

Jammers' Finale Makes For Nostalgic Labor Day

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By Scott Kindberg

It's early Labor Day afternoon and, my cousin, Tim Kindberg, and Durwood Swanson - longtime fans of the Jamestown Jammers - engage in a game of catch near the visitors' bullpen at Diethrick Park.

Article Photos



Russell Diethrick Jr. stands beside the plaque that bears his name Monday afternoon.

P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

The sound of a rawhide hitting leather seems comforting on this warm late-summer day, not only because the New York-Penn League season is drawing to a close, but also because the franchise that has occupied Diethrick Park since 1994 is relocating to Morgantown, W. Va.

The Jammers, who split with Mahoning Valley to end the year 35-40 and in second place in the Pinckney Division, will be playing the 2015 season in a multi-million dollar stadium that they'll share with the West Virginia University. It's a win-win for the school and Rich Baseball Operations, the team owner.

For the city of Jamestown?

Well, that remains to be seen.

Even as Jordan Luplow belted a walk-off, game-winning home run in the bottom of the eighth inning to give the Jammers an exciting 3-2 win in the opener, the idea of not having minor league baseball on Falconer Street next year had already left some in a melancholy mood.

One of those folks was Russ Diethrick, the man for whom the stadium is named, a man who has a plaque mounted on the red-brick entrance and a man known affectionately as "Mr. Baseball" in our community. During a decades-long love for the national pastime, Diethrick has been equal parts fan, player, manager, owner, supporter, organizer and friend of the game.

So as he walked from the parking lot to the ballpark at midday yesterday, he couldn't help but feel that a good portion of his life was flashing before his eyes.

"It was a long walk from the car to the front gate and it will be an even longer walk going home," he said, "but if I stop and pause and think a little bit, I have a flash of memories."

Before I knew it, Diethrick was regaling me with stories, some which originated in the 1940s when he would accompany his father to Municipal Stadium to watch the Jamestown Falcons.

One night, he recalled, the Detroit Tigers were playing an exhibition game against the Falcons. When the game ended, the Diethricks hopped in their car in the parking lot and headed up the street.

"Boom," Russ Diethrick recalled, "the back door of the car opened and some guy jumped in the backseat, yelling, 'I've got to get uptown, I've got to get uptown.' My dad said, 'What do you mean?'"

"Here it was Dizzy Trout (a Tigers' pitcher). He introduced himself and we started uptown. Pretty soon my dad had to slow down for traffic. The door opened and (Trout) jumped out. He'd seen a car with somebody else in it and ran over and got in.

"Whoever rode in a car with Dizzy Trout?"

It's been that kind of thrilling baseball ride for Diethrick over the last six or seven decades, especially at the ballyard on Falconer Street.

"I have memories of sitting there as a youngster and then coming back a few years later with the City Rec League that Jim Sharp had created and playing in an all-star game down here," he said. "What a thrill that was, and then to come down here years later and coach third base and tell Tommy Hurst to steal or not to steal and tell Ted Wyberanec to take or don't take and tell Jack Fulford to take a 3-0 pitch."

Diethrick took me on a figurative tour to other spots in the park as well. As a fan, he remembers sitting in the third-base bleachers and watching Fulford hit a home run over the scoreboard one night; marveling as Kenny Martin and Claire Hammond showed their talents at shortstop and second base respectively; and enjoying George Parsons' work behind the plate.

"I'm grateful for all those memories," he said.

He even was able to create some of his own memories Monday when he participated in a pregame catch near the picnic area. And the way he sees it, there will be other opportunities to do that again in the future.

"We're lucky," he said. "The mayor (Sam Teresi) and the community and the elected officials have always been supportive of this program. There's a lot going on and a lot of conversations being held and contacts being made. I feel very, very confident that there will be baseball here when the snow melts next spring.

Diethrick acknowledged that obtaining another minor league franchise in Jamestown is "going to be a steeper hill than it has been in the past," adding that the "footprint of minor league baseball is

completely different than it ever was."

So what then, he was asked, would be his thoughts when he finally left Diethrick Park on Monday?

"I'm just wondering if I'm gong to be able to turn and look over my shoulder as I walk away," he admitted. "But, of course, I had those kinds of feelings at the end of every regular season. The last day of the season was always an emotional, quiet time.

"Then to realize come next spring ... when the grass is green there will be baseball here. It won't be at the professional level, but it's still the very same game. I look forward to that. ... The game of baseball will play on this hallowed ground again."