

New MWL boss says league in good shape

Written by S.D. Buhr

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COMSTOCK PARK, Mich. - After serving as the general counsel for the Midwest League for more than 20 years, Richard Nussbaum is now completing his first year as president of the league. In January, he took over for George Spelius, who retired after running the league since 1987.

Nussbaum, who played baseball at Notre Dame in the early 1970s, thinks the Midwest League has enjoyed a good season and continues to prosper.

"I'm not sure it could have gone any better," he said Thursday prior to the second game of the MWL championship series between Cedar Rapids and West Michigan. "Probably fewer rainouts for some of the clubs.

"We had great attendance league-wide. We continue to draw about 10 percent of the entire fan base of all of minor league baseball across the country. Ten percent of those fans come to MWL games, which I think is remarkable.

"We've had great play on the field," he said. "We have two teams in the championship that have worked real hard to get there and played really pretty well throughout the entire season. The facilities are good, the fans are great. I'm very happy with the way the first year went."

After working within the MWL office for more than two decades, you wouldn't think much that comes up during the course of a season would surprise him, but that has not necessarily been the case.

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"I think it's fair to say that I knew a lot about what the job entailed," he agreed. "But I guess the one thing that I didn't know was how deeply you get into some of the on-field issues, especially related to if there's an ejection or if there's a bench-clearing incident and things along those lines. That can be pretty intense and time-consuming to make sure if you take action against someone, that you do it in the right way."

"I think we've seen all too often recently how heads of leagues can be a little less successful than they should be when they make decisions, so I have tried during the course of this year to be as fair as I can to everybody when I had to make a decision."

Nussbaum indicated, however, that there have not been a lot of disciplinary issues this season.

"It's not what I would call a significant problem, but there are a number of incidents and we try to take care of it very quietly, as it should be," he said. "This is a development league as applies to players, managers and umpires, so as everybody learns, sometimes people make mistakes. What we try to be is part of a development program to keep them on the right track."

The league boss went on to give praise to Kernels manager Jake Mauer.

"Jake is a great guy. I've had a chance to talk to him a couple of times and the Kernels are really lucky to have him."

"In the small-world category, one of Jake's teammates when he was in high school and playing Legion ball played with my son at Notre Dame," Nussbaum said. "Obviously, he comes from a high-profile, high-pedigree baseball family. He's done a great job this year for the Kernels."

With his first season running the league almost in the books, Nussbaum does not see much

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change coming to the Midwest League in the near future.

“I really don’t,” he said. “I think the league’s in pretty good shape. We’re not quite to the end of the year yet and I think after we get the championship game over with we’ll kind of step back and do an evaluation.

“We have a general managers meeting in October and then the winter meetings in December, so you never know, but right now I don’t see any significant changes.”

Two issues that are raised occasionally with regard to the Midwest League are the possible expansion or relocation of a team to St. Paul, Minnesota, and the possibility that the league would split into two separate leagues due to the geographic challenges of maintaining teams hundreds of miles apart.

Nussbaum does not envision a team in St. Paul.

“I don’t foresee that happening for a number of reasons,” he said. “We’re primarily player-development oriented and the Major Leagues have been very clear that they want to restrict the travel as best they can and the Midwest League footprint is as compact as most leagues and we want to keep it that way.”

Nussbaum conceded it’s no short trip when Cedar Rapids hits the road to Lake County, Ohio, however.

“I think those are the extremes. We also have Bowling Green (Ky.) in our league. That’s not an ideal situation, but it’s something that we’ve done because the South Atlantic League needed some help,” he explained.

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“They needed to restrict their travel. So we took on Bowling Green and Lake County. Lake County, of course it makes sense for them to be in our league. It doesn’t make as much sense for Bowling Green, but we can’t have everything all the time. We’re glad to have Bowling Green and we’ll make the best of it.”

As for a potential league split, don’t look for that happening, either.

“I think we’re always going to be one league. We’re not going to be two leagues,” he stated flatly. “I think we struggle and we look at and we review the scheduling every year. I think we’re as good as anybody in terms of allowing teams from the west and the east to play each other. We have responsible travel, where teams are traveling every other year to certain sites.

“I think it’s important that Cedar Rapids plays Lake County. The Twins and the Indians (Lake County’s MLB affiliate) are going to play in the big leagues quite often and I think it’s important for their minor league affiliates to play one another as well and I think the farm directors think that, too. I think it’s best for player development and it’s best for our league to continue down the path that we are continuing.”

One item that will eventually find its way onto Nussbaum’s desk is how to deal with a new master agreement between Major League baseball and the minor leagues. The current contract, that sets out the terms and conditions for all of affiliated minor league ball, is scheduled to expire after the 2020 season.

Typically, the agreement has been renewed several years prior to its scheduled expiration. That has not happened yet, but Nussbaum is not concerned.

“That’s a little bit higher than my pay grade,” Nussbaum conceded. “I’m sure that there are some discussions going on. I think the focus of Major

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League Baseball right now is on their collective bargaining agreement with the players, so I think once that gets done in 2016 that they'll focus their attention on the Professional Baseball Agreement, the PBA, with us.

"I think baseball is in a great place and I think this Commissioner (Rob Manfred) and our current president, Pat O'Conner, have a great relationship, so I'm sure it's going to be renewed. I don't think there will be any significant changes, but it's still five years down the road, so we'll see how it all shakes out."

With Major League Baseball continuing to see significant revenue increases, Nussbaum agreed that it seems there should be plenty of money in the game to make everyone happy, but he urged some caution, too.

"I think that we've got a lot of money in Major League Baseball and we've got a lot of clubs in minor league baseball that are doing well," he admitted. Yet, he added, "There are still clubs that struggle, so we've got to be careful with how we negotiate these deals."

Of the clubs that have to be counted among those that "struggle," two or three of them could well be among the Midwest League's Western Division. Beloit, Burlington and Clinton are perennially among teams with the lowest attendance in affiliated minor league ball and all three clubs play in older ballparks that might not necessarily meet professional baseball's standards to host a team if those communities were attempting to attract a team today.

Nussbaum conceded that some Midwest League teams are among the struggling clubs, but does not feel baseball should abandon those communities.

"I think it's a struggle for some of our teams because the markets that they play in aren't real conducive to the numbers that other markets like Dayton and Fort Wayne and Lansing and West Michigan and South Bend are able to reach," he said. "A club like Cedar Rapids does well. They work

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hard at it and they have a strong franchise.

“There’s a place for smaller towns in minor league baseball. It’s kind of part of our DNA, but the reality is that there are certain requirements that they need to meet.

“I think as long as they keep trying hard, and keep making progress, that they’ll be around. But if at some point in time it looks like they’re not going to be able to maintain the standards that they have to, then accommodations have to be made.

“But I don’t see anything in the short term along those lines and part of my job is to make sure that all of the clubs in our league get as much help as they need to be as good as they can be.”

Nussbaum plans to be in Cedar Rapids this weekend as the MWL finals continue.

“I’ll be there either Saturday or Sunday. If West Michigan wins tonight (Thursday’s Game 2), I’ll be there on Sunday for the remainder of the series. If Cedar Rapids wins tonight, then I’ll be there on Saturday.”