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On the cover: Muskegon Risers forward Miguel Flores, a former standout at Muskegon High School and Muskegon Community College. Photo/Tim Reilly

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THE ARENA RISERS ARRIVE

By Steve Gunn and Justin Haggerty
LocalSportsJournal.com

The Muskegon Risers keep offering the community something new, and the community keeps responding.

The Risers launched as an independent outdoor team in the summer of 2015, bringing high-level, semi-pro soccer to the shoreline for the first time.

The new team was the brainchild of former Reeths-Puffer High School and University of Michigan soccer standout Matt Schmitt, whose passion for his home town equals his love for the game.



TM
the team's fans would be interested in arena soccer. He reserved two winter dates at L. C. Walker Arena and staged two exhibition games, pitting the Risers against two traditional indoor teams.

Again the public responded, with more than 1,000 fans showing up for each of the two contests. That gave Schmitt the green light to plow ahead and make the Risers a two-season team.

Last July he announced that the club had joined the Premier Arena Soccer League and would play a 10-game indoor schedule this winter.

"This has been about a year in the making," Schmitt said when making the announcement. "Last winter we tested the idea out to see if there was a market for it, and if the players and fans enjoyed it, and it was an overwhelming success.

"The city really likes the idea, and the people at the arena really like it. It will be very positive for the downtown area."

A great opening weekend

The Risers' arena league inauguration took place on Friday, Jan. 14, when they hosted Detroit Waza Flo Premier at the downtown arena in their first PASL game.

The game finished in a 4-4 tie, but it felt like a victory for the Risers and the approximately 1,500 fans who showed up to check them out.

The team started out slow, falling behind 3-0 before halftime. Nobody seemed terribly surprised, because the majority of the Risers' roster is comprised of local players who lack experience at that level of indoor soccer.

But the Risers were determined to avoid a loss. They battled back to tie the game at 3-3, fell behind by a goal again, then secured the deadlock with a goal by Michael Schmitt – the owner's younger brother – in the fourth quarter.

One of the stars for the Risers was a local guy, former Muskegon High School and Muskegon Community College standout Miguel Flores, who scored the first goal in the team's indoor history, then scored again in the second half to lead the comeback.



Risers owner Matt Schmitt

In the beginning Schmitt couldn't be certain what to expect from a community where soccer has existed at the club, high school and community college level for years, but had never attracted the same type of fan base as football, basketball or hockey.

But the community embraced the Risers from the get-go. Large, enthusiastic crowds gathered for most of the Risers' outdoor home games at Reeths-Puffer High School throughout their first two seasons.

The team won some and lost some. It couldn't complete for a league trophy, because it wasn't part of any league. But the fans didn't care. They had a hunger for quality soccer, displayed in a professional and exciting manner, and the Risers provided it.

But there was more to come. After all, soccer is not just an outdoor sport.

In early 2016, following the Risers' first outdoor season, Schmitt wondered if



The Risers' Rich Visser takes a shot on goal. Photo/Tim Reilly

"Playing in my home town means a lot to me," Flores said. "To be able to score and hear the fans cheer means the world to me.

"That's what I focus on, performing at my best in front of my home town. I'm just really happy to be a part of it, I really am."

The outcome was even better the next night, when the Risers hosted the Youngstown Nighthawks in their second game, with an estimated 1,700 fans in attendance.

The Risers beat Youngstown 4-0 and pulled off a rare feat in the process. Shut-outs don't occur very often in arena soccer, because the play is fast and intense and goals are usually scored frequently.

Muskegon goalkeeper Tim Bergsma, a former University of Michigan standout, blanked the Nighthawks by stopping 19 shots.

Goal scorers for the Risers were Flores, Stu Collins, TJ Ifaturoki and Jubenal Rodriguez, another former Muskegon High School and Muskegon Community College player.

"It could be years and years before we get another one (shutout)," said Risers Coach Ben Ritsema. "We got lucky, they missed some shots they probably should have put in. We got much more organized in the back the second half of Friday night's game, and that carried over into tonight.

