

Sports

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Monday, July 9, 1984 O&E

classified inside



(F1C)

A war on and off ball diamond

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

WHERE HAVE you gone Bob Owchinko? Where have you gone Bob Welch? How about you John Martin? Or what about Glenn Gulliver, Dan Schmidt, Jerry Keller and Mark Elghimey?

Where have the glory days of the Eastern Michigan University baseball program gone?

Who can remember the days when the Hurons were a rising comet on the major college baseball scene — competing on a level with Arizona State, Texas and the other college baseball powers? It wasn't that long ago.

Wasn't it just 1976 that the Hurons placed fifth in the College World Series? The very next year, 1976, head coach Ron Oestrike took his major-league-caliber team back to the world series and came back second best in the nation.

All 1976, what a glorious season. Oestrike was named Coach of the Year by The Sporting News. The nucleus of that team went on to professional careers: Bob Welch (Dodgers), Owchinko (Padres), Martin (Cardinals), Gulliver (Tigers), Schmidt (Orioles and now Cardinals), Schmidt (Yankees), Keller (Braves). An arm injury kept Elghimey, the No. 3 starting pitcher behind Welch and Owchinko in '76, from a major league contract.

In those days, every blue-chip high school baseball player in Michigan wanted to play ball at Eastern. A baseball scholarship to Eastern Michigan University in 1976 was as precious as a UCLA basketball scholarship in the early 1970s.

Those effluent days have disappeared for the Hurons. Eastern has not been back to the College World Series since 1976.

Don't get the wrong idea. Ron Oestrike's program hasn't exactly fallen off the face of the earth. The Hurons have remained a power in the Mid-American Conference. They have won the MAC title twice in the last six years, and have always finished in the upper division of the 10-team league.

But the Hurons no longer considered a national baseball power. After the 1976 season, Eastern fell below

The competition for the Hurons is now in the hands of the players. It's not the coach's fault.

By Chris McCosky

500, 27-36-1 in 1977. They regrouped and had a solid season in 1979 but fell in the regional tournament. In 1980 they again plunged below 500, 20-34. Last year, after three mediocre seasons, the Hurons finished 27-35.

SO, WHAT in the world has happened to the EMU baseball program? There are several theories.

College baseball has enjoyed a recent surge of popularity across the country. National publications like Sports Illustrated and Sporting News, as well as authors Roger Angell and Tom Boswell have contributed greatly to the growing awareness of college baseball. Cable television, with its broadcasts of the world series, has spread the once-ignored sport coast to coast.

What popularity has done to the sport is make colleges more hungry for success. Recruiting of high school ball players has become intense.

"What you are seeing now is more and more schools coming in from out of state," said Dick Colpaert from the Major League Scouting Bureau. "The competition for high school baseball players in this state is greater than it ever been."

The prospects are beginning to sign the college players — another factor attracting young players to college.

"This year, there were five players drafted out of this state. Only one signed," Colpaert said. "We're signing less and less high school kids every year. You take the fringe player, not even the best prospect. Where we could get this kid for maybe \$10,000, \$15,000 before, we now have to come up with \$40,000 to \$60,000. It's because this kid has three or four college scholarship offers waiting for him if he doesn't go."

BACK TO THE HURONS . . . Ron Oestrike

is allowed a grand total of eight scholarships per year. He can attract players from two states — Michigan and Ohio. In those states, he must compete with every major college in the country for the top prospects. It's not been easy.

"We are kind of hoping it's a cycle thing," said Oestrike. "It's an up and down situation. Right now, we're down. But, we'll be back."

The other theory as to why the EMU program has lost its national prominence has to do with the school up the road — the University of Michigan.

After the 1979 season, U-M hired an ambitious young coach away from the University of Miami, Ohio. In the five seasons since, the young ambitious coach has led the Wolverines to four world series berths and a 214-77-1 record.

Don Middaugh has brought national prominence to the University of Michigan baseball program. Middaugh has succeeded where Oestrike had succeeded before him.

In the EMU glory days, Oestrike was able to recruit the Welch's and the Owchinko's throughout the state. Later, Middaugh has been able to get them.

"MICHIGAN is investing a lot more money in their program and it makes it very difficult to recruit against them," Oestrike said. "That's not a cop out. It's just a fact."

Where Eastern is allowed eight full-ride scholarships per year, Michigan and the rest of the Big 10 schools get 13. Eastern cannot afford to pay for out-of-state waiver fees needed to recruit outside of Michigan and Ohio (where no fee is charged). U-M can go anywhere it wants, though Middaugh stays pretty much in the Midwest.

Yet, when Michigan and Eastern have gone head-to-head for a top recruit, it's been Michigan winning out in

recent years. Middaugh wooed Redford St. Mary's pitcher Scott Kamieniecki away from EMU and the Detroit Tigers two years ago. Kamieniecki was the Wolverine's ace last year.

This year, Middaugh won out over Oestrike for the services of Orchard Lake St. Mary's hurler Mike Ignasiak, one of the top prospects in the state. Middaugh also got Divine Child's Jim Agency and Fraser's Steve Savage — both heavily sought by Oestrike. Middaugh was also on his way to signing St. Agatha's Andrew Robertson before the all-star signed with Cleveland.

"WE'VE BEEN very fortunate to do as well as we have," Middaugh said. "It goes in cycles. It's not like Eastern has worked less hard or anything like that. And it's not like they have a bad baseball program over there. They have an outstanding program."

