

## Fargo Dominance Comes to an End (1969-1974)

In 1935 the National Baseball Congress (NBC), the governing body for semi-pro baseball in the United States, held their first ever tournament in Wichita, Kansas. The tournament drew some of the best teams from across the country. North Dakota's entry from Bismarck, led by Satchel Paige, won the initial tournament and was named national champions. Bismarck competed again in 1936, and over the next few years North Dakota's state semi-pro champs entered the Wichita tournament, but none matched the success of the Bismarck team. Although the distinction could sometime be blurred, the tournament eventually transitioned into a championship for amateur, rather than semi-pro teams.

The headquarters of amateur baseball in North Dakota has always been in Jamestown, but by the early 1960s Fargo began to exert more influence over amateur baseball than any other city in the state. Beginning in 1962 Fargo teams won ten of the next thirteen state amateur baseball championships. For a few years, Fargo teams (and a few other larger cities) affiliated with the NBC. This often conflicted with the state amateur tournament, and the North Dakota entry in the NBC tournament often picked up several players from other teams, thus weakening those teams for state amateur tournament play. This upset the ANDABL, and a rift developed between the NBC affiliated teams and the state amateur association. There were also accusations that Fargo teams "recruited" some of the best players from other parts of the state by arranging for summer jobs in the Fargo-Moorhead community. This also weakened the other amateur teams and further angered the ANDABL.

In 1968, Fargo Park Board League members Glass and Paint, Emery Johnson, Cook Sign, and Sweeney Bros. were members of the ANDABL but Glass and Paint also decided to become a member of the NBC. Glass and Paint won the Park Board League pennant, compiled a season record of 28-7, but like other league teams, played most of their games against stronger competition in Minnesota. As the only North Dakota NBC member, they were invited to participate in the Wichita tournament.

The team that was assembled by manager Virgil Hegeholz, president of the Clay County State Bank in Dilworth, Minnesota may have been one of the best in North Dakota since the Bismarck champions of 1935. The sixteen-man squad, including pickups, included four players who would later be elected to North Dakota's Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame, and three others who had experience in professional baseball. The outfield consisted of Harold Larson, Jim Litch, and Joel Bochte and the infield, from third to first, were Gary Haskins, Larry Schwann, Ron Smedshammer, and Maynard Niskanen. Glass and Paint's top pitchers were Jim Everson, Mike McNair, and Jerry Christainson but lefties Bernie Graner and Duane Ramstad and right-handers Marv Dutt and Doug Eiken were added as pickups.

After their opening game in Wichita was rained out, Marv Dutt pitched a complete game four-hitter, striking out eight, as Glass and Paint beat Lawton, Oklahoma, 2-0. They lost their next two games, 8-1 to Staunton, Indiana and 13-3 to Ocala, Florida and were eliminated. After

returning from Wichita, the Glass and Paint squad won the 1968 North Dakota amateur tournament a couple of weeks later.

The ADNABL decided they needed to address the NBC question at their spring meeting on April 27, 1969. Jim Nelson's column in the *Jamestown Sun* entitled, "Fargo Loop Gets Partial Approval of NBC Ties", stated that Virgil Hegeholz, who was both commissioner of the state's NBC organization, and a commissioner with the ANDABL, recommended that the amateur organization allow Fargo Park Board League teams to declare their intention (of affiliating with the NBC) by June 15. The ANDABL agreed, and only stipulated that if North Dakota's NBC affiliated teams staged a playoff series to determine the Wichita entry, they could not call it a state championship event.<sup>1</sup>

The Class AA bracket in the 1969 state amateur tournament started off with an upset when independent Rolla knocked off Glass & Paint of the Fargo Park Board League 4-3. The winning run scored in the seventh inning when Jim Berube walked, was sacrificed to second by Jim Howsom, and came home when Harold Neameyer's grounder got through Fargo first baseman Jerry Christianson. In other opening round games, Emery Johnson eliminated Bismarck 15-0 and, before one of the largest tournament crowds seen in years, Wayne Westphal of Mayville outdueled John Reha of Valley City 3-1 in eleven innings. In the AA semi-finals, Dick Marsden was the winning pitcher as Emery Johnson defeated the Jamestown Merchants (who had received a first round bye) 5-1 and Mayville's 19-year-old pitcher Bill Koering shutout Rolla 4-0. In the championship, Emery Johnson outfielder Mike Berg had four hits and batted in three runs to support Bernie Graner's complete game win in an 8-2 in over Mayville.

