

LEAVING A TRAIL...

THE GFI STORY



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AUGUST 2, 1969. On this date, before a crowded house at James Donaldson Park, the Grand Forks Mets defeated the Trail Blazers 7-4 to capture the 1969 Provincial Junior Baseball Championship. By claiming the B.C. title, the Mets earned a berth to the 1970 Canadian Junior Baseball Championship to be hosted by Carman and Portage la Prairie, Manitoba.

When the celebration dust had settled, the planning for the 1970 campaign began with purpose and direction. It was decided to expand the upcoming season schedule to better prepare for the National tournament in Manitoba.

To initiate the reinforced calendar, it was agreed to host a tournament four weeks later on the Labour Day holiday week-end.

AUGUST 29 – SEPTEMBER 1, 1969. The Grand Forks International Labour Day Baseball Tournament was born on this date and it proved to be the springboard to the remarkable Grand Forks baseball tournament road map. That very first tournament included local area teams from Trail, Nelson, Castlegar, Rossland, Republic and Colville. This tournament proved to be most successful and its popularity amplified visions of future growth and development.

In 1970, a local sponsor, the Grand Forks District Savings Credit Union, was secured and the tournament label was amended to the Grand Forks Credit Union International Labour Day Baseball Tournament. Lengthy title indeed!

As the years went by, the tournament orbit of teams pivoted to out of area clubs from Spokane, Vancouver and Surrey. Then, in 1974, the Okanagan Major League Baseball Camp in Oliver, B.C. supplied a surprisingly gigantic contribution to the Grand Forks tournament cause.

We were informed that one of the instructors at this camp was an individual who favoured tournament baseball and his team could possibly be a great fit for Grand Forks. His was from Seattle and his name was Frank Papasedero. With visions of further magnifying the tournament's advancement, I decided to give Mr. Papasedero a phone call and extend a tournament invitation to him.

That phone call was unmistakably self explanatory and went exactly as follows. During my explanation and promotion of the GF tournament, not a single word or question was countered by Mr. Papasedero. In fact I thought he hung up on me. As I was disappointingly about to hang up, Mr. Papasedero finally spoke with a blunt response, "We're coming, where the "H..." is Grand Forks?"

Seattle would now become a huge part of the Grand Forks tournament tapestry and the tourney's journey would now begin to steamroll. Following the 1974 tournament, Mr. Papasedero provided us with the names of other baseball contacts who might very well be interested in bringing their teams to Grand Forks.

When Lewiston, Portland and Grants Pass echoed affirmation to our invitation, it was agreed by all that the tournament title was too long and in 1975 the **GRAND FORKS INTERNATIONAL** was officially unveiled.

As the GFI continued to gather strength and popularity, the amazing inclusion of teams over the years was remarkably astounding. Teams from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Houston, Miami, New Orleans, Atlanta, San Diego, Milwaukee and Reno placed a most impressive umbrella over the tournament's starting line-up.

Visions of global participation was now undeniably within the realm of possibility. In 1986 I was assigned the role of chef de mission with Canada's National Baseball Team which travelled to a world tournament in Taipei, Taiwan. While there, I blanketed the world baseball leaders with an aggressive informational delivery of GFI data. Face to face and from hand to hand, invitations were formally advanced.

The Taiwan tournament, which was played in early November, concluded and we returned home without any statement of acceptance or rejection from the global teams we canvassed.

In early December we received an awesome message from Taiwan acknowledging that country's participation in the GFI in 1987. Then, near the end of December, an incredible Christmas gift was presented to us. Japan had also agreed to green light our invitation and would send a team to Grand Forks in 1988.

The world was now truly coming to Grand Forks and James Donaldson Park needed a major face-lift. Night lights had already been installed in 1981, but the wooden grandstand needed to be pinch hit for with a more modernized structure.

Grand Forks Mayor and City Council were asked to consider totally re-placing the decaying wooden framework with a renovated rebuild. Our request received unanimous approval and the new grandstand was completed in 1987.

