

## Memories of summer baseball with local legends

By DR. JOSEPH MAROON  
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In the summer of 1957, two men were asked to put together a summer baseball team for Post 227 of the American Legion in Bridgeport, Ohio. One was John Byrnes, a local mail carrier and World War II veteran, and the other — John Blatnik — was a former professional baseball player. Between the two of them, they managed to cajole just enough willing boys for a team with a few more for substitutes. The players would have to work odd jobs in order to buy their uniforms and spend afternoons practicing at Perkins Field, the Bridgeport High School football and baseball field.

It was a quite a ragtag collection of young men, and many of their parents would have preferred their sons to have summer jobs to supplement their families' meager incomes. Indeed, after graduating high school — if that even happened — the majority of these young men would get jobs in the steel mills along the Ohio River or the coal mines in the rich seams of the Ohio Valley. But Valley sports programs served the critical role of bringing communities together, and growing up in this industrial crucible produced tough, resilient young men with remarkable work ethics. And some of these young men would escape the mills



Photo provided/Gordie Longshaw

**MEMBERS OF** the Post 227 of the American Legion team, from left, John Havlicek, Marty Holler, Phil Niekro, Bob Heckman, Ed Brown, Tom Farrell, Ed Johnson, Frank Mroczkowski, Harold Dee, Dave Druitt, Kelly Conway and Joe Maroon.

and mines through athletic scholarships to colleges and universities throughout the country.

This particular baseball team not only won the American Legion state championship in 1957, but many of its members would ultimately “give back” in unique ways. One became an esteemed priest. Others went into business or worked jobs that

allowed them to provide well for their own families. And remarkably, three went on to have extraordinary careers in sports.

John Havlicek, who served as the short stop and second baseman, would later be elected to the All-Ohio teams in baseball, basketball, and football. He was named a basketball All-American at Ohio State,

became an elite player for the Boston Celtics, and was then elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1984. Another player, Phil Niekro, would become known as one of the greatest knuckle ball pitchers of all times. He was All-State in baseball, won over 300 major league baseball games, was selected for five All-Star teams, and was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1997.

And then there was me. I played center field on our ragtag team and went on to become All-Ohio in baseball and football, and Scholastic All-American in football at Indiana University. I completed training in neurosurgery, and remain the team neurosurgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers and the medical director for WWE. And after years away from organized team sports, I began competing in triathlons and have completed multiple international Ironman distance races.

I was honored to be named to the National Fitness Hall of Fame in 2010, and it is wonderful that all three of us — John, Phil, and I — were inducted into the Lou Holtz Upper Ohio Valley Hall of Fame, named for the commentator and legendary Notre Dame coach from East Liverpool, Ohio.

What are the odds? Well, they are even tougher when you consider the following.

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