

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26



(Third in a series)

For sports-loving high school boys in Marion during the 1950s, the year had four seasons. They were football, basketball, track and baseball.

You could go out for cross country instead of football if you wanted to, but not very many boys did.

There were no other high school sports. All five were coached by one man, Les Hipple. He was a very demanding coach who enforced strict training rules, worked his players into top condition and insisted that they learn, very specifically, the fundamentals of each sport.

His methods worked, and his teams won more football games, more basketball games, more track championships and more state cross country championships than any other Marion coach.

But in one season of the year, Hipple changed his approach radically. And his record showed it. In his decade or more as baseball coach, Marion lost far more games than it won. The beauty of it was that no one cared.

Baseball at Marion was not an official high school sport, although the school district helped fund the program. It operated under the aegis of the American Legion, and the uniform jerseys bore the name of Stuber Motors, the Ford dealer in town.

Not many boys went out for baseball; fewer than 20. Most boys had summer jobs, and some couldn't get off in time to make practice at 5:30. For farm boys, it was out of the question. If a boy worked on a railroad maintenance gang or a highway crew or a construction project out of town, it was tough.

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26

Some boys didn't come out because they had spent nine months in Coach Hipple's iron regime and wanted a break from the man and his ways.

But a sports-smitten handful of us did show up. We hurried from our jobs in warehouses, stores, supermarkets and offices, put on our spikes, stuck a baseball cap on our heads and practiced in our jeans and T-shirts.

HIPPLE, WHO in other sports drilled his players ceaselessly on the precise execution of specific movements, confined his baseball coaching to little more than giving advice.

"Choke up on the bat and make contact," he told his batters. But most of us gripped the bat at its knob and swung from our heels.

He showed us how to hold the bat for a bunt, but benched no one who refused to slide his fingers up the barrel of the bat where they could be nicked by a fastball.

"Don't walk him. Make him hit it," he counseled his pitchers, but offered no suggestions about how to improve the curveballs they had learned from older boys on playgrounds.

His advice for infielders was practical. When the ball comes bouncing at you, he told us, get down on one knee and hold your glove between your legs. That way, when you fail to catch the ball, it will bounce harmlessly off your chest or forehead, and you will still have a chance to get the runner at first.

Tom Domer was a good fielder, but had a lousy arm. So Hipple put him at third base and told him to scoop up the grounders and then throw the ball to the pitcher. That way, Tom wouldn't try to heave the ball across the diamond, where it would arrive ludicrously beyond the first baseman's reach, forcing him to chase it into the weeds as the runner scampered to second. Better to grant the batter first base and hope for the best with the next hitter.

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26

THE FIELD we played on was south of town, across the dirt road from the swimming pool. We could hear the shrieks of children and smell the chlorine as the afternoon sun glinted in our eyes and sweat trickled down our necks.

On very hot days, after the team took a water break, players often grouped together for respite in the shade of trees that rose on the bluffs behind the field. They were in no hurry to resume practice. Hipple would walk onto the scorched infield and bark to the players, "Come on out here in the sun, where the breeze is blowing."

The infield was a rocky plateau with no hint of grass. Pebbles were everywhere. It would have taken a century for even the most meticulous shortstops to police up enough stones to guarantee a true hop.

The backstop was about 20 feet high, a wire fence strung from a series of telephone poles. When batters hit a foul ball over the backstop and into the woods, we stopped play until it was retrieved. Even scuffed and dirty balls were hunted down like lost lambs.

The pitcher's mound was a dusty hump, well under regulation height. When the team played an away game where the mound was shaped according to the rules, Marion pitchers found the altitude so precipitous that they tended to lose their balance as they strode into their pitch.

The outfield was closer to a cow pasture than a carpet, with ruts and gullies and patches of bare earth. There was no outfield fence. It was said that some mighty batters could hit the ball into Indian Creek, which ran behind a stand of trees in center and right fields, or onto the road in left field that ran beside the swimming pool, but I don't remember seeing it done or seeing anyone come close.

There were no dugouts at the field, just two long, sagging wooden players' benches on concrete blocks near the first and third base lines. There were some rickety stands, about 12 feet wide and five tiers high, for spectators just behind the bench near third base.

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26

When he coached football and basketball, Hipple dedicated the most practice time to drills, skill development and conditioning. But baseball practice was given over to game-like situations, with everyone playing several different positions.

WE PLAYED about 10 games all summer, roughly one a week. The games lasted five or seven innings and were often called by darkness. The new ball unboxed for the game became stained and was hard to see at twilight.

We had uniforms for games, made of baggy gray wool, with “Stuber Motors” in blue lettering across the shoulders in back. The uniforms felt heavy when we put them on. The cloth itched and turned soggy from sweat in the heat, then absorbed dirt when we slid or fell during the game. Our mothers cleaned them, somehow.

Hipple often had to juggle his lineups because some players, delayed by work, showed up late or not at all. This was especially true for away games. He continued his practice of allowing boys to play several positions. In one season, for example, I pitched and played first, second and third bases. We did not think about the wisdom of these decisions; we just went out and played.

Only a handful of people came to the games, even though no admission was charged. A few bored girlfriends, perhaps, and a father or two. Thousands came to see football games, and the 1,500-seat gym was crowded to overflowing for basketball.

We played hard, doing our best, for we knew we had to with Hipple as coach, but we usually lost, sometimes by a run or two, other times by enormous margins. The only team we could consistently beat was Mount Vernon, where Les Hipple’s brother, Don, was the coach and, apparently, operated in the same relaxed manner.

A FEW GAMES remain in my memory. Once, at Manchester, my curveball was working beautifully, and I fooled the hitters for an inning or two. Then Three-Finger Brown came up to bat. He had lost parts of the ring and little fingers of his right hand in a farming accident. He drilled a ball deep into center for a double.

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26

The next batter was Brown's younger brother, Five-Finger Brown. I got a curve past him for a strike. Then I heard Three-Finger yell to his sibling, "Just wait for the fastball." A shiver went down my spine. My fastball was not so much fast as it was straight, and I knew the jig was up. We lost.

Each year, Hipple entered us in some sort of state tournament. We looked forward to these games, even though we knew we would lose. In one of them we played a team that had a player some said was destined for the big leagues.

When he hit the ball, it came off his bat like a rocket. He hit screaming shots that ricocheted off the ground at the feet of our shortstop, whose only concern was dancing out of the way. I played first base that day and thanked God the guy wasn't lefthanded.

In a later tournament game, I was the pitcher. My curveball was working, and in the first inning I struck out the side. But this was accomplished with great difficulty. First, I had to strike out five men to retire the side because our catcher twice dropped the third strike and failed to get the runner at first.

This is not to say that I struck out five men in a row. Not at all. There were plenty of hits, errors and walks interspersed among the strikeouts, and indeed I may have struck out the same hitters twice as our opponents batted around. By the second or third inning the game was ended by the mercy rule. We had fallen so far behind there was no hope.

Hipple, who tried to act as if he did not care when his basketball or football teams lost a game, truly did not care if the baseball team lost. And neither did we.

How could this have been as much fun as I remember it? Because we got to play, did our best and each of us had our little moments of success. We loved the game, and that was the all that mattered.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Dan Kellams, who graduated from Marion High School in 1954, is the author of "A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians.")

The summer game: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 06 August 2011 19:19 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 August 2011 20:26
