

Boys of summer, West Allis style

In the late 1930s, the 'Big Guys' taught local kids on the playgrounds about the game of baseball

By George Vukelich

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We learned our baseball fundamentals at Central Park in West Allis before there was a Little League or a Babe Ruth League or a major league franchise in Milwaukee.

It was the late 1930s, the Braves were still in Boston and the Milwaukee Brewers were a Triple A Club in the American Association playing in baggy flannels and black shoes and batting without helmets.

We learned by playing with The Big Guys — Nick Jelich, Nick Ogenovich, Chuck Geboy, Danny Sekulich, Al Rainovic, and sometimes, in a real treat, Jim Sagorac, the immortal Chatz himself.

Usually, Chatz would be just passing through because he didn't live in our neighborhood, and cutting across the ball field, bound on some errand

George Vukelich, a freelance writer from Madison, presented a version of this story on Wisconsin Public Radio.

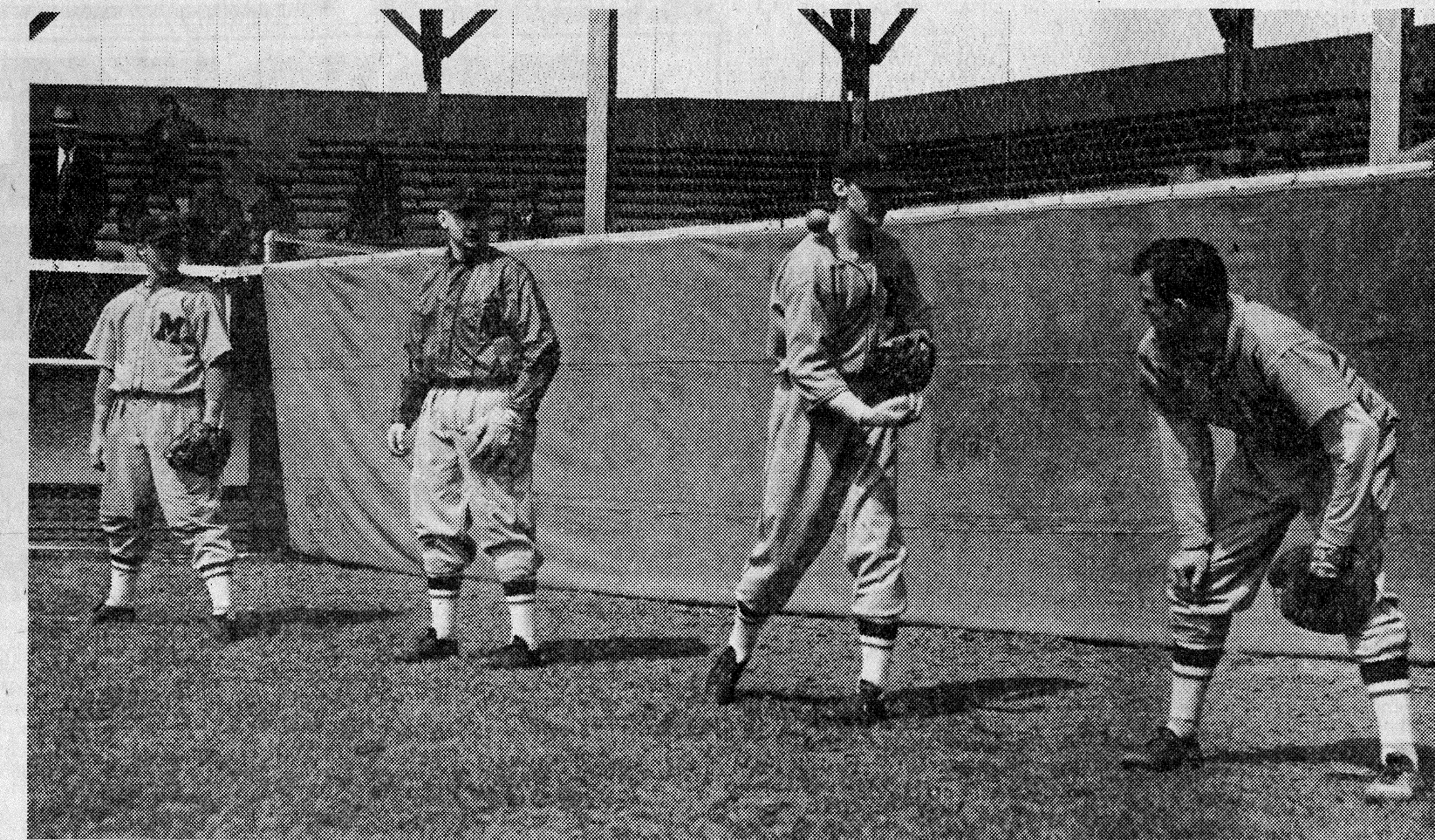
along Greenfield Ave. As often as not, it was the magazine rack at Wolff's at 70th where you could stand and read the pulp magazines — "G-8 and His Battle Aces," "Lightning Jim Whipple Westerns" and "Master Detective" — without getting thrown out, especially if you looked like you were waiting to use the phone booth.