"I was pretty happy about our defense, and our goalkeeping was really good."

Good reviews

The results from the opening weekend left everyone happy, but Ritsema, like a typical coach, said he saw good and bad, and expects the Risers to keep pressing forward and improving.

"Our finishing could be better," Ritsema said. "We had multiple opportunities to put a couple more in the net both games. To give up only four goals in two games, I'd say



Will Diaz, at left, eludes a Waza Flo defender; Risers goalie Tim Bergsma prepares to make a save. Photos/Marc Hoeksema, Tim Reilly

defense and goalkeeping is a strength right now."

Schmitt was very impressed with attendance at the first two games, and the overall community reaction to the indoor team.

"We connected with a larger audience," the team owner said. "It was obvious through social media, through traditional media, the way people turned out here at the arena, that our message is really starting to resonate, not just with the people who started following us right away, but with other people who are starting to understand we're all about both outdoors and indoors.

"There's certainly a buzz and we fully expect that momentum to continue."

A lot of fans seemed happy with the first two games.

Some of them were already fans of the outdoor Risers team. That included a few dozen members of the self-titled "Port City Supporters" group, which enjoys the games by gathering in one section, banging on upside-down buckets with drum sticks and cheering as loud as possible.

The group formed at Risers outdoor games, and made a point of reuniting for the indoor games, as well.

"It started with the outdoor team," said John Witmer, a downtown Muskegon resident. "We went to the first two or three

Continued on next page...

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games, and it was almost like a golf match, with people politely clapping. So we decided to get a little more rowdy.”

Nick DeBoer of Norton Shores has been a two-year season ticket holder for the outdoor Risers. He’s an old friend of Coach Ritsema and says his children all play soccer.

“I think we’ve been at every game the Risers have had,” he said. “There is a lot more quickness (in the indoor game). It’s a lot faster. You really have to pay attention. In the outdoor game you can doze off a bit, but this is more intense and fast-paced.”

Nick Tushek of Muskegon said he attends a lot of Muskegon Lumberjacks hockey games at the arena, and had attended one outdoor Risers game in the past.

“It seemed like the thing to do tonight,” said Tushek, who attended the Risers’ first indoor game. “It’s fun. It’s nice to have another event in the winter to see. It’s nice seeing a green field instead of a hockey rink.”

A different kind of soccer

Some might wonder if two seasons of soccer per year will be too much for one community.

But indoor and outdoor soccer are two very different experiences, for players and fans.

The traditional outdoor version of the game features 11 players and a goalkeeper for each team, playing on a large field. The indoor version is more like hockey on turf, with a 5-on-5 format, played in a much



The "Port City Supporters" bang on buckets on opening night. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

smaller space.

There are even power plays, because some fouls result in the offending team losing a player for several minutes and competing a man short.

“The biggest difference is the ball rarely leaves the field of play, meaning you keep the ball in action most of the time,” Schmitt said. “It’s very similar to the pace of a hockey game. With the smaller dimensions there are more shots on goal and a lot more offensive action. Scores can get up into the five, ten or even fifteen-goal range.

“With the close quarters and faster pace, there tends to be a lot more contact and action. It’s a pretty entertaining experience.”

Another novelty for the Risers will be competing for a league championship.

Through their first two outdoor seasons, Schmitt considered and then rejected the idea

of competing in a league for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the biggest was scheduling. In a league a team is bound to play when and where the league dictates. As an independent team, Schmitt was able to schedule a summer full of Saturday night home games at 6 p.m., which seemed to please the fan base.

But when he decided to take the winter plunge, Schmitt found a quality league with nearby rivals that was ready to accept the Risers.

Entering its 19th season, the PASL serves as a developmental league for the Major Arena Soccer League and bills itself as “the largest amateur arena soccer league in the United States.” It includes 28 teams separated into six divisions.

The Risers will compete in the Great Lakes Division with Waza Premier, the Youngstown Nighthawks, the Cincinnati Swerve and the Cleveland Legacy.