The volume of the GFI's maturity was overwhelming and the event was not only Canada's Largest Invitational Baseball Tournament, it was also undoubtedly recognized world wide. A fabulous acclaim indeed!

Over the years the GFI has welcomed and has witnessed some of the most elite amateur baseball talent from around the world. Famous footprints left by famous people at James Donaldson Park were many and here are just a few memorable ones that need to be mentioned.

In 1984 the GFI experienced a first in its short history as Major League scouts penetrated the baseball theatre at James Donaldson Park. They would be on hand to witness the play of a very special young talent from Maple Ridge, B.C. The scouts came, they watched, they were impressed and story has it that this player signed an amateur free agent contract with the Montreal Expos at the Grand Forks ball park.

His name...**LARRY WALKER**, and his career in professional baseball proved to be most sensational. He played for the Expos, the Colorado Rockies and the St. Louis Cardinals.

With the Rockies, he was the National League MVP in 1997, NL batting champion in 1998, 1999 and 2001 and NL home run leader in 1997. In 2020 he was the second Canadian player to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Famous people leaving famous footprints at James Donaldson Park!

At the GFI tournaments in 1987 and 1988, this player thrilled the Donaldson Park audience with his exceptional productivity at the plate and on the mound. In the tournament he played for the Washington State Cougars.

His name...**JOHN OLERUD** and in 1989 he was selected in the third round of the MLB draft by the Toronto Blue Jays. His Major League Baseball career lasted from 1989 through 2005, most notably with the Blue Jays team that won two consecutive World Series Championships in 1992 and 1993. He also played for the New York Mets, Seattle Mariners, New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox. In 1993 he won the American League batting title with Toronto.

Famous people, leaving famous footprints at Jame Donaldson Park!

In 1993 the Lewiston Truckers brought with them a pitching specialist. He was lights out as a reliever, erasing all threats with consistent dominance while captivating the baseball fans at Donaldson Park with his bullpen mastery.

His name...**KEITH FOULKE** and between 1997 and 2008 he pitched for the San Francisco Giants, Chicago White Sox, Oakland Athletics, Boston Red Sox and Cleveland Indians.

The Red Sox captured the World Series pennant in 2004 but would not have been crowned champions without the closer's command out of the bullpen. Boston swept the St. Louis Cardinals in four games and this relief ace pitched in all four games, notching a win and a save in game 4.

Famous people, leaving famous footprints at James Donaldson Park!

The 1997 GFI proved to be most noteworthy and memorable. To add flavour to the spirit of this fabulous event, umpires from Japan, Taiwan and the United States were imported to display their professional delivery in the GFI theatre.

Meanwhile, the Houston Astros injected high drama into the '97 tournament. Houston manager, Matt Konoposis, approached me early in the tourney and asked if someone from our committee would be able to travel to the Spokane airport and pick up a young player he wanted to fly in to pitch against Team Japan in the preliminary round. We agreed and the young arm was brought to Grand Forks to face Japan.

Word spread like wildfire that Houston was flying in someone special to pitch against Team Japan. The atmosphere was electric and on game day Donaldson Park was filled to capacity, standing room only crowd. The young pitcher didn't disappoint as he struck out 8 and yielded only 3 hits in Houston's 7-3 victory. Following the game, Coach Konoposis asked if we could return this young man to Spokane and have him fly back home. He was only 16 years old and he couldn't miss another day of school.

His name...**JOSH BECKETT** and his presence at the GFI was truly a moment to remember! A three time MLB All-Star, he played for the Florida Marlins, the Boston Red Sox and the Los Angeles Dodgers. He won the 2003 World Series with the Marlins and was named the World Series MVP. He then won another World Series in 2007 with the Red Sox and received the 2007 American League Championship Series Most Valuable Player Award. He also pitched a no-hitter for the Dodgers in 2014.

