

Recalling that championship season



JULY 29, 2006 12:00 AM • BY NICK PETAROS/TRIBUNE STAFF

It was almost like a movie.

A coach was hitting grounders to a group of Hooper youths when six local baseball legends emerged from the “corn.” The men - Fremont's only American Legion state champions - walked onto the field and gathered around the pitcher's mound for the first time in 60 years.

On Aug. 8, 1946, these men posted a 4-0 state championship win over Omaha McFayden's. The squad garnered national attention five days later when ace Paul Menking pitched a perfect game in the regional opener.

Since then, their career paths branched into different directions. However, every five years they return to the Fremont area to catch up on each other's lives, take turns buying drinks and reminisce about their run into the record books.

Thursday's 60-year championship reunion marked the first get-together of these men since Marlin Bopp, the event organizer, died nearly four years ago. The '46 team's second baseman Roland Laaker of Fremont did the planning for this year's event.

“We just all were good friends,” Laaker said reflecting on how his team remained close. “Everybody clicked with one another, so we really had a good group of people.”

The Fremont American Legion Junior All-stars, ages 17-and-under, defeated Omaha Metz and Nebraska football All-American Bobby Reynolds' Grand Island team to advance to the state title game.

“Menking hurled only two balls that were tagged for singles, and whiffed 16, while his teammates were playing smart, heads-up ball afield,” Fremont Guide and Tribune sports writer Tom Hill wrote following the championship win.

The '46 team was the talk of the town. Regular season attendance ranged from 500 to 700, while turnout for the state tournament games at Moller Field plateaued at 3,000. Menking and third baseman Robert Warner recall how the large crowd set the stage for some comedic relief before one of the state tournament games.

“They had girls sitting on the infield, just inside the fence. That's when a ball rolled under a gal's skirt and Bob Warner hesitated to go over and pick it up,” Menking said.

“I was watching something else, Donnie (Rice) threw me the ball and it went by me,” Warner recalls. “This gal was sitting on the ground. I looked at her and I turned around to Donnie and he said ‘you're a chicken ... if you don't go and get it.’ And I didn't go get it.”

Later that week, Menking set a single-game record for consecutive batters retired at 30 in a 10-

inning perfect game against Cheyenne, Wyo., at Hastings. He also recorded 21 strikeouts and scored the game-winning run on Bucky Poole's Texas Leaguer.

"I didn't know I had a perfect ballgame, but I knew I had a no-hitter," Menking recalls. "It seemed like everything I threw went the way you wanted it to go. When they hit the ball, (our defense) made the plays."

After the '46 season the Arlington native joined the Chicago Cubs organization. His first years of pro ball were spent in Hutchison, Kan., and Sioux Falls, S.D., of the Northern League. In Sioux Falls, he competed against future pros Bob Turley and Don Larsen. Menking won 19 games in a season with Sioux Falls, suffering 2-0 and 1-0 losses to Turley.

Menking was promoted to the Los Angeles Angles AAA baseball team after stints in Des Moines and Nashville. Two of his notable L.A. teammates were future Phillies manager Gene Mauch and television actor "The Rifleman" Chuck Connors.

Looking back on his career, Menking remains modest.

"It was a lot of fun, the older you get the better you were. There's not many people around anymore who remember what really happened," he jokes. "If you don't play very well, then you hit all these different towns ... I threw hard, it just took a long time to get there."

Menking's fellow pitcher on the '46 team, Don Watts of Kennard, also played professional baseball. He signed with the Cardinals and played for Albany, Ga., in a rookie league. The lefty was 13-7 in his first season before injuring his arm. After the injury, he never won another game.

Watts was transferred to St. Joseph, Mo., and then to Tallahassee, Fla., where he played outfield. While playing for St. Joseph, Watts competed against Mickey Mantle who was playing in Springfield, Ill.

"He was playing shortstop back then. He might catch one, he might not catch one, but he could hit the ball already back then," Watts said of Mantle. "He's all they talked about. They had a long-ball hitting contest and he won that. But he wasn't a shortstop, that wasn't going to be his position."

Watts enjoyed the bonds that were formed among his teammates. He recalls an eventful night in Tallahassee.

"One of the players drove the bus and we were coming home one night from playing," Watts said. "There was a humongous watermelon patch out the window. Everybody jumped out and stole two watermelons. We were driving down the road and realized we were short one guy, so we backed up. Everybody got out and we had a bus full of watermelon. It was just like we're doing tonight (at the reunion), being around the guys and chewing the fat."

The state tournament title came during a dramatic time in the life of shortstop Don Rice of Fremont. His father died prior to the teams' departure for the Hastings regional. Despite his loss, Rice joined the team for Menking's perfect game.

"Back then we just went out and played ball, that was it," Rice said. "Through the years we've had real camaraderie."

Warner, a Fremont native who now serves on the city council, agrees.

"We played because we loved to play," he said. "I do remember those old wool uniforms. Man, that was 100 percent wool. We played all afternoon games, there was no lights."

Uniforms weren't the '46 teams' only burden. With some players coming from nearby towns of Hooper and Arlington, travel was also a challenge.

“Paul (Menking), when we came from Arlington, would hitch a ride on the highway,” Warner said. “He had his spikes over his shoulder, and his glove. Everybody in cars in Fremont knew him. He'd just sit out on the highway and they'd come pick him up.”

Laaker of Arlington recalls driving his parent's old 1933 Model A Ford to practices and games. He didn't have a license in '46, so he took a gravel road from Arlington to Military Road in Fremont.

“It was different because we all had a different way in which we could get to the game,” Laaker said. “I think really we appreciated everything more because of the way you had to go about doing it.”

Looking back at his team's success, first baseman Don Otteman of Hooper attributes Fremont's lone state title to defense and coaching. Head coach Virgil Yelkin became the athletics director at the University of Omaha, where he started the school's baseball program. Assistant coach Myron Dramel went on to coach at Midland Lutheran College.

“We were a very good defensive team. Much better than an offensive team. That's the reason for winning as many games as we did,” Otteman said. “Everybody helped each other out. We had a good coach and a good manager. Virgil Yelkin kept things together very well.”

With age and health now a factor, Laaker believes that Thursday's reunion may be the last for his team. Time has yet to strain bonds formed from 1946's summer of excellence. Baseball is a timeless sport measured by innings, not minutes and seconds.

On a quiet evening in Hooper, the game formed an inter-generational connection that demonstrated why it remains America's national pastime. A look of youthfulness came across the faces of the '46 championship team when the little leaguers handed over their gloves for a photo.

As the men walked back into the “corn,” the youths' coach asked them if they had any advice for his young team. Their response - have fun... keep on swinging ... swing hard and swing often.