The Great Lakes Division champion will advance to the PASL league playoff tournament, which is scheduled for March 18-19 in Phoenix, Arizona.

“I think being an independent team was a really good place to start,” Schmitt said. “It got local people engaged who just loved the concept of having soccer in Muskegon. Now we’re laying in another level of excitement by playing in a league against other teams from the Midwest and around the country.”

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New life in the old barn

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Not so long ago, Muskegon's L.C. Walker Arena was a pretty quiet place.

The city-owned sports facility, which was dedicated in 1960, had one major tenant, the Muskegon Lumberjacks of the United States Hockey League, who play a 30-game home schedule every season.

There was always a steady parade of groups renting the ice at the arena. There were occasional events that drew significant crowds, like concerts and graduation ceremonies.

But on most evenings the approximately 4,000 seats in the building were empty.

Muskegon officials, led by City Manager Frank Peterson, decided that things had to change.

Their effort began in the summer of 2015, when the city took over direct management of the arena.

For years the building had been managed by the Lumberjacks, who collected an annual fee from the city and did their best to bring in new events. But that arrangement wasn't producing positive results, and was costing everyone a lot of money.



Muskegon City Manager Frank Peterson poses with his kids at a Lumberjacks game. Photo/Twitter

The city paid the Lumberjacks \$280,000 per year to manage the building and another \$180,000 toward utility costs. The hockey team was also coming up short on the deal, because the fee it collected from the city did not cover the costs of running the arena.

"The financial risk was with (the Lumberjacks), and they were finding that they weren't doing well financially, so a lot of things weren't being done," Peterson said. "The building was falling into a little bit of disrepair. There were no dollars available to do things and there was no incentive to do them."

A year and a half later, under city management, the arena has a new lease on life. It's now the home to three professional sports organizations – the Lumberjacks, the West Michigan Ironmen indoor football team, and the Muskegon Risers soccer club.

It's also hosts the sparkling new PEAK Training Academy, which has taken over and completely renovated the old arena annex building.

Space has been cleared for the addition of restaurants at the arena. Ice rental has been steadily increasing, with the arena now hosting the Reeths-Puffer High School hockey team, the Norton Shores junior hockey program, and the Muskegon Junior Lumberjacks program.

All the new activity is the first step in a major effort to make the arena a self-sustaining, multi-use facility.



Muskegon's L.C. Walker Arena is nearly 60 years old, but is experiencing a flurry of new activity. Photo/Jason Goorman

"The L.C. Walker Arena needs to be a multi-use facility," said Tim Taylor, who works for the city as the arena manager and separately for the Lumberjacks as the team president. "It's been dubbed as a hockey arena forever."

"We've had some concerts here over the years, and some other ancillary activities, but to have multiple teams here is good for the building and good for downtown businesses.

"At the end of the day we need to find ways to make it more self-sustainable. It's an integral part of downtown Muskegon and the resurgence that's happening here. It's up to us to make it vi-

able."

Three important new tenants

The rejuvenation of the arena began with a deal to put the old arena annex, a connected 6,000 square foot facility, to much better use. City officials leased the structure to PEAK Training Academy, which opened for business last September.

The sparkling new athletic training facility, jointly owned by attorney Terrance Williams and Mercy Health, is a stark departure from the dreary, open space of the old annex, which was mainly used for storage and generated no revenue.

The training facility is focused on helping athletes of all ages improve their skills, strength and speed. Clients include local middle school and high school athletes and teams, as well as the Lumberjacks, Ironmen, Risers and the West Michigan Lake Hawks basketball team.

The conversion of the annex involved initial costs for the city, which paid a \$150,000 match toward necessary improvements, around \$30,000 for a new roof, and will spend another \$150,000 this spring to replace the air conditioning and improve ventilation in the facility.



The West Michigan Ironmen indoor football team was the first of several new tenants at the arena. Photo/Tim Reilly

The traffic that PEAK brings to the building is well worth the investment, according to Peterson, the city manager.

