

'Verb' would be proud of today's baseball

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 22 May 2011 12:06 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 May 2011 20:05



I'm not sure Metro area baseball is any better today than it was decades ago, but certainly the process of producing players is very different.

For you younger readers, you may be surprised to learn that at one time there was middle-school baseball. Back then, they were called junior high schools. Taft, Wilson, Roosevelt, McKinley, Harding and Franklin all had baseball teams when junior highs consisted of seventh, eighth and ninth grade students. Wilson and part of Taft and Roosevelt fed Jefferson High School, Harding and parts of Taft and Roosevelt fed Kennedy, and Washington drew from McKinley and Franklin.

Most junior high schools had their own diamonds. And there were tremendous rivalries. They were built as the result of kids living nearby each other but attending different schools, or guys who competed in the Cedar Hills League or the City League, perhaps on the same teams but then squaring off as a member of their middle school team.

Then it all changed. Middle-school baseball went by the wayside with the advent of such organizations as CABA, Babe Ruth, AAU and USSSA. Hand-picked teams were formed for competition in these organizations, often with players who would eventually attend the same high school. These teams would not only compete locally but travel across the state, and sometimes to bordering states for games.

Both high school feeder scenarios had, and still have, their benefits. Both have produced outstanding high school players, major-college prospects and even a professional signee here and there.

One guy who would be proud of the progress is Bob Vrbicek, for whom this week's Metro baseball tournament is named. They called him "Verb."

Verb was my junior high school baseball coach at Taft. I didn't know much about Verb when

'Verb' would be proud of today's baseball

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 22 May 2011 12:06 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 May 2011 20:05

I played for him but I can tell you I came to learn he was an outstanding coach. He wasn't a rah-rah guy or a strict disciplinarian, just someone who knew a lot of baseball and imparted his knowledge to you in his own way.

I was Verb's catcher and our ace pitcher at Taft was Glen Zenor, who had some Mitch Williams in him. Glen was a left-hander who threw the ball hard but often didn't know where the ball was going. As his catcher, it was a challenge. Verb called me "Dukesie." It was "Dukesie, you need to block the ball better." Or, "Dukesie, go talk to Glen. Walks are killing us!"

Verb had fun with the game and had fun with his players. He also was a decorated umpire at the high school and collegiate level. Many players will tell you about the conversations Verb, the umpire, would have with them during games.

Actually, there were a lot of Vrbicek's back in the junior high school days. During my time, the west side had perhaps the top trio of coaches around in Verb at Taft, George Thomson at Roosevelt and Larry Bowen at Wilson.

Today, coaches of feeder programs for high school baseball most often are parents of players. There are many outstanding coaches in the USSA, CABA and Babe Ruth ranks. But it's doubtful any of them will have a tournament named after them.

For players competing in this week's Metro baseball tournament, the name Bob Vrbicek probably doesn't ring a bell. But trust me, there's good reason this event bears his name.

(Mark Dukes is former sports editor of the Cedar Rapid Gazette. He is co-host of The Gym Class radio show weekdays from 2-3 p.m. on KGYM-AM 1600.)