

Dramatic changes for baseball over the years

Written by Bob Brooks

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If you don't think athletics has changed in the past century, I would refer you to the baseball draft just completed.

In my early times in minor league baseball, it was rare to pay one player \$100,000, but it happened in the 1950s with a Cedar Rapids pitcher named Billy Jo Davidson, who appeared here under great publicity. That was the ceiling, considered to be astronomical at the time.

He arrived as a phenom, but he wound up as a career minor leaguer. The reason I bring that up is to illustrate what a person like Branch Rickey would do with the Brooklyn Dodgers back then. He would pay \$100,000 for 100 players, give them no instruction, no trainers, no roving coaches. He'd make them play every day and see which ones rose to the top.

The reverse is true today. Recently, when the Great Lakes Loons played the Kernels, they put out a pitcher who was going to be a quarterback at LSU and instead signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers for \$6 million. My, how the times have changed.

That brings us to the local stars who were drafted this week. Matt Holland, from Marion High School and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, was drafted in the 22nd round by Philadelphia, and Dakota Freese, from Cedar Rapids Washington, was picked in the 34th round by the Chicago White Sox.

And lighting up the local scene is Austin Christensen of Cedar Rapids Kennedy, who Wednesday night had three home runs against Ottumwa and as of mid-week had been on base so many times that he had recorded only 12 outs in the entire season in 13 games.

Christensen went undrafted, but he's certainly a sensational catch for the University of Nebraska baseball program, where older brother Chad just finished his sophomore year and is having a successful career with the Cornhuskers. The Christensens will be coached by Darin Erstad, a long-time major leaguer and former Husker who was selected by Tom Osborne to

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lead the program into the Big Ten baseball arena with a name, a reputation and no head coaching experience.

Baseball, my friends, has changed markedly.