"The activity going on at PEAK meshes really well with what we're trying to do at the arena - a full plate of sports activities," Peterson said. "The idea that athletes can train at the very place they play

is very cool. PEAK trains athletes for more sports than we have right now, but the arena will continue to diversity in the number of sports we offer.”

The deal to bring PEAK to the arena led to the birth of the Ironmen.



The Muskegon Lumberjacks have 30 scheduled home dates per season.

Williams, one of the PEAK owners, is a former local football standout who played for Oakridge High School and the old Muskegon Thunder professional indoor football team, which was based at the arena.

Williams had been flirting with the idea of bringing arena football back to Muskegon, and city officials worked with him to make his dream a reality. The West Michigan Ironmen began play in the arena last March.

The Ironmen had a total of nine home games (including one exhibition) and drew consistently good crowds.

While the Ironmen were preparing to kick off their inaugural season a year ago, Matt Schmitt, the owner of the Muskegon Risers semipro soccer club, approached the city about hosting two exhibition soccer games at the arena last winter.

The Risers were just coming off their first season as an outdoor team, and Schmitt wondered if his team's impressive fan base would enjoy winter indoor soccer, as well.

The Risers hosted the exhibitions, the attendance was impressive, so Schmitt and the city settled on a lease.

The Risers played their first two games in the Premier Arena Soccer League on Jan. 13-14, and will host three more in the regular season, which extends to early March.

With only 11 regular season home games between them this year, the Risers and Ironmen will hardly fill up the arena calendar. But every night that there's an event in the building, the city collects more revenue, and the arena moves a little bit closer to being self-sustaining.

The city gets a small percentage for every ticket sold, and a majority of the revenue for concession sales and parking fees, Peterson said.

The city offered generous lease agreements to keep the Lumberjacks in town and attract the new tenants. The Lumberjacks, Ironmen, Risers and PEAK all operate under flexible leases that base their rent on the amount of money they make.

The Lumberjacks have two years left on their current lease, with a team option for two more years, and Peterson said he expects a longer lease to be finalized in the next year.

The city is currently finalizing a new lease for the Ironmen which could cover three years, Peterson said. The Risers are operating on a single-year lease, and PEAK has about 3 ½ years left on its initial five-year deal, Peterson said.

The idea is for the tenants to build their customer base and become profitable, so the city can collect an increasing amount of rent, concession and parking revenue.

“We want each of them to be successful,” Peterson said. “We basically told them we would go in with them. We're trying to create a market.”

More upgrades, challenges ahead

More exciting changes are on the horizon at the arena.

The city is talking with potential operators for restaurants in the

arena, which will be accessible from inside the building, as well as an outdoor entrance.

Approximately 1,000 seats have already been removed to create the eatery space, and at least one restaurant is expected to be operational by next fall, according to Peterson.

The first business was originally supposed to be a rum distillery/restaurant, but will probably be a more traditional food and beverage establishment, Peterson said. There is a possibility that more than one restaurant could eventually operate in the 5,700-foot space that's been cleared, or elsewhere along the arena concourse, Peterson said.

“We are reevaluating it,” Peterson said. “I would be surprised if we don't have a restaurant in there by next season. I don't think there will be a distillery immediately, but there's still a lot of interest in that.”

Meanwhile, the city recently engaged Rosetti Associates, a Detroit-based consulting firm, to study the arena and help create a vision for its future use and development.

The consultants suggested improvements that could eventually cost \$7 to \$9 million, and would make the arena much more usable, according to Peterson.

“The idea would be to make the arena much more appealing to fans, based on the type and amount of seating, the number and quality of restrooms, the types and amount of food options, and the number of retail spaces we could fit in,” Peterson said.

Any major improvements would require the eventual approval of the city commission. It's possible that the city could eventually ask voters to approve a property tax levy to fund future arena projects.

“We haven't really gotten that far (in figuring out possible financing),” Peterson said. “We're hoping, if we planned things right, that new revenue from the tenants would cover a lot of the service debt.”

