

Vaughnsville's Baseball Dynasty Ruled Three Decades 1928-1943

Gilboa Gazette – 1st Issue of May - 1980

Every warm-blooded baseball fan knows that the most successful baseball team in history has been the New York Yankees. Consequently they have been either hated (as they never allow anyone else to win), or loved (because if you can't beat 'em then join 'em). Likewise the tiny hamlet of Vaughnsville in southern Putnam County has also borne the recognition of being a winner. From 1928-1943 the Vaughnsville Vikings took practically every trophy available in compiling one of the best known baseball dynasties in Northwest Ohio.

The 1928-1931 teams actually went undefeated during those four straight years in league competition. The big teams from Lima Central and South were the only outfits which could win at all against the rural farm school. Since Vaughnsville did not sponsor a football team they played both a fall and spring schedule. This fact allowed them to complete successfully in the Allen-Putnam-Auglaize County League.

The toughest challenger from Auglaize County was Cridersville. Allen County perennial powers Harrod, Lafayette and Gomer always gave a chase in the race for the title. Putnam County's best opponent usually came from Crawfis College (Gilboa) High School who was blessed with a good pitcher named Ralph Radabaugh.

Leading players for the Vaughnsville champs included some top notch talent. Herb Thomas was probably the best shortstop ever from Viking turf as he later had a trial with the Cleveland Indians. Bob McKanna was a small Pete Rose type of player who always got on base with a timely hit, walk or bean-balling. Griff Williams and Ken Jameson were a couple of rugged catchers. Maurice Nearon, the lanky outfielder, had a rifle arm and covered all of the fields. Dwight Deken was the bread and butter pitcher who hit the corners at the knees all day long.

Other players who contributed to the winning tradition were; Herb Huffman one of the better pitchers, Levi Hayden a good batter and second

baseman, Fred Collar at catcher, George Thomas an infielder, Gwynn Henkins and Elmer Bauman a pair of outfielders from Rushmore, Roger Slusser a classy first baseman, and Virg Parsons at third. Homer Jones was the type of coach who could bring out the best in everyone, and he had been a pretty good catcher himself in high school at Gomer.

During the mid-to-late thirties, Vaughnsville maintained its winning edge especially in the 1935 and 1936 seasons. Eldon Shook became the coach during this middle dynasty year. His 1935 team produced some fine ballplayers. In one game against Ridge Township in Van Wert County, Dale Woods slammed three home runs. The keystone combination of Braxen Mericle (2b) and Raymond Lewis (ss) helped support the southpaw pitching of Alfred Best.

The 1936 team which returned all of the above players, were the Putnam County League and Tournament Champions. They were finally defeated in the district semi-finals at Defiance. Ed Fortman complemented Best in the pitching rotation as a right handed flame thrower with a good fastball and excellent curve. The outfielders with Woods were Bill Collar, Junior Collar, Bob Bogart, and Don McKanna. Rounding out the infield were Wendell Collar (catcher), Dale Sakemiller and Jay Clevenger (first base), and Gordon Heidlebaugh (third and pitcher). Coach Shook is now retired and makes his home on a farm near Union City, Michigan with his wife.

Kalida stepped onto the scene in 1940 when they defeated Vaughnsville and eventually ended up in the state tournament. Will Stechschulte, Don Holtkamp, Bucky Westbeld, Don Fortman, Ron Dunlap and Vernon Hughes were the Wildcats team members who temporarily halted the Vaughnsville juggernaut.

Sylvester 'Stretch' Goedde became the meal ticket for Vaughnsville's late dynasty in the early forties. The big 6'8" southpaw led the team all the way to

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the district finals in Kingsburg Park in Defiance. Coldwater gave the Viking their only defeat of the season, 2-0. Stretch had pitched a no hitter in the district semi-finals against Convoy for a 3-0 win. Willis Sakemiller complemented the giant junior as the power hitter on the club. In the 8-1 PCL finals victory at Glandorf, he had an unbelievable line drive homer that had just barely cleared the shortstop's glove. On one other occasion during the year he had clobbered a home run onto the railroad bank at the North Creek field. One sad note did take place at the end of the year when coach Gale Williams left to join the Navy.

Vaughnsville achieved the ultimate in 1942 when they went all the way to the state finals in Columbus. The tourney trail began when they defeated Blanchard (Gilboa) 6-0 in the PCL finals. Stretch was matched up against the county's other fine lefty, Joe Pingle, in a superb pitching duel.

District competition could only be described as survival of the fittest. In the preliminary competition Ralph Goedde pitched them to a 3-2, nine inning victory. The game had been held up for a couple of hours because Ney took 15 innings to dispose of Holland, 1-0. Ney's pitcher was Ned Garver who later pitched for the St. Louis Browns and the Detroit Tigers.

The final game of the districts was strictly a tossup. Ft. Recovery was in the midst of a 16 game winning streak while Vaughnsville had put together a modest

win skein of 12 itself. Stretch Goedde ruled the roost, however, as he struck out 19 batters and allowed only one base runner due to an error. Percy Heidlebaugh and Bill Parsons led the hitting attack which garnered Vaughnsville a 5-0 victory.

Stretch again struck it rich in Columbus when he retired 19 consecutive batters via the strikeout route, as the Vikes beat the Plains Central District Champs, 4-0. Bad luck in the form of rainy weather resulted in having all games made up the same day which was difficult on pitching staffs. Vaughnsville played on a second rate diamond in the semi-finals which didn't even have a backstop. Also Stretch was due to try out for the New York Yankees the next day and so he did not pitch. The team from Cincinnati Reading had no trouble in defeating the discouraged Putnam County squad. Stretch went on to pitch for the Toledo Mudhens and then San Antonio in the Southern League.

Vaughnsville's storied dynasty enjoyed its last hurrah in 1943 when it captured its third consecutive PCL League and Tournament Championship on the strength of Dale Litten and Ralph Goedde's arms. And although no more championships came their way, the treasured memories of 1928-1943 will not easily be forgotten.

Editors Note: The preceding information was provided by former Vaughnsville players who choose to remain anonymous, but welcome any changes or additional information.