Oestrike did win one player away from U-M. Don Bealing, a football-hurler star from Ohio, chose EMU over Michigan. Oestrike also did well in the Observer & Eccentric area landing Livonia's Stevenston pluckers Brian Porter and Rick Roman, as well as Westland John Glenn slugger Don Wolfe.

"We aren't disappointed in our recruits this year," Oestrike said. "But, none were drafted and that always worries you."

Oestrike knows he has missed out on the cream of this year's relatively thin crop.

"I'll never say that we've got second-rate kids coming in here. But, we've got to get the same type of kid (Middaugh) has," said Oestrike.

Clearly, Oestrike hasn't been getting the same type of player, or at least not as many of them. Yet, there is evidence that the tide may be shifting toward the green and white.

EVEN THOUGH the team has struggled the last five years, EMU has continued to develop and produce major league players. Pat Sheridan, 1977-1979, is now hitting better than .300 with the Kansas City Royals. Bud Yarus, Audie Cole, Gordy Chretien, Brian Stemberger, Mark Wilkins, Jay Davidson, Mitch Zwolemon, Brian Clatterback, Rob Sepanek and Ken Spratke all are, or were at one time, property of a major league franchise.

Orchard Lake St. Mary's hurler Mike Ignasiak was one of the many high school baseball prospects sought by both Eastern Michigan and the University of Michigan. As has been the recent trend, U-M won out.

Windsor hoop camp a wealthy fantasy

DRUM ROLL PLEASE. From the creators of the Detroit Tigers Sports Fantasy Camp comes . . . Piston Fantasy Camp!

That's right, folks. For one low (?) price, an elite group of basketball nuts can enjoy a week with some Piston greats of yesterday.

George Blaha's play-by-play is mentally audible, describing an imaginary battle: "Rory Roundball working on Bing, sliding right. Ball goes into Lander, back out to Roundball, drives the baseline, puts up an 18-footer — HE FILLS IT UP!"

What a thrill, sweeping to the hoop past John Mengell or matching jumpers with George Trapp. There isn't a hardwood fanatic anywhere who would pass up an opportunity like that.

Except those who are meted out by the price.

SPORTS FANTASIES INC. is the creator of former Detroit Tiger Jim Price and Jerry Lewis. Not the comedian, this Jerry Lewis means business.

It takes superb businessmen to devise a weeklong baseball camp for adults and sell it for \$3,295.

Dwell on that figure for a few moments. Drink it in, enjoy it the way you savor a fine glass of wine, slowly and delightfully. All the things you could do if suddenly presented with \$3,295. Invest it, buy a new car, set it

aside for the kids' college education. Or blow it by retreating into your youth to play baseball against the 1968 world champion Tigers.

It seems guilt should intrude somewhere. But for 75 lucky men last spring and a long list of not-so-lucky ones who were left out of the fun, there was no better way to spend that much loot.

"We had to cut it off at 75," said Sports Fantasies spokesman Jim Bernstein of the baseball camp at a press conference Thursday at the West Bloomfield Jewish Community Center.

"Believe me, they would have paid more."

Next year, they will. The camp was so successful, the price has jumped.

WHAT LEWIS and Price have done is take the make-believe of television (Fantasy Island) and make it livable. Moreover, they've gone a step further. Sure, men have different fantasies, but few are more compelling than sports.

Baseball is the newest in the series. At the Tiger camp, Lewis passed



C.J. Risak

around questionnaires asking those in attendance what other flight into sport fantasy they would enjoy. "Most said basketball," Lewis said.

It didn't take long to line up Bing, Lander, Mengell, Trapp, Chris Ford, Ray Scott, Curtis Rowe, Don Adams, Willie Norwood and a few others.

Part of Lewis' plan is to stage the fantasy at the same spot the real team holds training camp. The Pistons will be at the University of Windsor, so that's where the fantasy camp will be.

It's true, a trip across the Ambassador Bridge isn't as glamorous as a flight south to Lakeland, where the Tiger campers lived their fantasy. But the Pistons have never won a championship, either, so the attraction isn't as powerful.

Neither is the price: \$1,495 for a week of pumping pistons. The fee includes all the basketball a guy can take, rooms at the University of Windsor, a Piston uniform, most meals and a few added "extras."

Not all those who attend do so just to see how they'd fare against the pros. "It's a thrill for a guy like me just to put it on," said Lewis. "Half of the camp is meeting the guys, listening to the war stories. You wouldn't believe the friendships that come out of it."

And yet its uniqueness makes it perfect for media hype. I mean, how much attention would a trip by some well-to-do to the Far East draw? And yet, Detroit's major dailies, two television stations and the Observer & Eccentric each ran a series of stories on the Tiger fantasy camp.

All that publicity lavished on what a relatively small group of people chose to blow their money on.

If this sounds a bit ridiculous, please take note: There's more to come. In December it'll be the hockey nuts turn. Lewis and Price already have a Red Wing camp planned in Port Huron (where the Red Wings train, of course).

The highlight will be Dec. 8, when the campers take to the ice against the Red Wing old-timers in a game played at Joe Louis, after a Red Wing game.

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BEYOND AIMING their camp at what many men dream about — playing in the big leagues — Lewis and Price have catered it to the upper echelon of society, which adds an air of exclusivity to it. It makes the fantasy special.

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