There are also big financial challenges on the horizon for the arena, mostly because its utility systems are very old, expensive to operate, and will have to be replaced in the near future.

In the short term, city officials are counting on the increased activity at the arena to lower their annual investment in the building.



The PEAK Training Academy is a shining new athletic facility in the former arena annex. Photo/Jason Goorman

They are eager for the day when the building will pay for itself.

The first year of city management was expensive, because there were unexpected boiler and humidifier problems, as well as some necessary improvement projects.

The city ended up spending at least as much as the \$480,000 it used to pay the Lumberjacks to manage the arena.

But the bottom line is improving. Peterson is hoping the total operating expense in the current fiscal year could fall to somewhere in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range, which would be a significant improvement.

“We're starting to see the numbers sway a little bit,” Peterson said.

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RON ROP'S PRO HOCKEY MEMORIES



Ron Rop served as the Muskegon Chronicle's hockey reporter for nearly 30 years, between 1983 and 2012. He witnessed nearly 1,000 games in the press box high above the ice in the L.C. Walker Arena, covering the Muskegon Mohawks, Lumberjacks and Fury professional teams, then spent more than two years covering the current Lumberjacks junior squad.

First experience: An angry coach

My first experience as a Muskegon hockey reporter was not pleasant.

It all began back in 1983 when the Chronicle published a nasty letter to the editor about the old Muskegon Mohawks, who were experiencing a very bad season. The letter, from a local youth hockey coach, said he could bring his kiddie team to L.C. Walker Arena and beat the tar out of the pro Mohawks.



Doug McKay

The following Thursday morning my boss asked me to make the short trek to Walker Arena and get a preview story for the weekend's Mohawks games.

Coach Doug McKay, who had previously coached

the rival Kalamazoo Wings, stepped off the ice after practice and, with fire in his eyes, walked right up to me and let me have it. Every other word he screamed in my face was an expletive.

He compared the newspaper to a pile of chicken poop, and that was just the start. He continued his tirade as his players walked off the ice. Several were shaking their heads in disbelief that their coach was in my face, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"You tell that *&#!^+% coach to bring his %\$@ kids down here and we'll



Longtime Muskegon Chronicle hockey writer Ron Rop revisits his old perch in the L.C. Walker Arena press box. Photo/Jason Goorman

kick the %\$## out of them. You tell him that."

And with that, McKay stormed down the tunnel at Walker Arena and headed for his office.

I don't remember if I got a Mohawks weekend preview story that day or not. And if I did, I guarantee McKay was not quoted.

I returned to the office and informed my boss what happened. I never did receive an apology from McKay, which was fine. Either way, it would not have erased my first scary impression of being a hockey writer.

Needless to say, I returned to L.C. Walker Arena many times after that. I lasted a lot longer as a hockey writer than McKay did as a coach. His team finished with a horrid record and he was fired, and the Mohawks were sold and became the first version of the pro Lumberjacks shortly after that.

Hoisting the cup

Not every Muskegon hockey team I covered was that terrible. I witnessed my share of big wins, including several that clinched league championships.

In the spring of 1999, the old Muskegon Fury was playing the Quad City Mallards in the Colonial Cup playoff

finals.

The Fury led three games to two, and was hoping to clinch the championship in Game 6 at the Mallards' home arena in Moline, Illinois. There were plenty of Muskegon fans who made the long drive to see the game, and were disappointed when the Fury fell behind 5-2 after two periods.

A lot of those fans left early, assuming the game was a lost cause and there would be a Game 7 in Muskegon. As it turned out, they missed one of the most exciting periods in the history of Muskegon hockey.

The Fury staged a huge third-period comeback, scoring four goals in the final 12 minutes, led by John Vary's spectacular three-goal hat trick. They emerged with a thrilling 6-5 victory, won the Colonial Cup, and a party for the ages started on the ice, moved to the visitors' dressing room, and spilled into the parking lot of the arena.

