

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

JULY 22, 2023

Cooper: Martinsville's 'Bad Phillies' team leads to the hall of fame

By Cara Cooper

On July 25, 1993, the top story on the front page of the Martinsville Bulletin sports section showed the headline "There's a reason the Phillies are bad."

The article referred to the Martinsville Phillies, a rookie league affiliate of the Philadelphia Phillies major league baseball team that played its games at Hooker Field.

At the time the story was written, the Martinsville Phillies were 8-26, with the lowest winning percentage of any team not just in their league, but in all of the minors.

Losing became a constant for the Phillies throughout their time in Martinsville. In 11 seasons they never finished better than sixth in the Appalachian League standings, and never finished a season with a winning record.

The article's writer, former Bulletin sports writer Michael Haley, argued that there were two contributing factors to the team's poor showing on the field. One was players' experience level – the roster typically consisted of players just drafted, some right out of high school.

The other factor was the Phillies front office, for lack of better words, didn't care about minor league wins and losses.

"Our objective is not to win here," former Philadelphia General Manager Lee Thomas was quoted in the article. "It would be nice, but this is just not a place where you count wins and losses. I would like to win more for the city of Martinsville, but I think the fans understand what we're about here. We're here to develop players. There are good young players here that are going to need a good month and a half to two months to get going for next year."

From 1988-1998, the Phillies had 27 players eventually reach the majors, including regulars Jimmy Rollins and Ryan Madson, and current University of Virginia head coach Brian O'Connor, who was a starting pitcher on that 1993 team.

But none of the players who came through Martinsville proved Philadelphia's development prowess like Scott Rolen.

The Bulletin article was printed two days after Rolen arrived in Martinsville, and four days before he made his minor league debut with the Phillies on July 29, 1993. The 18-year-old from Evansville, Indiana was a second round pick for Philadelphia in the 1993 MLB Draft, and made his professional debut about six weeks later.

That Bulletin article proved to be prescient. Martinsville finished the 1993 season 22-46 overall, but the wins didn't matter. The field on Commonwealth Blvd. did its job that summer. Almost 30 years to the day after the article was published, Rolen will be inducted into the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame.

Rolen was elected to the Hall in January, appearing on 76.3 percent of voters' ballots in his sixth year of eligibility. He'll be inducted into the Cooperstown, New York museum on Sunday alongside journeyman first baseman Fred McGriff.

The future third baseman's time in Martinsville was short. He played just 25 games, batting .313 with five doubles and 12 RBIs in 80 at-bats.

From there, Rolen spent two-and-a-half more seasons working his way through the minors before making his debut in Philadelphia on August 1, 1996.

A year later he was the National League Rookie of the Year.

Rolen retired in 2012, having spent seven seasons in Philly, six in St. Louis, and the rest of his career between Toronto and Cincinnati. He finished with a career .281 batting average, 316 homers, and 1,287 RBIs.

Rolen isn't Martinsville's first MLB Hall of Famer, but he's the first, and likely only, Martinsville Phillie.

MLB Hall of Famer Heinie Manush and Enos Slaughter also spent time in Southern Virginia. Manush played in MLB from 1923-1939. Six years later he served as player-manager for the Martinsville A's, a Class C affiliate of the Philadelphia Athletics (now the Oakland A's). Manush's 1945 squad featured two future major leaguers: catcher Cliff Bolton, and outfielder Tom Kirk.

Manush's team went 69-67 that season.

Nine years after his time in Martinsville, Manush became the manager of the MLB Washington Senators. He was inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee in 1964.

Enos Slaughter, a Roxboro, North Carolina, native known around town as "Country", began his professional baseball career with the Martinsville Manufacturers in the Bi-State League in 1935 when he was just 19 years old. He played 109 games that season, collecting 115 hits, 25 doubles, and 18 home runs.

Two years later, Slaughter began his MLB career as an outfielder with the St. Louis Cardinals, where he played for 13 of his 21 big league seasons. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1981 by the Veterans Committee.

Martinsville has been home to thousands of baseball players throughout the years. Some – looking at you, Lou Whitaker – deserved their time in Cooperstown a long time. Hopefully that day for him will eventually come.

In that same 1993 Bulletin article, Martinsville Phillies team president Tim Cahill is quoted saying "Their record is not improving, but they are developing players."

"The bottom line is less than 10 percent of minor leaguers will ever make the majors anyway, and getting a fix on who that will be is an extremely difficult task," Haley wrote.

Martinsville has also seen a lot of baseball losses over the decades. This weekend, we should celebrate a big win.

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

JUNE 16, 2023

Celebrating the Grateful Dead and sports titles

By Cara Cooper

Region semifinals night is probably the most fun night of any sports season.

