

Veteran Coaches: Baseball's In Their Blood

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For most, coaching the game was simply a natural progression. “I guess it’s in my blood,” said Leipsic’s Ted Miller, who has compiled almost 220 wins in his 15 years as the Vikings head coach.

“I had a lot of success as a player, and after I graduated (from Findlay College) I just wanted to stay close to the game. I really enjoy the game of baseball, and I enjoy working with the kids. I think I have something to offer them, and it’s rewarding for me.”

Miller has been a part of two high school state championships, as a player for Kittanning, PA., in 1967 and as Leipsic’s coach in 1976. At Findlay College, under the legendary Homer Shadle, Miller was on the team that competed in the NAIA area playoffs against teams from Indiana, Michigan and Illinois.

For all his success, though, the true measure of Miller’s dedication came in the spring of 1986. An operating levy for the school failed to pass and all extra-curricular sports were threatened.

But Miller and his staff offered to coach the baseball team without pay that season – and led the Vikings to the BVC championship,

WHEN IT comes to filling a trophy case, though, few coaches can match the success of Miller City’s Dan Kern. In his 14th year as head coach, Kern owns a sparkling 244-58 record. His teams have won seven of the last 12 Putnam County League championships, but their greatest success has been in tournament play, where Kern has led the Wildcats to eight sectional, six district and four regional titles. His 1977 and ’84 teams were the Class A state champions.

“Success breeds success,” says Kern, who has some definitive things to say on how a baseball program should be run. “Our Sportsman Club runs the Little League program here. That’s a key factor. We have no travel teams; our teams just play against each another, and we might have seven or eight teams of just Miller City kids. We carry anywhere from 11-13 kids on a team and there are special rules – you have to use three pitchers every game, everybody has to bat at least once, and every player has to play at least an inning on defense.”

“I think that helps develop pitchers and catchers over the years and that’s where it all starts.”

Baseball has put the small town of Miller City on the map. And Kern, with a small-town background of his own, seems perfectly suited for the position.

“I always loved baseball,” Kern said. “But we had no coaches in the summer; we just got a bunch of guys together and played on our own. And if we got in five high school games, that seemed like a lot.”

“But I played for the Ottawa America Legion when I was a senior and that was fun. We went to the state tournament. That was my first experience with ‘real’ baseball.”

“So when I first started out in teaching I wanted to get into coaching. I never thought it would a lifelong thing, but I really enjoy it. And around Miller City, there’s not much else to do.”

FORT JENNINGS may be even smaller than Miller City, but veteran Musketeers’ coach Tom Sakemiller has amassed nearly 240 career wins with the same type of attitude.

“We’ve had a lot of good kids and had a lot of fun over the years,” said Sakemiller, who has led the Musketeers to the regional tournament three different times.

“We’re the fifth or sixth smallest school in the state, but we think we have good kids and a good program. Ken VonSossan has been with our Little League program for 30-some years and the parents take an interest. That’s given us good stability. “Fort Jennings is a two-sport town – basketball and baseball. But the people take a lot of pride in our facilities and our programs.”

Like the other veterans of the coaching profession, Sakemiller remembers a past much different from the present. “I didn’t play in college,” he said. “But back then we had what were called town teams. I played on those and I played in the Metro League in Lima.”

“When I got into coaching we still had a fall season and another one in the spring. We’d schedule about 15 games and be lucky to get that many in.”

“If I didn’t enjoy it, though, I wouldn’t be doing it.”

FORMOST, that seems to be a common theme among coaches.