

Baseball Can Bring Development

Written by Letter to Editor

Tuesday, 21 August 2001 18:00

I read with great interest Jeff Ignatius' article about the Quad City River Bandits and the furor that has erupted over them and the possibility of a new stadium. (See "Going ... Going ...," River Cities' Reader, Issue 334, August 1-7, 2001.) I felt that the article was well-written; however, I feel that Mr. Ignatius could have followed through on a few areas a little better. The areas are: economic impact and the minor leagues versus independent leagues.

First, the area of economic impact. Mr. Ignatius referred over and over again to one source to conclude that baseball parks had little economic impact. If one were to take all ballparks built from the early '90s to present, this statement might be true. However, as one knows, location plays an integral part in any development. If a ballpark is built away from a downtown area, that ballpark will have very little impact. However, if the ballpark is built as part of a revitalized downtown area, then it might have an impact. One only needs to look to the minor leagues to see the evidence.

Old Kent Park, just outside Grand Rapids, Michigan, is one of the newest and better ballparks in the Midwest League. It draws large crowds every home game and has all the amenities that I would like to see in a ballpark here. But it is not a part of a downtown-revitalization project. It is not located near any unique shopping areas or unique restaurants. There is no place to walk to before or after the game. If a ballpark like that were located in a revitalized downtown Moline, people could walk to restaurants, bars, shops, or even enjoy a walk along the river before and after the game. When a city attempts to revitalize its downtown area, leaders develop plans that will bring and then keep people downtown. A baseball park is just another part of such a plan. Perfect examples of this are the ballparks in Lexington, Kentucky; Akron, Ohio; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Indianapolis, Indiana. Soon Peoria, Illinois, might join this list with a new ballpark downtown.

Many downtown areas are planned to attract people from outside the community. However, I do not believe that a baseball team in the Quad Cities needs to draw a large number of people from outside the community to have a big economic impact. How many ball teams do you know of that depend on tourists? Ball teams aren't conceived to draw tourists, although if marketed correctly they will. They are conceived to draw baseball fans from the community. Many of the people who attend River Bandits games are within the community. And there are many more that would attend if there were a "fan friendly" ballpark. If a "fan friendly" ballpark were in place, whether in the John Deere Commons or as part of the River Renaissance, I believe that tourists, too, would come. If the location is right, people from all over would come to the ballpark. We don't question the number of outsiders who attend Mallards and Steamwheelers games. We just label them success stories, and one of the reasons is because of the facility they play in and the location of that facility in a revitalized downtown area.

The second part that I believe Jeff Ignatius neglected is the difference between the minor-league and independent-league teams. Mr. Ignatius seems to focus on the following statements: "Independent-league teams understand that baseball is family entertainment"; "Players in Class A are just trying to postpone becoming adults"; and "Few major-leaguers come from Class A teams."

With all due respect to Mayor Yerington, Midwest League teams understand that baseball is

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family entertainment. The promotions at Frontier League games are just the same as promotions at Midwest League games. There are baseball-card giveaway games, ballcap giveaway games, kids-eat-free days, fireworks, campouts, and bat giveaway games at all ballparks. The between-inning promotions are the same, too. All baseball teams try to be family friendly, and there isn't a difference from league to league, unlike what you are led to believe by Mr. Yerington. It's too bad that such tactics need to be used to try to promote your case. And it's too bad that Mr. Ignatius didn't follow through by questioning Mr. Yerington about this statement.

With regards to the other two statements, I am very disappointed that Mr. Ignatius didn't address them in greater depth. The players in Class A, for the most part, are right out of college and have contracts with the parent club. These are outstanding ballplayers who feel that they have a legitimate shot at making "the show." Frontier League players generally do not have a contract with a major-league team. Their contract is with the Frontier League team. Some of the players in the league are 25 or 26 and are waiting to see if they get "discovered," hoping to play for a minor-league club the next year. Which players are really postponing becoming adults?

Why shouldn't Class A ballplayers in the Quad Cities feel that they have a legitimate shot at making "the show"? Since 1960, when the Quad City team joined the Midwest League, 173 players have played at John O'Donnell Stadium that have also played in the major leagues. That means that a Quad City baseball fan, during an average season, can watch as many as four future major-league ballplayers.

My conclusions are very different than Mr. Ignatius'. I believe that a new stadium can add another aspect to development along the river. I also believe that if the Quad Cities are to try to compare themselves to other communities of the same size, then major-league-affiliated baseball is needed. I, too, wish we would set our sights higher when it comes to baseball and maintain a major-league-affiliated team.

– Tim Anderson