

Introduction

Baseball has been played in the Dakota Territory since the early 1870s, before North Dakota even became a state, first by the soldiers at the army forts established in the area and later by settlers as towns sprang up along the new Northern Pacific Railroad. Early games were mostly lighthearted affairs played for recreation and fun, but within a short time baseball became more competitive. Gambling on the outcome of games and charging admission to fans meant considerable money was now involved in the game. By the late 1800s some towns began paying their players, either local men, or outsiders recruited from elsewhere. This began a period of time in which semi-professional baseball flourished in North Dakota.

Semi-pro baseball differs from organized professional baseball in that the players and teams are independent, and not affiliated with any organized structure. North Dakota has had teams in organized baseball beginning with towns in the Red River Valley League in 1897 and many of the state's larger cities have had teams in the Northern League during much of the twentieth century. The Northern League has operated off and on in the Upper Midwest since the early 1900s and teams representing North Dakota towns participated at various times throughout its history.

By the late 1930s, fewer and fewer towns were paying the players on their ball teams, and semi-pro baseball was only viable in the state's largest cities. Many small towns continued to form amateur, town teams and as a result the Association of North Dakota Amateur Baseball Leagues (ANDABL) was formed in Jamestown in 1939 and the first state-wide tournament was held that year. No tournament was held during the years the United States was involved in World War II, but after the war ended thousands of servicemen returned to their home communities and resumed playing baseball. As a result, amateur baseball in North Dakota flourished during the next two decades. During its peak in the 1950s nearly three hundred teams were formed across the state and often more than thirty of them played in the state tournament, an event that usually lasted more than a week and drew thousands of fans to McElroy Park, later named Jack Brown Stadium, in Jamestown.

By the early 1970s amateur baseball entered a transitional phase. Fewer players were participating, meaning fewer teams and leagues were formed, fewer teams attended the state tournament, and fewer fans watched the games. This gradual decline has continued over the last fifty years and many reasons have been cited for this development. As the players from the 1950s and 1960s aged, many turned to slow pitch softball. The view of sports in society in general changed from being spectators to active participation and many more recreational opportunities were available to North Dakotans. People decided they would rather golf, play tennis, or fish, than play or watch amateur baseball. For those that did still want to watch baseball, they would rather drive to Minneapolis (a trip that was much easier than twenty or thirty years ago) to see the Twins than watch a local amateur game.

In an interview in 2017, R. D. Brown described that state of the game in North Dakota as being “on life support.” Nevertheless, amateur baseball continues to hold on in North Dakota, in part because other forms of baseball thrive in the state. Since the 1930s, North Dakota has had active high school and American Legion baseball programs. Many of these players wanted to continue to play baseball after they aged out of those programs, so they formed amateur teams in their communities. In addition, despite a short season due to unpredictable spring weather, successful college baseball programs operate at Minot, Mayville, Jamestown, Valley City, and North Dakota State University in Fargo.¹ College baseball coaches encourage their players to join amateur teams in the summer to gain needed experience. Both the American Legion and college baseball programs serve as a feeder system, and although at one time players had to choose between participating in an American Legion tournament or the state amateur tournament, now often the best, older legion players play on both teams.

Despite the challenges and uncertain future of the amateur game in North Dakota, there are many dedicated men doing all they can to keep the game alive. What makes fifty-year old men with creaky knees and stiff backs still play a young man’s game? Why do they give up summer weekends to drive all the way to Jamestown and pay an entry fee just so they can play a few games in the state tournament? Why do they still devote so much time, energy, and money to the sport?

There are probably as many answers to these questions as there are players. “As long as we’re competitive, we might as well keep going”, said Jared Purdy,² and Joe Vannett added, “I’ll play as long as I can.”³ Referring to the tradition of the state championship team having their picture taken under the scoreboard at Jack Brown Stadium, Cory Anderson said. “The walk to center field never gets old.”⁴ However, in the time of multi-million-dollar major league salaries, there are still some men who play the game for the right reasons - for the love of the game. What follows is an attempt to recognize their efforts.

¹ The college baseball program at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks was recently eliminated.

² Jamestown Sun, August 17, 2012.

³ Jamestown Sun, August 18, 2016.

⁴ Jamestown Sun, August 12, 2012.