Chatz had it down to a science. Chatz had everything down to a science, including the first one-handed push shot we ever saw in the Suburban Conference. When they said that some West Coast flash named Hank Luisetti had invented it, we took that as a personal slur not only on Chatz in particular, but on all Slavs in general. The Cincotta family never let us forget it.

Any kind of ball

A baseball game at Central Park could be played with a hardball, a softball, a tennis ball or whatever. Sometimes, the Big Guys went one on one with golf balls and hammered them way over the left-field fence, across Orchard Ave. and up the block to Panos Panosian's house.

Sometimes, they would use greenie apples if they had raided somebody's yard on the way to the park. The pitcher would take a bite and



Back in the late '30s, the Milwaukee Brewers wore baggy pants and black shoes . . . and the 'Big Guys' ruled

throw the apple, hard, up to the hitter. It was a real lesson in aerodynamics, although not a single one of us even knew that word then.

The way the little kids got to play baseball with the Big Guys was at the sufferance of the two oldest Big Guys who designated themselves "Playing Managers." They also designated themselves "Pitchers." And "Umpires." They had more authority than the Seven-Foot Nun over at Holy Assumption or Monsignor Julius Burbach or even the Pope himself who at the time was Pius XI.

Hard time getting there

The Big Guys chose up sides, picking all the kids who wanted to play and even some who didn't. We are talking players ranging in age from 10, 11 years old up to maybe 19, 20 years old, which is what a few of the really Big Guys were.

We were a mixed bag of talents —

from fireballing Tommy Cincotta who looked like he was ready to shave in the seventh grade to little Zadig Mouradian who was the fastest thing in sneakers once he got on base, only he had a very hard time getting on base.

Zadig was as fast and as fiery as his father, only his father wasn't too crazy about baseball — a lot of the old country fathers felt the game was corrupting their kids, along with Stick, Kick-the-Can and Football. More than one varsity player forged the old man's signature on the high school insurance forms and then prayed he wouldn't have to explain a broken leg.

Part of the catcher's job in Central Park games was to keep an eye on 69th St. — because he was the only one facing that way — for immigrant fathers and other family members who could come swooping down on you without warning, scattering a

dynamite ball game faster than a thunder storm.

We little kids got more than three strikes if the Big Guy pitching decided that we needed more. Sometimes four. Sometimes five. Sometimes even more. Zadig usually was up there batting until he finally hit the ball because everybody including the Big Guys just loved to see him fly down to first.

Teaching all the time

The Big Guys didn't throw their best stuff at us and they were teaching and talking to us all the time.

Hey! You hold your bat like an old lady! Line up those knuckles. Naw! Not like that. Like this! Sometimes, they called "Time Out" and walked in to show you, standing behind you, their hands on yours, so there was no misunderstanding what they meant.

Keep your head in! Keep that back shoulder up!

first base, he had a little grin and you knew he wasn't feeling badly at all.

Special rules

When the two Big Guys faced each other, then they bore down with all the stuff and smarts they had. They had special rules for each other: One strike, you're out. A foul ball, you're out. Sometimes, any ground ball was out, it had to be hit in the air to left. Other times; a fly ball was out, the ball had to be hit on the ground.

They were always making their personal contests tougher and tougher on themselves. When they went one-on-one with each other — that was their true practice. Nobody else there could stay with them, could really test them. God, nobody could hit Danny's fast ball, except Nick Ogenovich. We could only gawk at the confrontation, too overwhelmed to even cheer or snap our bubble gum or even breathe.

The Big Guys would be at Central Park day after day unless they were playing in an organized league somewhere.

Then, we little kids would bike over to see them play real baseball games with their flannel uniforms and metal cleats and scoreboards and real umpires.

The Big Guys played a lot at Washington Park and they had big crowds watching them. The pitchers threw their best stuff and they never called a time out to teach the other team anything. And no matter whose team it was, the batters all seemed so brave and lonely standing up there in their cloth caps and bagging pants.

It was a different game here, scary fast and hard. You just felt that you couldn't play this new game in a million years, because even behind the screen, you realized how violent this new game could be and you had never thought it was violent before.

The only way to play this game was to have Danny Sekulich and Nick Ogenovich on the same team along with all the other Big Guys — Belich, Sagorac, Krsnich, Markovich, Marcetich, Jelich, Rukavina — a band of brothers, serious and dedicated as matadors going into the arena to face whatever will come — pulling together, going flat out, holding nothing back, with the little kids from Central Park huddled behind their dugout like street sparrows and yelling like all hell for them.

I don't remember which Old Guy first told us: "Hips before hands!" But I know it wasn't Ted Williams.

We didn't realize until we became Big Guys ourselves that they were plugged into a whole different level of The Game, teaching, and that was what saved them from going crazy with us.

You really felt pretty special and worthwhile when Danny Sekulich stopped everything to point out a teensy weensy hitch in your swing when you were playing for Nick Ogenovich.

Sometimes, after you corrected, you got lucky and even lined one of Danny's pitches right back through him and out into center. It wasn't Danny's best pitch by a long shot, not even his half-best, but it flooded you with an unbelievable feeling and when Danny looked over at you on