Every team in the VHSL knows if they win the region semifinals they'll automatically qualify for the state tournament. While winning a region title is nice, for most teams they don't care as much about the region championship trophy. They're much more concerned with getting the chance to move on and play for an even bigger trophy.

Region semifinals night this spring was an especially fun one:

- The Magna Vista girls soccer team defeated Hidden Valley – their nemesis that had sent them packing in the region tournament the last three years – in penalty kicks.

- The Magna Vista boys soccer team defeated Christiansburg High School – regarded as probably the toughest team on this side of the state – with relative ease in a 4-0 victory.

- The Bassett boys soccer team defeated Tunstall – the team they fell to in the Piedmont District tournament a week earlier – to reach the state tournament for the first time in a decade.

- And the Patrick County baseball team defeated Nelson County to reach the state tournament for the first time since before any of the current players were born.

I can't remember a time when four local high school teams all qualified for VHSL states in one season, and I know since I've been at The Bulletin it hasn't happened all on the same night. It was an incredible night all around for local high school sports... and I missed it.

I at least had a good excuse for missing it.

I was at a Grateful Dead concert.

My dad is a huge "Dead Head," having seen some variation of the band at least 100 times. I grew up listening to songs like "Casey Jones" and "Uncle John's Band" in the car when he would pick me up from daycare. Back then, he would always quickly turn the music down and back up so I couldn't hear any of the bad words.

For a time, I thought the Grateful Dead was the worst band ever in existence. Which is, of course, what every teenager thinks of their parents' favorite bands.

Then one day about 15 years ago I was watching what has become my favorite TV show, "Freaks and Geeks." Slight spoiler alert – in the series finale of the show, the main character, high schooler Lindsay Weir (Is it a coincidence she has the same name as Grateful Dead frontman, Bob Weir? Probably not.) decides to skip out on an opportunity to go to math camp for the summer and instead runs off with friends to follow The Dead in a VW van.

In one scene, Weir is given a copy of The Dead's American Beauty album and carries it with her to the lunchroom. Two classmates dressed in head-to-toe tie dye see it and say "You've never listened to American Beauty? I wish I had never heard it, just so I could experience listening to it again for the first time."

I told my dad that when we were on a long road trip with my brother, and they made me listen to American Beauty for the first time.

And, I won't lie, it did something.

I no longer hated The Dead.

This summer is billed as Dead and Company's final tour – but probably just their final tour with guitarist John Mayer, who joined eight years ago as a semi-replacement for Jerry Garcia – and since my dad has been saying to me since I was in high school that everyone should see a Dead show at least once, I knew if it was going to happen it needed to happen now.

We got the tickets before I knew any of the dates for the region tournaments.

My mom, who loves music and will go to any concert at any time, but also saw The Dead with my dad one time and said, "Once was enough for me," told me two things before going:

1. "Grateful Dead fans don't dance, they just stand and wiggle the whole time."

That was hilariously accurate.

2. "The concerts are super boring, but getting to look at John Mayer the whole time will make it worth the price of admission."

That was half true. It wasn't boring! It was actually really fun.

But also, yes, it was nice to look at John Mayer play guitar for four hours.

I got to thinking about the concert—which now ranks behind Billy Joel and Heart as the Top 3 best shows I've ever seen – and how it can relate to sports.

And it actually made a lot of sense that it would fall on region semifinals night.

The entire way down, my dad and his friend were trying to make predictions for what songs we would hear, what the band would open with, what would be the encore. Because every Dead show is different. It's impossible to predict what songs they'll play and in what order. I certainly went in with some I wanted to hear, but they didn't play a single one. And that was actually O.K.

I won't lie, we got into the second hour of music and they had only played one song I had ever heard before. Then, I heard the opening notes of something and it hit me. They were playing "Bertha," my favorite song when I was little.

Hearing it live, I remembered riding in the car with my dad, eating a Snack Pack with my feet dangling over the edge of the seat, and him pointing at me saying, "Bertha, don't you come around here anymore."

I hadn't even thought of that song when we were driving down. It was totally unexpected, and the highlight of my night.

Just like in sports, you can never predict what will happen. You can try to guess, you can hope for this or that. But, really, sometimes the unexpected is way better.

And, as teams make runs through the postseason, it's better to not go off of predictions or look into expectations. Sometimes it's better to just sit back and enjoy what's happening in the moment. Like those hippie kids on Freaks and Geeks, there are moments in my life I wish had never happened, just so I could enjoy them happening for the first time all over again.

I know the Magna Vista girls soccer team enjoyed their first state tournament berth. Bassett's boys soccer team enjoyed defying expectations and predictions to reach states. And, there's no doubt in my mind, the Patrick County baseball team enjoyed the heck out of that dogpile after winning their first state championship.

