

THE FOUNDATION OF BASEBALL IN MID-MICHIGAN: BILL STAVROPOULOS AND PAUL BARBEAU



Bill Stavropoulos, the former CEO of Dow Chemical Company had a dream to bring minor league baseball to mid-Michigan. Paul Barbeau had the baseball credentials to make Bill's dream a successful enterprise called the Great Lakes Loons.

These two men from diverse backgrounds came together with probably only two things in common. One was a burning desire to succeed and the other was a love for baseball. Bill's passion began as a player, while Paul's came from the management side of the game.

Stavropoulos lived with his Greek immigrant parents above their family restaurant on Long Island, New York. Baseball was a constant activity as a youth. "After school or after doing our chores, all the kids gathered together for a game," recalled Bill. "We had our own rules, we created our own stadium – you had to bat opposite-handed because

we had limited space but if you hit one on to someone's porch, it was a home run."

He went on to graduate from Fordam University and then received a Doctorate from the University of Washington before starting his career with Dow in 1967 as a research chemist. Forty years later, in 2006, Bill retired as their CEO. They broke ground for the Dow Diamond on April 11th of that year.

During the last few years of serving on Dow's Board of Directors, he began formulating the vision of owning a minor league baseball team. As he researched his options, it became evident to him there was a great opportunity and excellent chance for a team to succeed in mid-Michigan. There were several reasons for creating the 501c3, non-profit Michigan Baseball Foundation (MBF).

"I wanted the Loons and the Dow Diamond to have permanence in mid-Michigan. If it were a private enterprise, the team could be bought and moved to another location," said Stavropoulos. "As a non-profit organization, the profits would go back into the area and the team has local ownership. Second, we can use the MBF to spark economic development in the region."

Contributions to the MBF come in many ways. The most obvious way is to attend Loons baseball games but there is also a campaign to give private donations. "It's a self-perpetuating thing," said Bill. "In essence, by supporting the team and the Foundation, you are giving back to the community. An excellent example of economic development is with some of the profits, we purchased the ESPN radio station (100.9 FM), which brought jobs and sports talk radio to the area."

In total the MBF has issued over \$300,000 in grants to a variety of organizations in mid-Michigan including Gladwin Area Hockey and the Beaverton Youth Recreation program.

"The centerpiece for success is the Great Lakes Loons," said Bill. "The MBF oversees the team, the stadium and radio station but we needed a baseball man to make it work. After one phone interview, I was pretty sure that man was Paul Barbeau. We interviewed several other candidates but Paul really made it an easy choice."

Paul Barbeau didn't play much baseball as a kid growing up in the Boston, Massachusetts area but he admits his entire family are fanatical Red Sox fans. He came to baseball by way of his Georgetown University roommate, whose brother was the General Manager of the Spokane Indians, a minor league team in Spokane, Washington.

After graduation, Paul gave him a call for advice. “I always thought his job sounded interesting,” recalled Barbeau. “It seemed I was headed for either teaching history or going to law school but I needed a summer job.”

His first job in baseball was running the souvenir concession as the merchandise manager, which included a couple high school employees and little more than a kiosk. He quickly moved up to the Director of Group Sales and would eventually become the Indian’s Vice President and General Manager, which he held for eight years before coming to the Loons.

“Believe it or not, I learned many of my management skills working right out of high school, two summers for a landmark Boston-area restaurant called Kelly’s Roast Beef,” said Paul. “It was just a beach shack takeout place that specialized in roast beef and seafood. But the owner taught me the importance of maintaining high standards in all aspects of business – quality of the product, putting in a good work ethic and creating a fun working environment.”

One of the blessings that Paul brought with him was the daughter of Indian’s season ticket holders. “It may sound ironic, but yes, I met my wife at a baseball game,” Barbeau said smiling. He moved to Michigan in March 2006, then wife Shauna and son Peter followed shortly after. They now have added a daughter, Anna to the Barbeau clan.

I sat down with Paul to talk a little baseball with him and later Bill joined us.

ROR: You have the titles of President and General Manager. What do those jobs include?

Paul: They are really all rolled into one job but the President handles the overall direction of the operations and making sure they are working together. I’m out in the community representing those organizations and provide leadership for our staffs. As the General Manager I handle the day to day operations and work closely with the Dodgers baseball organization, which is our Major League Baseball affiliate.

ROR: What is the biggest difference between the Spokane Indians and the Great Lakes Loons?