On the Class A side of the 1969 tournament, Steele and Bowman had an easy time in their first two games while Litchville and Fordville survived scares to come out on top. In their opener Fordville took a six-run lead but Jud battled back to go ahead 10-8. Fordville scored three in the tenth, the big hit being a two-run double by catcher Lyle Lizakowski, to prevail 11-10. Braddock's 35-year-old curve baller Andy Schmidt had Litchville shutout through seven innings before Litchville rallied for two runs in the eighth and three more in the ninth to win 5-2.

In the semi-finals Bowmen eliminated Steele 10-6 and Fordville downed Litchville 15-0 behind Ron Enerson's two-hitter and six RBI, including a three-run home run, by Lizakowski. In the championship game, Bowman shortstop Terry Severson committed four errors, three of them in the fifth inning when Fordville scored twice. Conrad Dvorak pitched a complete game and Duane Baumgartner added insurance runs with a two-run homer, as Fordville won the Class A championship 4-1.

In the Class AA championship game, Emery Johnson second baseman Larry Mollins was hit above his left ear by a fastball from Mayville pitcher Wayne Westphal. He was taken to the

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<sup>1</sup> Jamestown Sun, April 28, 1969.

hospital to get checked and wasn't expected to play in the overall championship game (between the A and AA champs) later that afternoon. It was good thing he did. Fordville and Emery Johnson were locked up in a 2-2 tie game when Mollins led off the ninth inning with a walk, stole second, went to third on an infield out and stole home with the winning run to give Emery Johnson the overall title.

For the first time in tournament history, the MVP did not come from a member of the winning team. The state amateur tournament had seen dominant pitching before, but few topped the performance by Bowman's Gary Schuler in 1969. He struck out thirteen in his team's opening round game and followed that up with a no-hitter against Lisbon. In that game he whiffed another fourteen, and allowed just two base runners, both reaching on walks. Only two balls were hit out of the infield all day. In his third tournament appearance, Schuler came in in relief against Steele with the score tied 6-6 in the sixth and held them down as his teammates rallied for a win, Schuler's third. When Fordville scored in the fifth inning of the championship game, it broke a string of 20 1/3 consecutive scoreless innings for Schuler.

Despite the exciting state tournament, the ANDABL still faced a number of challenges. With the dwindling number of teams, the state association tried to get as many as possible to participate in the tournament (half of all registered team entered the 1969 event), but they found this approach didn't necessarily increase attendance and revenues because fans from small town usually only came to Jamestown if their team reached the championship game. The title of *Jamestown Sun* writer Jim Nelson's report on ANDABL's spring meeting in April 1970 was, "Amateur Sports Losing Public Appeal"<sup>2</sup>. In it he reiterated the themes that had been plaguing amateur baseball for the past decade; that fans had developed other recreational interests and options other than amateur sports.

1969 tournament MVP Gary Schuler had moved to East Grand Forks, Minnesota but Bowman still brought a strong team to the 1970 Class A tournament. In their opening round game Mike Meszaros fired a two-hitter and his teammates scored eight runs in the sixth inning to down Napoleon 9-0 and then they got by Lisbon 11-2 in the second round. Gackle also won their first two games. Terry Otto threw a one-hitter in a 9-0 win over Harvey and then struck out seventeen in beating defending champ Fordville 3-2. Gackle scored all three runs in the first inning, two coming on a home run by shortstop Loren Henke. In the Class A championship Jim Silbernagel used his roundhouse curve to strike out ten in a 2-1 win over Gackle to give Bowman the A title.

It was felt that the strength of the Fargo Park Board league was down a bit, so the Class AA tournament was wide open. Nonetheless, the league's two representatives won their opening round games. Joel Bochte's homerun to right in the eleventh inning gave Glass & Paint a 5-4 opening round win over Minot and center fielder Dave Johnson's grand slam keyed a nine-run

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<sup>2</sup> Jamestown Sun, April 8, 1970.

sixth inning as IDSO Sales routed Rolla 13-5. The Jamestown Elks trounced Bismarck 17-0 in five innings<sup>3</sup> and Doug Eiken hit a three-run homer to left center in the bottom of the ninth to give Mayville a 11-9 win over Valley City in the other opening round games.