It was the Fury's first Colonial Cup championship in seven years in the league.

An even better party occurred three years later at the L.C. Walker Arena, following Game 6 of the Colonial Cup finals between the Fury and the Elmira Jackals.

The game was tied until Muskegon



Rop, left, with Nick Howard and colleague Tom Kendra after the Jacks won a Colonial Cup. Photo/Nick Howard

star forward Todd Robinson (now an assistant coach with the current Lumberjacks) scored a breakaway goal 4:16 into overtime, clinching the Colonial Cup.

Walker Arena was packed to the rafters that evening, with a crowd of more than 5,000 fans. When Robinson's shot rattled under the crossbar and into the net, the building erupted. You'd have thought the roof was coming off the old barn that night. Several sections of the glass surrounding the ice were removed so friends and family could join the on-ice party.

The celebration continued in the dressing room and lasted long into the evening.

Of course I had work to do back at the newspaper after the game, writing the story about the thrilling championship. But I eventually rejoined the celebration for a few sips of beer out of the cup.

Obviously minor league hockey championships are what they are. The teams don't play for the Stanley Cup, and there's little glory outside of the city that won the title. But for the hard-working players who battled all season, and the hometown fans who cheered them on, winning the Colonial Cup seemed like the best thing in the world.

Dropping the gloves

Back in the days of the Mohawks, Lumberjacks and Fury, fighting was commonplace at L.C. Walker Arena. We all remember the tough guys who provided the extracurricular entertainment over the years - Jay Miller, Richard Zemlak, Chris McSorley, Paul Tantardini and Mitch Wilson, to name just a few.

Sometimes the fighting got a little out of hand, the benches cleared, and all hell broke loose on the ice.

One such incident happened during the 1986-87 season and involved a hulking goon from the old Flint Spirits, Andy Ristau, who stood about 6-foot-5 and weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of 240 pounds.

Ristau was the focal point of a bench-clearing brawl against the old pro Lumber-

jacks that resulted in the suspension of the game for nearly an hour.

At one point in the brawl, a group of Lumberjack players lined up at center ice with their sticks raised high, challenging Ristau to a lumber fight. Fortunately that did not happen and the two teams were ushered separately off the ice.

I ventured into the tunnel area of the arena to see what was going on after the brawl, and witnessed Ristau pacing outside the Flint dressing room like a caged animal.

He appeared ready to rip the head off anyone or anything that stepped into his path. It was obvious that he was not a good candidate for a newspaper interview, and I was more than ready to move along.

Seconds later, I heard someone say "stand still, I need some pictures." Behind me was one of our young photo interns trying to shoot photos of Ristau. Suddenly there was a long camera lense on my shoulder while I stood in the face of danger, between the angry, gigantic Flint player and our eager young photographer.

Luckily Ristau took no notice of us and we moved along safely.

When play resumed, there were fewer than 10 players on each team that hadn't been thrown out of the game. Those were the days!



Mitch Wilson was a great Muskegon hockey goon. Photo/Nick Howard

Wheeling and dealing

One day prior to the start of the 1985-86 season, I was sitting in the cramped office of Muskegon Lumberjacks owner/general manager Larry Gordon, a wily minor league hockey executive who knew how to arrange sweet deals. He had proven that a few years earlier, when he had purchased the old Mohawks for a mere \$1 and turned them into the successful Lumberjacks.

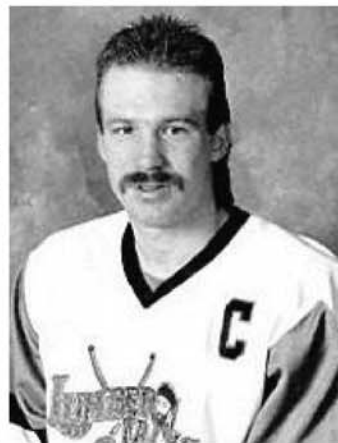
Gordon was spending an inordinate amount of time on the phone while I sat there. I pretended not to listen, but I

quickly surmised that one of the calls was with the International Hockey League office.