In the 1997 victory against Japan in Grand Forks, he retired Japan's phenom **Kozuke Fukudome** three times. But the Japanese star player had the last laugh as he banged a homer, a double and collected 2 RBI's in Japan's GFI Championship victory over Houston. He played in Major League Baseball from 2008 to 2012, primarily with the Chicago Cubs.

Famous people, famous footprints left at James Donaldson Park!

Finally, before passing the baton to a new leadership group, we capped our exit by creating the World Baseball Challenge. This creative and demanding baseball episode proved to be a milestone moment in the transition process. Eight countries would umbrella the WBC and the world took notice and watched. The World Baseball Challenge country line-up included Canada, the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Russia, Samoa, Dominican Republic and the world's #1 amateur baseball nation, Cuba.

Securing Cuba's berth was somewhat challenging as several conditions had to be met for them to accept our invitation. The primary condition was to guarantee around the clock security for the team. We were informed that the Grand Forks tournament was Cuba's first step in preparing for the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. Defections were a huge concern and the watchful coverage was of paramount importance.

We complied, the Cuban's came, the Cuban's won and went to the Summer Olympics in 2004 with a handful of players who participated in the World Baseball Challenge in Grand Forks in 2002. In Athens, Team Cuba won the Olympic Baseball Gold and that team's connection to Grand Forks will undeniably be forever carved in memory in Grand Forks tournament history.

Meanwhile, at the WBC in Grand Forks, this Cuban pitcher was brilliant as he dominated the baseball tournament landscape with every outing. His name...**JOSE CONTRERAS** and he did defect only a month following the WBC. Contreras defected from Cuba in October, 2002 while pitching for the Cuban National Team in Mexico.

After defecting, he signed with the New York Yankees and played for them in 2003 and 2004. He also played in the MLB for the Chicago White Sox, Colorado Rockies, Philadelphia Phillies and Pittsburgh Pirates.

Famous people, leaving famous footprints at James Donaldson Park!

However, unequivocally, placing the famous footprints aside, the most important and relevant footprints left at James Donaldson Park over the years are those left by the loyal and supportive baseball fans. The fans recognizable valued support was the catalyst that sparked the continued growth of the GFI and is very much commensurate with the tournament's longevity.

Meanwhile, the fabric for success in events such as this is indeed the volunteer. They have been and are the most important ingredients in the advancement and enlargement of the GFI recipe. They are the inspirational role models that help steer the leadership process and their commitment to excellence is unparalleled.

Also, and most meaningful, is the support and significant contribution I have received from my family, Flo, Jeff and Nicole. Theirs is the complementary DNA that facilitated in shaping the GFI's successful blueprint.

The multiple number of sponsors, also most certainly, deserve the merit of a grand salute. Their generosity and beneficial support helped immeasurably in diagramming the numerous GFI navigational channels.

As we look through the window of this gorgeous baseball theatre, James Donaldson Park, I am reminded of what a wise man once said: "Do not follow a path that leads...go where there is no path and leave a trail."

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The GFI and the World Baseball Challenge have done exactly that and the City of Grand Forks and surrounding community can proudly boast the ownership of both. These words, without question, have been most inspirational and most pivotal with the shepherding of the GFI and WBC. Most importantly, a cavalier attitude, especially towards the GFI's growth, was never embraced and the tournament's striking expansion is a testament to that approach.

In adding a most appropriate note to the Grand Forks baseball tournament essay, a closing short story is to be shared. In the 1980's and 1990's the largest baseball tournament in North America was the NBC World Series held in Wichita, Kansas and hosted by the National Baseball Congress. To our pleasant surprise at the 1994 GFI we had an NBC delegation from Wichita arrive at our tournament doorstep in Grand Forks. Following the tournament, upon leaving, their comment was most pointed, "how could such a tiny community host such a remarkable giant event?" The reply to them was simple and relevant, "yes, our community is tiny, but the hearts and dreams in this community are substantially larger than most!"

FOR THE HISTORY AND THE ROMANCE OF THE GFI...THE WICHITA CHAPTER CROWNS THE STORY!