Both Fargo teams were eliminated in the second round. Glass and Paint errors contributed to four six inning runs, and Mayville scored two more in the tenth inning to upset the defending champs 6-4. A rhubarb was the feature of the other semi-final game. The Elks were trailing IDSO Sales in the eighth inning when IDSO manager E. J. Anderson objected to a call. After a lengthy argument with the umpire, he was thrown out of the game but refused to leave the field. No pitches were thrown but the umpire began calling balls on “imaginary” Elks batters until Anderson finally left and order was restored. Jamestown outfielder Jim Wright fouled off several pitches before rapping a two-run double with two out in the bottom of the ninth to give the Elks a 5-4 win. In the Class AA championship game Mayville committed seven errors, and only one of the eight runs the Elks scored in the fifth inning was earned, and Jamestown won 12-5. In the overall championship, the Elks scored three first inning runs, and John Reha and Steve Furst combined on a four-hitter in a 6-2 win over Bowman.

The Elks’ star pitcher John Reha was named tournament MVP. The 21-year-old lefthander was a native of Williston where he starred in American Legion ball before attending the University of North Dakota where he played for Pinky Kraft. He struck out thirteen of the first sixteen batters he faced against Bismarck and followed that up with a win in relief in the IDSO game. Reha was credited with a save in the AA championship win over Mayville and as mentioned earlier, won his third game of the tournament by pitching the first seven innings against Bowman. Overall, in four tournament games, Reha struck out nineteen in thirty-nine innings pitched, and allowed just one earned run.

The overall win gave the city of Jamestown their first title in fourteen years, the last being the Eagles championship in 1956. The Elks had an overall record of 36-6-1 and went 12-0 in the Twilight League, the first team to have gone undefeated in league play. Their team was built in much the same way as the Fargo Park Board teams earlier in the decade with a core group of local players reinforced by outsiders. The local *Jamestown Sun* even commented that the roster was, “...not completely representative of Jamestown but some connection of reasonable long-standing”.

A post-tournament summary divided the Elks roster into “bonafides” and “others”. Among the bonafides were John Plowman and Dave Bachmeier, both former players at Jamestown College and teachers in town, Tom Gould, a local legion player, and Jim Wright, a native of Courtenay, who played with the Jamestown Legion team. Mike Ward, Terry Waterman, and second baseman Jim Nelson all worked with manager Mike Wells at a local insurance company. The “others” group included Reha of Williston, Jim Kapaun and Randy Rustad who were both from

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<sup>3</sup> Early round games, particularly on the Class A side, were often mismatches that ended early due to the nine-run rule.

Fargo and had played at Mayville State. John Jensen was a UND student from Broten, Minnesota and Steve Furst was originally from Wahpeton.

The state's amateur baseball association held their 1971 spring meeting on Sunday April 17 and the headline in sportswriter Jim Nelson's column in the next day's *Jamestown Sun* was, "ANDABL Reluctantly Approves NBC Team". Virgil Hegeholz, the state's NBC commissioner, asked for clarification of the rules on dual membership – teams belonging to both the ANDABL and the NBC – and Jack Brown's opinion was that if a team was affiliated with another organization, they were then ineligible to be a member of the ANDABL. After what was described as a lengthy discussion, an initial straw vote resulted in seven delegates opposing allowing NBC teams in the association and six favoring. Association president L. C. Loerch then made a motion that stipulated that the rule be waived for one year and that any player picked up by the Fargo NBC team for the Wichita tournament needed written permission from both his team's manager and sponsor. Another vote was taken, reversing the earlier straw vote, and now the delegates voted 9-3 in favor of Loersch's motion.<sup>4</sup>

In mid-July Fargo hosted a tournament to determine which North Dakota team would represent the state in the NBC tournament in Wichita later in the summer. This would be the ninth time a North Dakota team played in the tournament, the last being Fargo Glass and Paint two years earlier. Originally eight teams were scheduled to participate but the Minot Merchants backed out when they were not able to reschedule Manitoba Senior League games. So, the five Fargo Fitzgerald League members (Glass & Paint, IDSO Sales, Sweeney Bros. Construction, Cook Sign, and Wahpeton) along with the Valley City Merchants and Lisbon-Gwinner faced off in the double-elimination tournament.

IDSO Sales, managed by Virgil Hegeholz, and Glass & Paint, were tied for the league lead with 6-1 records, and were considered co-favorites. IDSO beat Wahpeton in their opening game and Steve Idso outpitched Dick Limke 3-0 as they beat Glass & Paint (who had an opening round bye). Sweeney Bros. then upset Glass & Paint 4-3 giving them their second loss and knocking them out of the tournament. The Valley City Merchants also had two wins and faced Sweeney with the winner taking on undefeated IDSO Sales for the championship. Down 4-1 early, Valley City rallied to beat Sweeney 5-4 but were defeated by IDSO 12-7 in the championship.