He was discussing a young hockey player named Dave Michayluk, who had scored 66 goals the previous season with the rival Kalamazoo Wings. Gordon heard Michayluk was coming back to the league, and was in his car headed for Kalamazoo.

Gordon's point during the discussion, which became a bit heated at times, was that Michayluk was the property of the Edmonton Oilers, and the Lumberjacks were an affiliate of the Oilers. Gordon insisted, over and over again, that Edmonton players should be playing for Edmonton's affiliate.

The Muskegon owner somehow won the argument. As it turned out, Michayluk was instructed to drive right past Kalamazoo, head north on US-131, take a left at I-96 and stop when he got to Muskegon.



Dave Michayluk

Rumor has it that Gordon paid \$1,000 for the rights to get Michayluk on the Lumberjacks' roster.

Michayluk ended up scoring more than 100 points for the Lumberjacks for seven straight seasons, before the Jacks moved to Cleveland for the 1992-93 season. "Boris" finished his Muskegon/Cleveland career with a whopping 1,084 points. That means Gordon ended up paying less than \$1 per point.

Tough travels

A few times over the years I jumped on the team bus and headed out to cover road games.

One time I decided to travel with the Muskegon Fury to Thunder Bay, Ontario, where they were scheduled to play the Thunder Bay Senators, always a scrappy team with equally tough fans.

It was quite a trip, since Thunder Bay is on the northern shore of Lake Superior, about 400 miles from Muskegon.

We gathered at L.C. Walker Arena with a departure time scheduled for 11 a.m. It was a snowy, windy and cold day in Muskegon, and we could only wonder just how much windier, snowier and colder it was way up north in Thunder Bay.

Bus troubles popped up before we even left, and the departure time was pushed back two hours, then four hours, then five hours.

Continued on next page...



We finally pulled out of the parking lot about 4 p.m.

We crossed the Mackinaw Bridge in the dark, then headed west down a snow-covered, two-lane road in the middle of a blowing storm. Lumberjack defenseman Darrel Newman was sitting across from me on the bus, and seemed genuinely afraid we were headed for trouble.

It wasn't too long before sunrise when the temperature in the bus dropped about 30 degrees within seconds, because the bus broke down again. That left us in an all-night diner somewhere in the hinterlands of Canada.

Most of the players huddled around tables in the diner and had an early breakfast, but I had to file a story, and this latest delay was putting that in serious jeopardy. There was no wi-fi in those days, and sending written copy could be a hassle in the best of conditions. Fortunately I was able to use the pay phone in the lobby of the restaurant to successfully send the story over my laptop computer.

My famous last words in that story were "Get me out of here!"

But there was no turning back at that point, and we rolled into Thunder Bay at noon, more than 24 hours after our originally scheduled departure time. The skies were clear, the sun was shining brightly and the temperature was zero.

Welcome to Thunder Bay.

The hard life of a radio guy

It was on that same trip to Thunder Bay that I learned how brutal pro hockey players and their fans can be.

John Wiedeman, the current Chicago Blackhawks announcer and the Fury's radio broadcaster at the time, was not so fortunate.

Wiedeman came prepared for that cold bus trip, with a winter coat, gloves and his prized Kansas City Chiefs knit hat, a special gift from his brother which was purchased at a Chiefs game. Somewhere along the way, one of the Fury players snatched that hat off the top of Wiedeman's head and took it to the back

of the bus.

Hours later, the hat reappeared on Wiedeman's head, with the top third of it cut off. He made the best of the situation, still proudly wearing the hat for the rest of the trip to Thunder Bay.

But apparently that demonstration of calm in the face of provocation was not enough to earn the players' respect.

One afternoon on that same road trip, there was a knock at the door of Wiedeman's hotel room. Several Fury players were standing at the door with pillow cases over the heads to conceal their identities.