Paul: The Indians are over 100 years old and the Spokane area is larger (400,000+). I was working in a stadium that was built in 1958 – a great facility but much different than the Dow Diamond. The merchandise store here is about one thousand times bigger than what I

started with (laughing). So I started here with something built from scratch as opposed to being a steward of an organization with a long history. The Indians were owned by a group of investors looking for a return on their investment, while here we are still looking for a good return but we turn the profits back to the community. This stadium is a year-round operation.

ROR: When did you and Bill first meet and were there any surprises?

Paul: I actually had a phone interview with him first but I met him in person at my follow-up interview. No surprises - they were very thorough and I was very impressed.

ROR: Ok, let's get to the nitty-gritty of baseball...who is/was the best manager in baseball?

Paul: Oh, I'll be completely politically correct...Tommy Lasorda (legendary Hall of Fame manager for the Dodgers).

ROR: Who is your all-time favorite player?

Paul: You know it would be a Red Sox player...Jim Rice (Boston Red Sox outfielder and Hall of Famer).

ROR: If you were starting a new team and could pick a pitcher, catcher, infielder and outfielder – past or present, who would they be?

Paul: I'll stick with just the players I've seen rather than go way back. My pitcher would be Greg Maddox; catcher, the Twins' Joe Mauer; infielder, George Brett; and outfielder, Ken Griffey, Jr.

ROR: Your favorite announcer?

Paul: Not a baseball announcer but my favorite was radio broadcaster Johnny Most of the Boston Celtics.

ROR: If you were the Commissioner of Baseball what would you change?

Paul: Well, I think they have a good start but I would continue to be aggressive on the drug testing and I don't like the All-Star game deciding home field advantage in the World Series, so I would change that.

ROR: Should Pete Rose be in the Hall of Fame?

Paul: I would say no.

ROR: Your favorite baseball movie?

Paul: Bull Durham.

At this point, Bill Stavropoulos joined us in Paul's office. So I asked him some of the same baseball questions and a few more.

ROR: I would like your impressions of Paul when you interviewed him (at which point, Paul laughed and said maybe he should leave the room).

Bill: Everyone had a very positive impression from the first interview and I thought he was very knowledgeable, articulate and interested in the challenges of starting fresh with a new team. (Paul injected that at the 2nd interview when they met face to face, Bill set the seating arrangement for dinner and put Shauna right next to him.) Well that's true – I was recruiting them both! (laughing).

ROR: Your all-time favorite baseball player?

Bill: Stan Musial.

ROR: You can draft a pitcher, catcher, infielder and outfielder to start your new team – current or past players. Who are they?

Bill: My catcher, I'd pick the current guy Joe Mauer (Paul and I both laughed when we told Bill that was Paul's pick); outfielder, I'll go with Ted Williams; pitcher, I might reach back and take Warren Spahn; for an infielder I'll take Lou Gehrig.

ROR: Should Pete Rose be in the HOF?

Bill: No.

ROR: Because of your involvement serving on several Fortune 500 company boards, I'd like to ask your impressions on the Michigan economy and the U.S. economy.

Bill: Michigan got a double whammy from the overall economy in our country and also our dependence on the automobile industry. But we have to re-invent ourselves. We have to make a better environment here for business investment. We have a beautiful state, with a skilled labor force and there's no reason why we can't make a strong comeback. A financial crisis really triggered this downturn in the U.S. economy. But I think generally we are gradually coming out of it. This has caused a lot of companies to reorganize, which has made them stronger. When the recovery starts picking up speed, I think earnings will be higher, more people will be back working and we will be much stronger globally.

ROR: Where do you see the Michigan Baseball Foundation in the future?

Bill: I see it serving as an even bigger catalyst for economic development in the area- we call it the Bay Area Region. We want to work with other people to help create things by giving out grants, partnering with others and loaning our expertise. I'm very excited about the future of the MBF.

ROR: Are you living your dream right now?

Bill: Well, like most people I've had a lot of dreams along the way. As a kid, I played stickball (a broom handle and tennis ball) in the community area, which was surrounded by our homes – it was our stadium. Now, we have another community stadium, the Dow Diamond, one of the best facilities in all of baseball. It certainly is one of my dreams.

ROR: We are certainly glad you had the vision and the perseverance to see it through. All of mid-Michigan thanks you and Paul both for sharing this dream with us.

