

Fun While it Lasted

Andy Milovich

A few weeks back I posted a quick article on the Michigan Battle Cats, a now-defunct late 90's minor league baseball club out of Battle Creek, Michigan. A lone Midwest league title in 2000 notwithstanding, the Battle Cats eight-year run in the Cereal City was fairly unremarkable.

More interesting was the tale of the team the Battle Cats *could have been* and why they weren't. For the owners of the Michigan Battle Cats dearly wanted to call their team the Battle Creek Golden Kazoos.

The story of the Golden Kazoos has a little bit of everything: the hubris of absentee owners, the provincial jealousies of two small Midwestern cities, team executives threatened at knifepoint, courtroom battles and, ultimately, a lone local oddball who managed to foil the team's plans. Well, no sex I suppose. The story of the Battle Creek Golden Kazoos has a little bit of everything except sex.

So anyway. I looked up Andy Milovich. A baseball lifer, Andy has spent the last five seasons as Vice President & General Manager of the popular Myrtle Beach Pelicans of the Carolina League. But his first full-time job in the game was as Director of Stadium Operations for the Midwest League's Madison Hatters in the summer of 1994. After only one season in Wisconsin's capital, the Hatters moved to Battle Creek with the promise of a new ballpark in the autumn of 1994. And the 25-year old Milovich was the man sent out to the local press – despite his own personal misgivings – to defend the locally despised Golden Kazoos nickname.

Andy Milovich spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his adventures in the Midwest League on January 14th, 2018.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

I believe the Madison Hatters was your first full-time gig. Was there any real consideration of keeping that team in Madison, or was it known from the start that this was just a one-year stop over on the way to Battle Creek?

Milovich:

The staff was under the belief that we were going to try to make things work in Madison, but it would depend on our level of success. My impression as the season approached its culmination was that the ownership group had intended to move all along without a new ballpark built along the beltway. That probably wasn't a reasonable goal given the short stay and little time spent forging the relationships that would have been required to accomplish that.

It's unfortunate because the front office staff really enjoyed Madison and believed we could have succeeded even in Warner Park. Ultimately, Steve Schmitt has proven us right <with the success of his Madison Mallards in the Northwoods League>, which has been great to see!

FWiL:

What was the story behind the Golden Kazoos nickname and the community response? It seems like there was some tension between Battle Creek and Kalamazoo in the name debate. I wonder if the team would have had such a negative response today in the era of Jumbo Shrimp, Rubber Ducks and Rumble Ponies? Or maybe it was the process of choosing the name rather than the name itself?

Milovich:

My recollection is that we held a Name the Team contest when our owners had been committed to something Kazoo related from Day One. We intimated the disdain for Kalamazoo by many residents of Battle Creek and shared our sincere concern for the choice as a staff with our ownership, but we were ultimately overruled. The name was met with local anger <in Battle Creek> and little enthusiasm from Kalamazoo as expected. Kazoos itself wasn't the problem, but the attempt to force Kalamazoo tie-ins on the Battle Creek community while running a sham contest that undermined the community trust.

FWiL:

A local man named George Hubka swooped in and trademarked the Battle Creek Golden Kazoos name before team officials got around to it, setting off months of legal battles over who controlled the name. Who was George Hubka and how did that soap opera play out?

Milovich:

The ownership was committed to sticking to their guns, but ultimately George Hubka gave them an out when they realized the bitterness wouldn't wane. Many name changes are met with mixed reactions because of the discomfort that accompanies change or fans' personal choices in a "name the team" contest. They'd expected people to come around, but ultimately got a free do-over from Mr. Hubka. They should have held a George Hubka Bobblehead Giveaway with him holding a kazoo for doing them a favor.

FWiL:

How did the Michigan Battle Cats name and logo come about? Did the name controversy ultimately drain the start-up momentum away from that team?

Milovich:

The name controversy really undermined the momentum and any potential for success. The market size and stadium location as it related to the interstate presented some challenges, but the sham contest betrayed the community trust in a significant way.

The anger was so intense that I recall our Chief Operating Officer Tim Cullen being threatened at knife point outside of a bar late one night. Battle Creek had lost the airport, post office and population size battle with Kalamazoo over the years. The initial reaction to having professional base ball was very solid. They'd have a flagship of their own. But we really missed the mark with the Golden Kazoos name and everyone in the office saw it coming.

FWiL:

Any memories you can share of Battle Cats owner Bill Collins and his efforts to build a sports empire in the mid-90's? He was into minor league baseball, hockey, and indoor soccer at one point, plus his effort to bring Major League Baseball to Washington, DC.

Milovich:

Bill was an incredibly successful man with an incredible vision. His goal was to acquire an entire minor league system to feed the MLB franchise he'd planned to bring to Washington. His vision was enough for me to pass on other full-time offers in baseball to join his efforts and go to the Big Leagues with him.

There was competition with respect to ownership groups and location when baseball finally reached DC and Bill fell just short of realizing his dream. I'm not as familiar with the particulars of how his Major League efforts played out, as I am with the Minor League story. He could sell his vision very well and acquired a stable of incredibly talented young front office members for his Minor League front offices. We were put in some pretty challenging situations, but we had been able to develop strong relationships and a great understanding of the markets in a short period of time. I only wish we'd had more success getting him to understand how to approach those markets so we could have enjoyed the type of success that the Madison Mallards have enjoyed.

FWiL:

In one of our earlier emails, you told me that you keep a few 20-year old articles from your Battle Creek days in your office. And you pull them out whenever you need to teach an object lesson about 'operating your team as a community trust'.

Milovich:

I've long believed that a franchise's most valuable asset is its fan base. A great facility, location, market, ownership, team, staff and logos are all certainly part of the equation. However, the relationship you have with the community and the engagement from its fan base play a major role in every aspect of that equation.

A team's ultimate responsibility is to become part of the fabric of the community. Connecting to it in a meaningful way that allows you to use the power of sports to uplift the community and become part of the connective tissue that brings it together. Doing that effectively requires you to operate your team as you would a community trust by placing your fans and community first. The other elements of the equation tend to take care of themselves when your team is properly aligned in its community.

FWiL:

Any other favorite Madison or Battle Creek stories you'd like with our readers?

Milovich:

I have a lot of stories that probably aren't fit for public consumption, but overall I have fond memories of both communities.

My first trip to the Shoe Box in Black Earth, WI, was a real eye-opener. It led to a life-long friendship with Steve Schmitt that has had an impact on me both personally and professionally. I collected \$500+ worth of shoes that he marked down to about \$275 while checking out (I'm not sure if anyone's ever paid full price at the Shoe Box!?!?!?). I was only making \$12,000 annually, so I only had a credit card to pay for it. Steve gave me his address and told me to write him a check when I got home. I'd never met the man before, but realized the impact his customer service had on his business right there. Steve went on to own the Madison Mallards and his success shouldn't surprise anyone!

I'll never forget the Villa Tap, State Street and its bars, The Rolling Stones at Camp Randle or watching our tarp fly over the backstop when high winds rolled across Warner Park and ripped it from our hands.

Battle Creek was an even quicker whirlwind, as I only stayed for 6 months before pursuing new opportunities. Living through the Golden Kazoos debacle told me it was time to consider other options if I wanted to make baseball work for my career. Being the Director of Media Relations for a team announcing the Golden Kazoos name may have clouded out some of my time there, but I'll never forget Carl Angelo and the times we shared stories over a shot of slivovitz. Mike Riley's umpiring stories, Bell's Brewery and the smell of cereal in the morning will forever be part of my fond collection of memories.