Glass & Paint and Wahpeton emerged from the league tournament a few weeks later to represent the Fitzgerald League at the North Dakota state tournament in Jamestown while IDSO left for Wichita. Before doing so, they engineered a "trade" with Glass & Paint, which might have been one of the most one-sided deals in baseball history. IDSO catcher Steve Madsen worked as a groundskeeper at Jack Williams Stadium in Fargo and couldn't get off work to accompany his teammates to Wichita. So, they lent him to Glass & Paint for the North Dakota tournament in

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<sup>4</sup> *Jamestown Sun*, April 18, 1971.

return for their catcher Arlo Brunsberg and pitcher Dick Limke (who between them had thirteen years of professional baseball experience).

Brunberg was born in Fertile, Minnesota and after high school attended Concordia College in Moorhead where he excelled in all-sports, most notably as a halfback on the football team. After college he signed with the Detroit Tigers organization and had a nine-year career in professional baseball including a late season call up to the major league club at the end of the 1966 season. Arlo appeared in two games and got one hit in three at bats. He spent the next four years in AAA ball but the Tigers already had an established catcher in Bill Freehan, so Brunsberg had no opportunity to play regularly in the majors. After retiring from baseball, he was hired as head baseball and assistant football coach at NDSU in Fargo in 1971 and during the summers played with Fargo Glass and Paint. After three years in Fargo, he moved to Minnesota where he retired after a thirty-year career as a high school teacher and coach.

In their first game before 5,000 fans at Lawrence Stadium in Wichita, IDSO upset ninth seeded Farmers Insurance of Fayetteville, Arkansas 9-3. They got off to a hot start with a four run first inning, highlighted by a homer by shortstop Tom Tessar and Limke pitched a complete game win. IDSO dropped their second game to home-town Wichita Service Auto Glass 6-0 and then, because they weren't scheduled to play again for several more days, drove back to Fargo.

When the IDSO club returned to Wichita later in the week they received a forfeit win when their scheduled opponents from St. Louis failed to appear. The Fairbanks, Alaska Gold Panners were the next opponent for IDSO. This team included some of the top college players in the United States including University of Minnesota star, and future Hall of Famer, Dave Winfield. This all-star outfit was too much for the North Dakota amateurs, defeating them by a score of 7-0. IDSO's 2-2 record at Wichita was good enough for a tie for 11<sup>th</sup> place and they finished with an overall record of 36-9 for the summer.

Back in North Dakota, the championship games of the 1971 state amateur tournament were one-sided affairs. In Class A, Lisbon took an early 5-2 lead against Bowman starter Jerry Silbernagel, but Mike Meszaros came on to relieve him in the third inning, allowing just three hits the rest of the way, and Bowman rallied for a 14-5 win. Four first-inning Rolla errors led to seven unearned runs and Glass & Paint rolled to a 15-6 win in the Class AA title game. Bowman starter Bob Waldal walked eight in the first three innings and Glass & Paint easily won the overall championship game 11-2. Catcher Jack Bugge hit two homers, driving in five runs, and center fielder Jan Kapaun also homered for the winners. Kapaun and second baseman Rex Haugan were named co-MVPs.

A couple of weeks later Glass and Paint faced South Dakota state champion Canova in the Dakota Series played at Howard, South Dakota. Dick Limke, picked up from IDSO Sales, struck out fifteen and allowed only three hits in a 7-3 win for the North Dakota champs in the first

game. Fargo collected twenty-three hits and overwhelmed Canova 20-10 in the second game to take the series. Arlo Brunsberg knocked two homeruns and Bugge and Harold Larson each also added a round-tripper.

### The NBC Rift Comes to a Head

Before getting into a discussion of the NBC issue at their annual spring meeting in April 1972, ANDABL delegates addressed several other questions. Association rules stated that teams in cities with a population of 5,000 or more needed either form or join an existing league. The Minot Merchants were the only team in that city and had been granted a waiver the past two years, but this year the waiver was not renewed. Also, the ANDABL had a long-standing rule allowing teams playing in Canadian tournament to accept up to \$500 in cash prizes for “expenses”. There was no way to effectively enforce the rule, so the \$500 limitation was removed after acknowledging it “probably had been violated many times” A proposal to change the nine-run rule from the seventh to the fifth inning was voted down 9-8 and finally, it was decided to leave rules about pick-up players for the state tournament to individual leagues.

