

Big league stars had Nebraska starts

Nebraska State League — Born 1910 Died 1959

By Bob Asmussen
Night News Editor

The Nebraska State League: it was the lowest of the low, at the very bottom of minor league baseball. But, to players who started there, it was the first or second stop on a journey the players hoped would eventually land them in the big leagues. Hundreds began the journey, a handful made it.

The Nebraska State League opened and folded on four different occasions. In the League's last four-year stint, 1956-59, it fielded teams in eight Nebraska cities. Teams in the 1956-59 Nebraska State League were the Grand Island Athletics, Hastings Giants, Holdrege White Sox, Kearney Yankees, Lexington Red Sox, McCook Braves, North Platte Indians and the Superior Senators. To point even further to how long ago this was, the Braves were still in Milwaukee, the Athletics were still in Kansas City and the original Senators had not yet moved to Minnesota.

The Nebraska State League was a Class D league. Very few players were expected to make it to the majors and very few did. But, despite only a four year existence, the Nebraska State League helped produce a handful of future stars.



©Copyright Topps Chewing Gum Inc.

Hall of Famer to be Phil Niekro was 7-1 in 1959 with McCook. Ron Hunt, who holds the major league record by getting hit by 243 pitches, got plunked 13 times in only 62 games for McCook in 1959. Jim Kaat, who won 283 games in a 25-year major league career, was 5-6 with a 3.70 ERA at Superior in 1957.

The league also had some later literary successes. Former Yankee pitcher and best-selling author Jim Bouton was 2-4 for the Kearney Yankees in 1959. Bouton won 62 games in his major league career and penned the controversial book "Ball Four."

Two other future major leaguers of note who got their start in the Nebraska State League were Jim Perry, who won 215 major league games, and Deron Johnson, who hit 245 home runs in a 16-year major league career.

Niekro has had the most productive career of the former Nebraska State Leaguers and also the most surprising. McCook was the second of nine minor league stops for Niekro. Since making the major leagues for good in 1966 with the Atlanta Braves, Niekro has won 309 games and is still pitching strong for the Cleveland Indians.

"I think it was one of the better experiences I had in the minor leagues," Niekro said in a phone interview. "It was a starting point for me."

Niekro spent his season in McCook as a relief pitcher. He used his famed knuckleball almost exclusively during the season.

"I remember first getting off the train at McCook," Niekro said. "It was at the bottom of a big hill. At the top of the hill was where the team stayed. I walked up there and the guys were getting onto the bus to play an exhibition game. I got on with

them, so, before I had even been in the town five minutes, I was leaving again."

The late 1950's were great times for the Milwaukee Braves. In 1957, the Braves won the World Series and in 1958 they lost a seven-game Series to the Yankees. To keep a good thing going, the Braves had spent bonus money to sign top players. Many of those players were sent to McCook. With the help of Niekro, Hunt and star pitcher Paul Chenger, who was 10-1, the Braves won the last Nebraska State League title. Chenger never made it to the major leagues.

Another player who relied mostly on the knuckleball in his one season in the Nebraska State League was Bouton. Bouton had broken his thumb while playing earlier in 1959 for the Yankees minor

"I think the girls were impressed," Bouton said. "Fresh talent had come to town. We had a good time. Unfortunately, the girls in Kearney weren't much interested in sex back then."

league team in Albany, N.Y. When his thumb mended, it was difficult to grip the fastball so Bouton went with the knuckleball.

"I broke my thumb in Albany," Bouton said in a phone interview. "They put me in a cast and sent me to Kearney."

Bouton said he has vivid memories of both Kearney and of Nebraska.

"I remember tall corn and alfalfa," Bouton said. "Nebraska was the flattest state I'd ever seen."

Bouton said the players on the Kearney Yankees were treated nicely by the people of Kearney, but, that the people in Kearney realized they were outsiders.

"I think the girls were impressed," Bouton said. "Fresh talent had come to town. We had a good time. Unfortunately, the girls in Kearney weren't much interested in sex back then."

