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Baseball: Sun finally sets on Bruins

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Christenson Field, at the end of a road on Beatrice's northwest edge, has been home to Bob Steinkamp and the Beatrice Bruins for 40 years. No longer. Steinkamp recently announced his retirement.

MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

Bob Steinkamp was a young man then.

Before gray hair and grandkids. Before future big leaguers like Alex Gordon and Joba Chamberlain started passing through his dugout like 4x4s on the highway.

It was summer in the early 1980s, and Steinkamp was a baseball coach in Beatrice, Neb. On a budget.

When he heard that friend Merl Eberly, manager of the Clarinda A's, had an overland bus for sale, Steinkamp considered \$500 a small asking price. Even if the ride was vintage 1946.

On the first big road trip, before Steinkamp had time to paint Beatrice Bruins on the side of the bus — “I think we had Beatrice Br” — he climbed aboard with 15 or 20 college kids and headed south for Hutchinson, Kan.

Ten miles from Hutch, with the temperature hovering between absurd and miserable, the bus broke down.

“The engine blew up,” Coach Steinkamp said.

Thankfully, a trucker with a big heart and an empty cattle trailer stopped and picked up the Bruins. In one way, the trailer was an improvement.

“Probably a little more fresh air,” Coach said. “That bus, obviously, did not have air conditioning.”

Twenty minutes before first pitch, they arrived at the ballpark, where awaiting them was a lineup card stacked with future major league All-Stars.

In the early '80s, the Hutchinson Broncs enlisted Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, Rafael Palmeiro, Jeff Brantley, Mike Stanley, Dan Plesac, Steve Ontiveros. ... A few of them were on the field that night.

Pete Incaviglia did the most damage. Coach remembers three home runs and insult to injury — “he really, really took his time getting around the bases.”

After two drubbings, Steinkamp eventually got his team back to Beatrice, where he called Merl Eberly. His greeting: “Thanks a lot, pal.”

A few days later, Steinkamp sold the bucket of bolts for \$100.

That was about 25 years ago. The Bruins' last road trip was Saturday night.

Twelve hours after the birth of his fourth grandchild, Steinkamp closed the book on the supreme semipro baseball team in Nebraska, which he started 40 years ago. He was at the hospital in Lincoln until 10:30 a.m., then drove 300 miles to Sedalia, Mo., for a doubleheader.

The Bruins won the first game and lost the second.

Afterward, Steinkamp huddled his players and thanked everybody for competing. Then he choked up a bit.

“You can't go on forever,” said Steinkamp, 61. “You've got to call it quits sometime.”

“We've lost a great baseball man, a great teacher,” Texas coach Augie Garrido said. “He had a great balance between understanding how to manage and coach the game, and discipline and respect for playing the game right.”

Garrido has sent his best underclassman prospects to Beatrice for almost a decade. There, they learned to swing a wood bat. There, they got a taste of minor league baseball. They got tougher.

“I always called it baseball boot camp,” Texas associate coach Tommy Harmon said.

Steinkamp didn't envision the final product when he started the Bruins. He just wanted a place to swing and throw and get dirty. After high school, he played a few years of town-team baseball for Barneston. If a town of 100 people could support a roster, why not Beatrice?

One day, he drove around town pitching his product to business owners.

“I said I'll put the name of your business on the back of our uniform for \$50.”

He got a few hundred bucks, bought new digs and rounded up some pedestrian glovemen. In the early '70s, local players comprised the roster. The Bruins dueled little towns in the area.

“I got tired of all the excuses for not showing up. They had a wedding tonight or had to go to a party or whatever. Sometimes you had to scrape to get a team fielded.”

So Steinkamp, a player-coach, had a decision to make: He could allow distractions to interfere and watch his Bruins vanish with dozens of other town teams across the state in the '70s and '80s. Or he could ante up, hang up his own glove and start recruiting talent comparable to that in the elite Alaska and Cape Cod summer leagues.

He first coaxed a few Huskers, including Maury Damkroger, who “was an outstanding catcher.” He asked a star shortstop from Wayne State to live in his basement for a summer.

Pretty soon he had a lineup worthy of interstate travel. The Bruins played games just about every night of summer. Under blissful skies at Christenson Field, the diamond at the end of a washboard road on Beatrice's northwest edge. Under tornado clouds in St. Joseph. Under the midnight sun in Alaska.

Steinkamp established a first-class reputation for his baseball eye — he has worked as a major league scout for several organizations. Eventually, coaches and kids started calling him for roster spots.

He looked into the kid's character, lined up a part-time job and a free bedroom in a friend's house and reserved a spot in the batting order.

Coach got his own future major leaguers like Randy Velarde and Jeff Huson and Shane Halter. In 1984, he acquired a catcher from Missouri whose stepdad was Harry Caray.

“He liked to sleep 'til around, oh, 11 o'clock every morning. Then he'd get up to watch ‘The Young and the Restless’. He didn't need to work.”

About 250 Bruins, including Caray's stepson, went on to professional careers. Eighteen went on to the majors.

Chamberlain was the best pitcher, Coach said. A Longhorn named Jordan Danks, now in Class AA, was his best position player. In 1993, the Bruins played for the National Baseball Congress national championship. Last year, they got third.

Steinkamp's players were his for only a few months, but he didn't hesitate to get after them, especially if he didn't think that they were properly representing his hometown. He wasn't afraid to meet an umpire at home plate and rustle a little dirt, either.

"When he got riled up, he could put on a show with the best of them," Merl Eberly said.

A college coach might call inquiring about his pitcher's curveball, only to hear Bob include a scouting report on the player's manners.

"He was a no-nonsense-type guy," UT's Harmon said. "We appreciated that."

It wasn't the coaching that persuaded Steinkamp to end the Bruins. If it was, he could easily find a young, competitive replacement to fill his spot in the dugout and keep the program rolling.

"But somebody's got to recruit the players, raise \$25,000 or more every year, go out begging for money, selling ads, getting host families lined up every year, part-time jobs, scheduling. You know, it's a full-time job."

And Steinkamp never took any money for himself.

Ryan Eberly, current manager of the rival Clarinda A's, said something has changed with semipro ballplayers.

"You hear them say, 'Oh, it's just summer ball,'" Eberly said. "They used to do it as a steppingstone. Now they're just doing it because their coach sent them."

A generation ago, Steinkamp said, kids appreciated a chance to play somewhere like Beatrice.

"Now, maybe it's just me, but they just don't quite seem to be as enthused or thankful to have that same opportunity. ... But I think that just goes with it as you get older. Maybe your perceptions change."

But his assessment is honest. And those feelings, along with the relentless pursuit of community support, make it harder for a coach of 40 years to bust his butt maintaining a nationally competitive program.

Besides, Coach has his own distractions. Like Madden Schwager, his new grandson. Grandpa's got a story about Pete Incaviglia and a cattle truck the kid needs to hear.

Actually, Steinkamp's next employer might be a different grandson. Jackson has already extended an invitation to Grandpa to manage his Little League team next summer.

Coach figures the job would pay the same as his last one and, who knows, maybe he'll find another future major leaguer in his lineup.

"It's either the Yankees, Red Sox or my 8-year-old grandchild's team. And the Yankees and Red Sox would have to make some pretty outstanding offers."

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