So, I'm sorry I couldn't be there for what ended up being the biggest night of the season. But I'm so glad I was able to spend time with each team this spring and school year, and hopefully we can all celebrate more firsts in the years to come.

(Did I really just write this 1,100 word sports column just so I could talk about a Grateful Dead concert? Yes, yes I did. Because, sports seasons come and go, but The Music Never Stopped.)

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

JULY 12, 2023

The court's greatest comeback

By Cara Cooper

Player 1 took her usual spot in the far left corner of the court. It's a spot she found out works best for her game, because her backhand is, admittedly, not good.

She could hear the words of her coach, Serena Williams, still ringing in her ears. "Don't run around your backhand!" Coach Serena Williams would yell. But, Player 1 discovered standing far to the left gives her the best chance of maximizing her abilities to go right, without risking the need to use her backhand.

Player 1 often wondered if she should just work in her downtime to make her backhand better, but those thoughts usually came to her in the middle of a game, not during a time when she could actually do anything about it.

It had already been a not-so-great day on the court for Player 1. For the first time in her storied career, she lost. A five set match, each set best-of-five games, came down to the fifth and final set, and Player 2 was victorious, 40-15. On game point, Player 1 hit the ball right into the net. Her first loss was one of her doing.

After a break for Player 2 to make a phone call, he said "What's next?" After some thinking, Player 1 said, "One more set, for all the marbles."

Player 2 nodded his head, put his hat back on, and grabbed his paddle... er, um, racket. He grabbed his racket.

"This one is for all the marbles" said commentator John McEnroe, as a hush went over the crowd.

Player 1 got one more pep-talk from her coach, Serena Williams, who told her simply, "Slow the game down. Let it come to you." Player 1 nodded as she took one more sip of her water from a bottle she had bought at a Dave Matthews Band concert.

Player 2 threw Player 1 the ball. She took it and prepared for her pre-serve routine. She took a deep breath, stepped to the line, and bounced the ball three times before dropping it and winding back to hit it off the bounce.

The next 10 minutes or so are a blur, but they're the best Player 1 has ever felt on the court. She could feel herself getting better at a game she had felt like she already mastered. Light on her feet, she could bound from sideline to sideline with ease. No shot was too low or ever out of her reach, and like her coach, Serena Williams, had been instructing her, she was getting better at knowing how to place her shots. "Put it where your opponent isn't," as Coach Serena Williams would say.

She even got a point off of a backhand shot, which brought out a celebratory yell so powerful she just knew her coach, Serena Williams, would be proud of both.

There are times on the court Player 1 would get so in the zone she didn't even know the score and would forget how many shots had even been played. Sometimes she wondered if that was a good or bad thing.

The two opponents – rivals at this point, given neither had ever played against anyone else – fought back-and-forth, and again found themselves tied, 2-2, going into the fifth game.

The deciding game featured some of the longest volleys of the day. Player 1 thought she was off to a good start with a fastball shot that nearly hit Player 2 in the face as he rushed to play up by the net, where he and Player 1 both knew he was his best. But while he attempted to defend his teeth, his paddle... I mean, RACKET, totally his racket... got in the way just in time, bouncing the ball across the net and almost into Player 1's face. Her defense wasn't quite as quick, and the ball hit the handle, landing just below her feet.

Fifteen-love quickly turned into 30 and then 40-love. Player 1 needed a comeback. She got the next point, which gave her the serve back. Serving is always when she feels the most confident.

Deep breath.

Bounce.

Bounce.

Bounce.

Another volley and another eventual point, 40-30.

It was for nothing. The next volley would last just three shots, and the game ended on another unforced error by Player 1.

She picked up the ball and threw it across the court, and dropped her... racket to the ground in disgust, letting out a yell, this time not in celebration.

"Man, I haven't seen a temper tantrum like that since I quit playing," said Commentator John McEnroe.

O.K., fine, the previous story wasn't about a great tennis match for the ages. It was about a pickle ball game I played over the weekend, and I'm Player 1.

No, my coach is not Serena Williams, although, how cool would that be?!

Also, John McEnroe has never commentated one of my pickle ball games but sometimes when I hit a really good shot I imagine he is and he's yelling, "WOW! That's one of the best shots I've ever seen! Cara Cooper is an incredible talent!"

And he would have said that about a lot of the shots I played this weekend, because, honestly, I lost and I'm still mad about it, but I played so good and I can feel myself getting better. When I'm playing pickle ball it's honestly the first time I've ever felt like a true athlete, not to brag.

So this story isn't necessarily about the greatest single game comeback on the court, but there will be a comeback. I'll be back, and as I'm sure my coach, Serena Williams, has said at least once in her life, "It's not about falling down, it's about getting back up again."