Association president L. C. Loersch introduced the following resolution: “Be it resolved that any team or player who participates in any NBC sponsored tournament (or is) affiliated in any manner with NBC cannot take part or be a member of ANDABL”, which passed 14-2. Loersch went on to say “The time has come for ANDABL to take a stand. If the NBC operates as in the past, I don’t see how we can possibly work together”, and that the waiver of dual membership “probably shouldn’t have been granted in the first place.” Hegeholz did not attend the meeting, but when reached by phone indicated that he was not surprised by the association’s ruling.<sup>5</sup>

This meant that for the first time no Fargo team (winners of eight of the last ten state championships) would be playing in the state amateur tournament in Jamestown. Things came to a head in a column written by sportswriter Jim Nelson in the *Jamestown Sun* on August 12 followed by a column by Dan Nelson writing in the *Fargo Forum* two days later. According to the *Sun* piece, the rift began last year when Glass and Paint picked up Brunsburg and Limke from IDSO when they went to the NBC tournament. The ANDABL felt this weakened the league representative (although IDSO still won the Class AA title) and diminished the overall quality of the amateur tournament. The ANDABL was further angered when Glass and Paint manager Virgil Hegaholz later reinstated (over the objection of the ANDABL) Brunsberg and Limke when they played in the Dakota Series. Hegeholz, who served as North Dakota’s NBC Commissioner, politely reminded the ANDABL that they had no jurisdiction over who he placed on his roster in the series against the South Dakota amateur champs.

Other areas of contention included the ANDABL’s claim that they wanted to “preserve the amateur purity of the sport”, implying the NBC was not a truly amateur organization. The NBC responded that since the ANDABL had sanctioned money tournaments for years, they had little

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<sup>5</sup> Jamestown Sun, April 17, 1972.

standing on the issue of amateurism. Nelson (in the *Sun*) also accused Fargo teams of recruiting by scouting the best players in the state and enticing them to move to Fargo. This, according to the ANDABL, further weakened their organization.

Before the state tournament began, Harold Larson, who managed the IDSO team and who was picked up by Glass and Paint for the Wichita tournament, and also was a commissioner with the state amateur association, contacted L. C. Loerch, president of the ANDABL about the possibility of IDSO, or other Fitzgerald League teams, still being allowed to play in Jamestown. Loerch, who had initiated the resolution barring Fargo teams the previous spring, seemed now open to the idea, and suggested Larson contact Jack Brown, president of the ANDABL. When Larson was unable to get in touch with Brown, Loerch denied his request.

Hegeholz and Larson were pleased with their association with the NBC but also signaled a willingness to continue with the ANDABL, if allowed. The *Sun* column noted that the ANDABL and the NBC had co-existed for three years, and called for a compromise between the two organizations, but the ANDABL was unwilling to back down. Further complicating the issue was that South Dakota now wanted to send their amateur champ to the NBC tournament rather than play the North Dakota representative in the Dakota Series any longer.

Dan Nelson's column in the *Fargo Forum* was titled "ANDABL Digs Own Grave by Barring Fargo Teams." He pointed out that Fargo teams were the best draw at the Jamestown tournament, and even the second, third, or fourth place finishers in the Fitzgerald league would be quality teams, and even predicted that the ANDABL (who was already struggling to keep afloat) might vanish altogether. Nelson added that you couldn't blame players for moving to Fargo if they had the chance to play in a prestigious tournament such as the Wichita NBC.

Although the 1972 AA amateur tournament lacked a Fargo entry, a strong eight-team field arrived in Jamestown. Fordville had veterans Lon Enerson and Lyle Lizakowski and Dickinson was led by 6' 4" 19-year-old left-handed pitcher Terry Froelich. Tom Soholt, whose dad Red was in the Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame, managed the Mayville club and Grand Forks McDonalds had two stars in pitcher Corey Nyhus and first baseman Hank Biesiot. Williston, managed by Jim Duffey, picked up Doug Overbo, a Minot State pitcher, from Crosby. The Minot Merchants, largely unknown because they played most of their games as members of the Manitoba Senior League, were considered a sleeper, but the other Merchants entry, from Jamestown, was the favorite based on their three-man pitching staff of Craig Wahl, Hank Jeske, and Paul Lunde.

Teams from three large cities (Jamestown, Minot, and Grand Forks) and the small town of Fordville, playing in the AA instead of the A tournament this year, upset Williston to post opening round wins. Fordville was ousted by Jamestown 11-6 in one semi-final game. Corey Nyhus knocked in the winning run in a three-run eighth inning, and pitched effectively in relief, as Grand Forks McDonalds downed Minot 6-8 in the other semi-final matchup.



