn't in it any more, so I left in the middle of the season and eventually was accepted by Concordia Seminary at Springfield, Ill."

PASTOR HOEFT and his wife, Pat, were married during his first Christmas break from seminary, and two of their children had arrived by the time he graduated in 1964. A third was born during his vicar year at Fallon, Mont.

Since then his career as a minister has taken him to pastorates at Nashville, Tenn., Clair Shores and Hammond, Ind.

He also spent a year at Valparaiso University earning a master's degree

in history, and had come back to the Detroit area in the fall of 1976 to teach at Lutheran High West when moving into the St. Paul parish, he attended services there and shortly was extended a call to become the church's pastor. He accepted after the high school located a replacement to end "the shortest faculty tenure in its history."

Recently he earned a master's of divinity degree from Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind.

TIGER STADIUM, scene of the Baseball Chapel services Sunday, will be a familiar spot for this local pastor because it was with the Detroit team that he first signed after being named an all-American prep player.

"My mother was serving dinner to a different crowd practically every night, but I knew right along I wanted to sign with the Tigers," he said.

That was 1947, and he played with several Class A teams in the Detroit farm system before being drafted by the White Sox two years later. He had two seasons with Chicago when, facing the draft for service in the Korean War, he decided to enlist in the Navy. After being posted at Great Lakes station, he was assigned to play for

the Bluejackets. His next tour was aboard the USS Lake Champlain, "where the captain, realizing he had several pro ball players among his crew" was challenging every ship and station in sight."

Hoeft's athletic prowess later brought him assignment to the Norfolk base, where he was a member of the team that went to the all-service playoffs in Colorado Springs. There his Navy team bowed in the finals to the Army team from Fort Ord, but Hoeft's outstanding play won him a place on the All-Service team.

"Jimmy Landis, later a White Sox star, hit the home run that beat us and he was given the centerfield spot on the all-service team, but they did something very unusual and named me, also a centerfielder, to the right-field place," he remembers with not a little pride.

The pastor now recalls baseball days with fond remembrance but no regret. His athletic endeavors are limited to, as a St. Paul secretary put it, "swinging a mean bat in the office."

But he's pleased to be going back to Tiger Stadium Sunday while Vicar Dale Reusch takes over his home pulpit. After all, he figures, he's a member of the championship team.



Pastor Robert Hoeft returned to the Tiger locker room last Sunday and made the players feel at home in the dugout chapel.

## Kids find refuge in self-built homes

(Continued from Page 3A)

saying. Usually we sit here and talk and have lunch here, sometimes," Bunty said.

David Blackmer, 12, of Farmington, uses his clubhouse as a retreat. The compact, square structure offers privacy and a repository for his collection of posters which range from Farrah Fawcett to the Sweet Hogs recommending "Up your nose with a rubber hose."

Dave, who'll enter East Junior High this fall, has already slept in his hideaway. A screen at the top of the door allows cool air into the house.

Brian Lewis, 14, has plenty of cool air in his clubhouse on stilts. The house was built by his brother Craig and his father Stanley about nine years ago.

"You can see the college (OCC) and the library from the treeshouse," said Brian. "I just mess around in it. I do my homework in it."

He reaches his hideaway by using a free hanging fire escape ladder. Gold carpeting and a coffee table are part of the decor in the tree top house which sleeps three persons.

Although the house has a roof, it's closed for the winter.

BRIAN does such fall chores around the house as taking out the gold car pet so it will escape the ravages of

snow and ice.

It took eight boys about two weeks to complete the clubhouse that stands in the backyard of Jean Nolan. Unpainted on the outside but completely furnished and decorated on the inside, the New Bradford Street clubhouse can hold all eight of its builders.

Although girls have been seen entering the house, Dave Loeffler, 11, staunchly insists that they're not allowed.

"Cause they're grumps," he explained.

Pat Nolan, 9, Chris Nolan, 8, Bob Loeffler, 12, Kevin Edwards, 9, Kurt Mochacek, 9, Kevin Unwin, 12 and Steven Unwin, 10, join David in crowding the hideaway. A mattress and sleeping bags provide comfort for over-nighters. The house only holds three sleepers.

Decor is strictly early clubhouse. Their posters include Farrah, the Red Wings, Steve Austin, a license plate and a satellite photo of Earth. Visitors are welcomed by signs on the door inviting persons to spit.

"We were the only ones who said yes," said Mrs. Nolan, explaining how the structure ended up in her yard.

"August is a bad month," she said. Summer classes and sports programs are winding up. The boys needed a place to play.

## Fairlane displays photos

Joe Messina will exhibit 50 of his award-winning photographs in the south grand court of the Fairlane Town Center, Dearborn, Sept. 5-11.

Messana has been a photographer since 1962 and has had his work published in a variety of national magazines and four books.

More than 10 years of work is involved in this exhibit on modern architecture and related arts, including works by Frank Lloyd Wright and Minoru Yamasaki.

The display is open to the public at no charge. Fairlane Town Center is west of Southfield Freeway in an area bounded by Michigan Avenue, Hubbard Drive and Evergreen Road. Shopping hours are 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. weekdays and Saturdays, and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays.

## Hills tourney announced

The First Annual Farmington Area Golf Championship will be on two weekends, Sept. 9-11 and 16-18, and is open to all Farmington area residents and employees.

Sponsored by Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation in cooperation with the San Marino Golf Course, the championship will consist of three flights—a championship flight, first and second flights.

Men will play 45 holes beginning with nine holes on Sept. 9 at 4 p.m. Women will play 27 holes, beginning with nine holes on Sept. 16 at the same time. Play will continue with 18 holes on Sept. 10 and 11 for men, and

nine holes daily for women on Sept. 16 and 17. On Saturdays and Sundays, play will begin at 9:30 a.m., and Award Ceremonies will end the festivities on the Sunday afternoons. Three championship plaques and three runner-up plaques will be awarded.

Registration will begin Sept. 2, and will be first-come, first-served, with no more than 50 registrations for each division. Fee is \$19 for men and \$14 for women, payable upon registration at the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Office. All green fees are included in the entry fee.

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