"People were very nice. The girls were nice but not as nice as we'd have liked. The guys our age weren't so nice. They looked at us as competition."

That feeling of competition almost led to a brawl, Bouton said.

"We were downtown and a bunch of the local guys confronted us outside the pool hall," Bouton said. "Nobody really wanted to fight and cooler heads eventually prevailed."

The 1959 Kearney Yankees included three players from the Dominican Republic.

"The funniest thing all summer long was listening to these guys swear at the umpires in English," Bouton said. "They'd say 'you son of a bleach' and 'you fucker your mother.' The umpires wouldn't throw them out because they thought it was funny too."

"We had guys from all over the country. Kearney, Nebraska is isolated. Imagine a guy from California or New York City and he's in Kearney, Nebraska for the summer."

Bouton said the first stop in the minor leagues can be a difficult one for a player.

"Minor leagues is the first time guys fail in their lives. You hear a lot of complaining from players who can't accept that they aren't doing well. I was not a complainer. I had pretty good perspective."

"I was not a big star in high school. I was just happy to be playing baseball."

Bouton said he knew while pitching in Kearney that he would some day make it to the major leagues.

"My only thing I wanted to find out was what I needed to make it," Bouton said. "Once I knew that, I felt that I could make it. Even sitting in the stands with a cast on my thumb, I still felt I would make it."

Bouton jumped to Class A Greensboro the next season and Class AA Amarillo the year after that. In 1962, he made the Yankees pitching staff and won seven games. In 1963 he won 21 games and in

1964 he won 18 games and two World Series games.

Bouton said he remembers the other famous pitcher from the 1959 Nebraska State League, Niekro.

"Phil Niekro was a skinny kid with a crew cut," Bouton said. "Three years later, I'm in the big leagues, Niekro's still in the minor leagues. He's a wonderful guy. He's a great example of someone who never gave up."

Probably the best season enjoyed by a Nebraska State League player was Johnson's 1956 season with the Kearney Yankees. In 63 games, the San Diego native belted 24 home runs, had 78 RBI, walked 63 times, scored 70 runs and batted .329. Johnson, now a coach with the Seattle Mariners, said he enjoyed the season in Kearney.

"It was something a kid dreams about," Johnson said. "When you first start in baseball, you have to gain confidence in yourself. That year in Kearney showed me I could play."

After his brilliant season, Johnson jumped three classes to Class A. He made the major leagues in 1959 with the New York Yankees.

"It was a helluva league," Johnson said of the Nebraska State League. "The people were super. It was just a great place for a kid to start."

Preparation for his first season in professional baseball was not lengthy, Johnson said.

"You come right from high school, practice four or five days and then start the season."

One player who used the Nebraska State League to perfect his craft was Hunt. Besides hitting .284 for the 1959 McCook Braves, Hunt also managed to get hit by 13 pitches on the way to a major league record 243. Hunt was hit by a record 50 pitches in 1971 while playing with Montreal.

Hunt, who now lives in Wentzville, Mo., said he can't explain his hit by pitch record.

"I don't know why they (the pitchers) were throwing at me," Hunt said. "Heck, I wasn't going to hit the ball out of the park. They should have been throwing at the home run hitters."



Hunt said people were nice to the team in McCook.

"It was like a home away from home," Hunt said. "McCook was a good place to play."

With the exception of Niekro, Hunt said he doesn't know where any of his 1959 teammates are today.

"They're probably all dead," Hunt said. Kaat said the experience earned in the Nebraska State League was invaluable to him.

"It was my first time away from home to play baseball on a regular basis," Kaat said. "I was eager to play professional baseball."

Kaat, who is a television announcer for the New York Yankees, said he wasn't the best pitcher on his Superior team.