In the championship game, Hank Biesiot hit a homer in a four run eighth inning as McDonalds took an 8-4 lead over Jamestown. The Merchants' Dick Newark hit a three-run homer in the ninth to cut the lead to 8-7, but McDonalds' pitcher Corey Nyhus, got the final out preserving the victory. Nyhus' three-run homer and 5-0 shutout of Dickinson in the first round, a relief win against Minot in the second, and a compete game win the title game earned him the AA MVP.

Gackle, Medina-Woodworth, Rolla, and Jud won opening round games in the twelve-team Class A tournament and would face Stanley, Hatton, LaMoure, and Bowman, respectively, who received first round byes, in the quarterfinals. Hatton beat LaMoure 13-4 and Stanley's 18-year-old right-hander Ray Bruels used his harp breaking curve to strike out thirteen in a 5-0 shutout of Jud. Bowman rallied for four runs in the seventh inning to beat Gackle 6-3 and Hatton edged Medina-Woodworth 7-6 to move into the semis. Rolla beat Stanley 13-4 in the first semi-final matchup and Bowman came from behind again. Down 5-0 in the eighth, they scored three in the bottom of the inning, two more in the ninth, and another in the tenth, to eliminate Hatton 6-5.

Bowman was favored in the A championship game, but Rolla batters connected for nineteen hits (every player in their lineup had at least one) and overwhelmed Bowman 16-7. In the overall championship game, three wild pitches by Grand Forks starting pitcher Frank LeBlanc in the second inning led to two Rolla runs, and that was all that was needed as Rolla's starter Gordy Roberge pitched a complete game 3-1 win. Rolla only collected four hits for the game but took advantage of five walks by McDonalds' pitchers. Whether the absence of Fargo Park Board teams was a factor is not known, but Rolla became the first Class A team to beat an AA champ in the overall title game.

Rolla, managed by Bob Neameyer, had only played ten games prior to the state tournament, winning eight of then, with Roberge the winning pitcher in each victory. They picked up pitching reinforcements in Lon Enerson and Tom Kurtti as they prepared to host Crofton, Nebraska<sup>6</sup> in the Dakota Series. Crofton's star pitcher Dave Gasman allowed just one hit in outdueling Rolla's Roberge in a 5-1 win for Crofton on the opening game before crowd said to number 1,500. Rolla committed six errors and Crofton beat them 6-5 in ten innings to sweep the series.

At the ANDABL spring meeting in April of 1973, the association welcomed the Fargo NBC teams back into the amateur organization provided they drop their affiliation with the NBC. Three of the four Fitzgerald League teams complied but IDSO Sales held out, still hoping to play in the Wichita tournament again. Manager Harold Larson said, "We have done extensive recruiting and feel we can compete with any amateur team on a national level,"<sup>7</sup> a quote which reinforced one of the areas of contention between the two organization, that the NBC teams were raiding other amateur teams in the state for talent. The ANDABL gave IDSO until July 15 to

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<sup>6</sup> Like Fairview, Montana and Groton, South Dakota in the North Dakota tournament, teams outside the borders of South Dakota participated in, and won, their state amateur tournament.

<sup>7</sup> "Fargo Teams Returning the ND Amateur Baseball", *Jamestown Sun*, May 7, 1973.

decide whether they were going to stay with the NBC, or return to North Dakota amateur association, which they eventually did.

Two Fargo teams, IDSO Sales and Glass and Paint, worked their way through the Class AA brackets in that year's state tournament and met in the championship game. IDSO, who had beaten Glass and Paint six out of seven meetings during the regular season, had their number again and rolled to an easy 11-2 win. In the overall championship game, Steve Idso and Rolla's Greg Larson were locked up in a scoreless pitcher's duel through eight innings. IDSO had allowed just one hit and Larson three. But IDSO plated four runs in the ninth inning and won 4-0. IDSO then took on Macey's of Rapid City<sup>8</sup> in the best two out of three North Dakota-South Dakota playoff. Fargo won the opener 4-0 but dropped the second game 2-1 when Rapid City scored both their runs in the ninth inning. In the deciding games, Macey starting pitcher Whitey Munn allowed just one hit and the South Dakota club won 1-0 to take the series

The semi-finals of the 1973 Class A tournament featured two improbable comebacks. Hatton took an 11-4 lead over Rolla after seven innings but seven hits, eight errors, a wild pitch, two stolen bases, one hit batsman, and a sacrifice fly led to a thirteen-run eighth inning for Rolla, and they went on to win 18-14. In the other game, Gackle took a 9-1 lead over Zeeland after seven innings. Zeeland scored seven runs in the eighth on homers by Charlie Opp and Greg Salwei to cut the lead to 9-8, but Gackle put the game away with four runs in the ninth and won 14-8. The championship game was never in doubt. Rolla scored nine runs off Gackle starter Scott Berry over the first three innings sparked by a three-run homer by Dwane Getzlaff. They were leading 14-5 after eight and one-half innings when the game was stopped by rain. Maybe remembering the late-inning rally in the semi-final games, Gackle refused to concede, so the umpired declared Rolla the winner in the Class A title game.

#### Bismarck Becomes Relevant

The Bismarck-Mandan community had a strong presence in the first years after the state amateur baseball organization was formed. Bismarck won a state championship in 1940 and the Mandan Trainers followed that up with a title in 1947. Bismarck even hosted the state tournament one year (1941) before it was permanently returned to Jamestown. Most years during the 1950s Bismarck supported a four team inter-city league, but by the middle of the decade amateur baseball began to die out in the area. The Bismarck Barons of the independent semi-pro Man-Dak League played between 1955 and 1957 and in 1962 the Minnesota Twins paced one of their minor league teams, the Bismarck-Mandan Pards of the Northern League in town. In addition, residents preferred to play and watch softball and American Legion baseball, rather than amateur baseball.

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<sup>8</sup> Dick Green, a member of the 1972-1974 World Series champion Oakland Athletics was a member of the Rapid City Macey's team.

An effort to re-ignite interest in amateur baseball was made in the early 1970s. Bismarck won the state American Legion championship in 1971 and the players wanted an opportunity to keep playing. In the summer of 1973, a baseball organization was formed that began planning to field an amateur team the following year. A Board of directors was formed headed by Evan Lipps and Gene Severson, the little league baseball supervisor with the Parks and Rec. Department and teacher at Northridge Elementary School, was named field manager. It was hoped that \$5,000 in pledges could be obtained from area businesses.

The Bismarck Capitals built their roster from former American Legion and current college baseball players from the area. They also recruited from outside the vicinity by adding pitcher Greg Larson, who was the MVP at last year's state amateur tournament while playing for Rolla. They had a successful initial season that included a three-game sweep of Fargo Glass and Paint and finished with a record of 31-13. The Capitals downed Moorhead Sportland in the first round of the Class AA state tournament before losing in the championship game to Fargo IDSO Sales.

Despite poor home attendance and the inability to secure a sponsor, the Capitals had ambitious plans for the 1975 season with the intention of providing more exposure for their players. General Manager Dale McCabe said, "Our objective will be to give the good college players exposure to pro scouts...and thus give them a better chance to be drafted by a major league team."<sup>9</sup> He compared the quality of ball played by the Capitals to be on par with Rookie or Class A minor league baseball. The Capitals put together a 60-game schedule and planned to travel as far as Colorado, Iowa, Minneapolis, and Canada to seek out good competition.

The Capitals strengthened their team with several new additions including two other former amateur tournament MVPs in shortstop Rich Carrier and pitcher Corey Nyhus. They opted to affiliate with the NBC and hosted a three-team double-elimination Tri-State Playoff series in July with the top two finishers going to the regional playoff in Wisconsin with the opportunity to go on from there to the national in Wichita. In the first game Rapid City Macey's edged Bismarck 5-4 and the Capitals faced Dilworth (Minnesota) Agency (the former Fargo Glass & Paint club) next.

Behind the strong pitching of Greg Larson, Bismarck and Dilworth were tied 2-2 after nine innings. Mickey Hatcher<sup>10</sup> led off the tenth with a double, Arlo Brunsberg stroked an RBI single, and Randy Haskins hit a two-run triple to give Dilworth a 5-2 lead. The Capitals put two runners on with one out in the bottom of the inning, but Dick Limke came in and got the final two outs to preserve the win.

Dennis Fankhouser of Bismarck umpired behind the plate for the next game between Dilworth Agency and Macey's. Dilworth manager, and state NBC commissioner, Virgil Hegeholz questioned his ball and strike judgment and became upset with an out call on a Dilworth runner at home in the ninth inning preserving a 10-9 win for Macey's. Fankhouser was scheduled to

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<sup>9</sup> *Bismarck Tribune*, August 24, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Hatcher went on to a successful career in the major leagues, including several seasons with the Minnesota Twins.

work the bases in the next game but when he arrived at the ballpark Hegeholz informed him he had been replaced by another umpire chosen by Hegeholz. He justified his decision by saying “I just felt it was my responsibility as commissioner to remedy the situation.”<sup>11</sup> The *Bismarck Tribune* was highly critical of Hegeholz’s actions calling them “awful rotten” and “quite unethical” and went on to point out the potential conflict of interest when the same man (Hegeholz) was NCBC commissioner and manager of one of the participating teams.