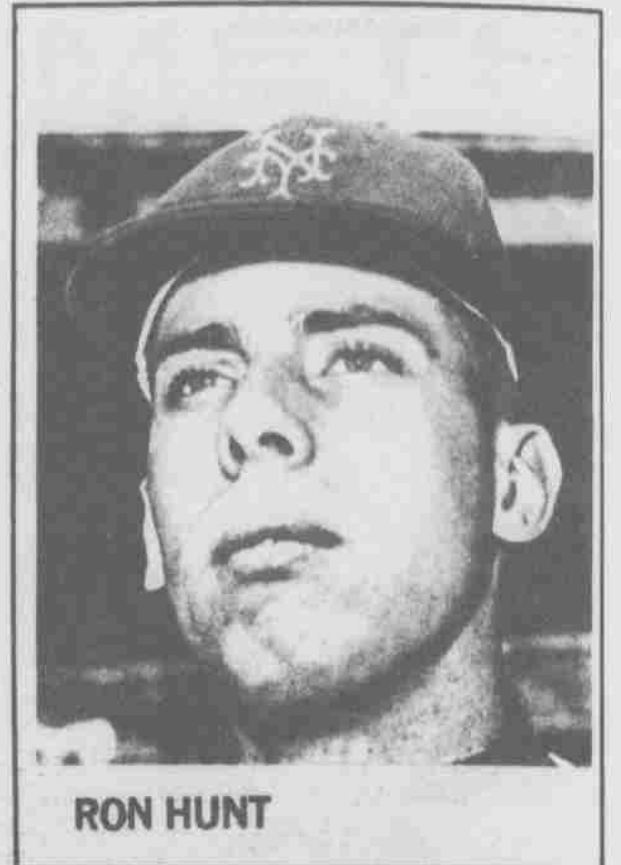
"I didn't feel a lot of pressure because the team had shown confidence in me," Kaat said. "In those days, you had a lot

more minor league teams. But, the Senators let me know that I was in their plans at the major league level."

Kaat said major league players usually remember their first stop in professional baseball the best.

"When a big league player looks back on his minor league career, he looks back at those as the fun times. It was fun for me and I'm sure it's fun for most of the other players too."

"The things I remember most about Superior were the heat and the jackrab-



bits we used to hit with the bus," Kaat said. "Also, the mosquitoes in Holdrege were the biggest I'd ever seen."

Paul MacFarlane, historian for The Sporting News, said he remembers the Nebraska State League as a power league.

"These were important players," MacFarlane said in a phone interview to his St. Louis office. "These guys were stronger, pretty good players who the teams felt had good futures in baseball."

MacFarlane said the reason for the folding of the Nebraska State League was money.

"A major league team has to supply more money to these clubs," MacFarlane said. "Eventually, the clubs couldn't support the league anymore and neither could the towns."

Attendance figures from the first three years of the league supports MacFarlane's claim. In 1956, the first year back for the revived league, McCook topped the league with an attendance of 32,224 in 32 games for an average of 1,007 per game. In 1958, the top attendance figure was North Platte's 18,766 in 32 games for an average attendance of about 586 per contest. Total league attendance fell from 225,952 in 1956 to 113,925 in 1958.

The competitiveness of the league could not be blamed for its downfall. In four seasons, four different teams held the top spot. Lexington won the first league title in 1956 with a 41-22 record. Grand Island was second with a record of 35-28. In 1957, Grand Island won the league with a 33-22 record, edging Holdrege and Lexington, which both finished 33-23. In 1958, North Platte edged McCook by a single game to win the title. In 1959, sadly, the last year of the Nebraska State League, McCook was an artistic success. The Braves won 43 games and lost only 19 to post the NSL's best record in four seasons.

After 1959, the Nebraska State League was only a memory. The guys in Kearney didn't have to worry anymore about ball players chasing their girls. The jackrabbits in Superior knew they were safe from the Senators' bus.

But, the guys in Kearney, the jackrabbits in Superior and the people in all eight Nebraska State League towns had to realize they had lost the irretrievable. No longer would they have a chance, 32 times during the summer, to watch a player who might someday make it big. The odds would be long for the players but at least they would have a chance. Some, like Niekro, would stick it out and finally be recognized as stars. Others, like Paul Chenger, would get forever lost in the shuffle of minor league baseball.