Bismarck was without a team for the next few years but had a brief resurgence in the early 1980s. Leo Ringey, who organized the Dickinson team that won three straight Class AA titles (1977-1979), moved to town when he was hired as the head football and baseball coach at Bismarck Junior College.

The Bismarck Capitals conceded they might not have been able to gather enough players to go to the Wisconsin regional had they qualified, so were happy to enter the four-team 1974 Class AA North Dakota amateur tournament. The Capitals made a good showing, scoring twelve runs in the third inning and Doug Walters pitched a four-hitter as they beat the Grand Forks Chiefs 14-3. The Jamestown Elks won the other first-round game, defeating Dickinson 8-6. Bismarck had beaten the Jamestown Elks six times during the regular season but in the championship game, Hank Jeske threw a complete game four-hitter striking out 11, and the Elks scored twice in the top of the ninth inning to take the title by a score of 4-3.

Because of the dwindling number of Class A teams, at their spring meeting in April 1974, the Association ruled that all Class A teams could participate in the state tournament if the league they were representing was in agreement. They also said that non-North Dakota teams would need permission from the Commission to play in the tournament. The Fargo Fitzgerald League operated with two local teams, Glass and Paint and IDSO Sales, but also included Moorhead Sportland and Barnesville, Minnesota. All four teams were allowed in the tournament, and were joined by Bismarck, Grand Forks, the Jamestown Elks, and New England in the eight-team Class AA field.

Fargo Glass and Paint won the 1974 Fitzgerald League with a record of 14-1 but were upset in the opening round of the tournament by Bismarck 6-4 in ten innings. Dick Limke was uncharacteristically wild, issuing six walks, and Fargo errors contributed to two unearned runs. Defending champion IDSO sales, managed by Harold Larson, finished second behind Glass and Paint in the league. Larson had a number of veteran returnees including Carrier, Steve Idso, catcher Mike Grande, and Tom Kraft, but added several new players as well. They played an ambitious schedule, including several games against top competition in Colorado. IDSO won their first two tournament games and faced Bismarck in the championship. Rich Carrier hit two

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<sup>11</sup> *Bismarck Tribune*, July 25, 1975.

homers and outfielder Mike Vavrosky had an RBI single and drove in the go-ahead run with a double in the eighth inning as IDSO Sales edged Bismarck 6-5.

In the 1974 Class A tournament, Zeeland's Lowell Schweigert took time out from practice for the Shrine high school all-star football game to pitch an opening round shutout over Kulm and followed that up with a win over Bowman in the quarterfinals. Greg Salwei hit two homers and Zeeland downed Rolla to reach the championship game. Scott Howe threw a seven-inning no-hitter as New Rockford beat Hettinger 12-0 in the other semi-final game. In the championship game Zeeland played short-handed (Salwei had gotten married the previous Saturday) but were tied with New Rockford 5-5 at the end of nine innings. New Rockford scored eight runs in the tenth inning, knocking out Zeeland starter Lowell Schweigert, and went on to win the A championship 13-5.

In the overall title game, right-hander Tom Pahl pitched a one-hitter and IDSO broke open a tight game with four runs in the seventh and another six in the ninth, highlighted by a Harold Larson grand slam, as IDSO beat New Rockford 15-1. IDSO then made short work of Madison South Dakota in the ND-SD playoff series. Bruce Brenner threw a three-hitter with nineteen strike outs, and his teammates smashed out seventeen hits, five by Vavrosky, in a 12-1 opening win. They swept the series, and won the Calvin Griffith trophy the next day, when Mike Grande and Larry Muratore each hit three-run homers in a 6-5 win.

IDSO Sales' state championship would be the last state title for a Fargo team for nearly a decade. The old Fargo Park Board (later Fitzgerald) League ceased to operate and after IDSO manager Virgil Hegeholz moved to take a job at a bank in Dilworth, Minnesota, about ten miles east of Fargo, he moved his team there. They operated for a couple seasons, but by 1977 Hegeholz moved out of town and the Dilworth Agency didn't sponsor a team. Long-time IDSO player Gary Haskins said, "As far as I know, amateur baseball is a dead issue in the Fargo-Moorhead area."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Jamestown Sun*, May 2, 1977