They forced their way into Wiedeman's room and began punching him and throwing him to the floor. His arms and legs were bound with duct tape and the perpetrators disappeared down the hallway.

Of course the "attack" was all in good fun. There were no injuries, but plenty of laughs. In fact, Wiedeman was still giggling as he told me the story later in the day.

During one game on that trip, Wiedeman invited me to join him on the air for the radio broadcast, and I learned first-hand how difficult his job could be.

When you talk about a hostile environment, Thunder Bay was it. Their fans were downright nasty. During one intermission, Wiedeman took a break and headed for the men's restroom.

While there, he had a short but unpleasant conversation with the man standing in front of the next urinal. It went like this:

Thunder Bay fan: "Hey, are you from Muskegon?"
Wiedeman: "Yes, I am."
Thunder Bay fan: "F--- you."



John Wiedeman

Later in the game, during the action when we were on the air, I heard, loud and clear in my headphones, "Hey Ron ... DUCK!"

I quickly ducked down and was able to avoid whatever it was that had been thrown in our direction.

"What was that?" I asked Wiedeman during the next commercial break. "Oh, nothing," he calmly said.

Apparently, as a minor-league broadcaster, Wiedeman was accustomed to that sort of abuse.

I was not, and I was happy to be a lower-profile writer who did not attract

that sort of attention or treatment.

Writers get injured too

Sports writers are always looking for new stories and unique angles. So I decided I would jump on the Fury bus for a game in Flint, but instead of sitting in the press box, I got permission to stand behind the bench with Muskegon Coach Steve Ludzik and injured defenseman Steve Herniman.

From that vantage point, I could experience the sights, sounds and even the smells of pro hockey from close range. But I soon learned that being that close to the action isn't always a pleasant experience.

It didn't take long before one particular smell took over the bench, and it wasn't sweat. Someone kept passing gas and the unbearable stench had many players wondering who the culprit was.

Finally, it was determined that Justin Morrison had eaten something that wasn't agreeing with him, and was making the team bench a pretty undesirable place to be.

That wasn't the worst of my problems.

At Perani Arena in Flint, the wooden team benches were huge and heavy. One time, when the players occupying one end of the bench hopped over the boards and onto the ice, it toppled over and landed on my right foot, as well as one of Herniman's.

We were able to shake off the pain, but as luck would have it, it happened again. Only this time, Herniman was able to get out of the way. I didn't get out of the way and the bench landed in the exact same spot on the very same foot. Ouch!

The game ended and I limped across the ice toward the Fury dressing room, then onto the bus. Former Muskegon Zephyr Ron Stephenson, then the color man for the radio broadcasts, was sitting next to me on the bus.

"Uncle Ron, it's going to be a long ride home," I told him. The pain was nearly unbearable (I could feel my heart beating in the top of my foot).

Fortunately my pro hockey injury never caused me trouble again. It turned out to be just another battle scar from an interesting, but sometimes painful, career as a hockey writer.



Justin Morrison

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Terrible teams become terrific



WITH ASANTAY BROWN ON THE ROSTER

By Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

Asantay Brown has a history of joining bad football teams that become really good within a few short years of his arrival.

That's not a coincidence.

He was a star on the Mona Shores varsity football team that was 1-8 when he was a sophomore, then went 7-3 in his senior year and qualified for the state playoffs for the first time in school history.

Then he became a star for the Western Michigan University Broncos, which won one game the season before he arrived, then grabbed the nation's attention last fall by posting an undefeated regular season and playing in the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 2.

The 13-1 season was quite a ride for the standout junior linebacker and his Western Michigan teammates. It's rare for a Mid-American Conference team to experience that kind of success and gain such notoriety on the national stage.

But Brown said he and the Broncos remained grounded and focused during their head-spinning season, which brought the national spotlight to the university in a manner it had never experienced before.

It was the players' ability to keep their eyes firmly on the prize, and not get lost in all the hype, that made it all possible, Brown said.

"It was fun and exciting," he said about the season. "It's everybody's dream to play on national television. But we didn't let it change us, we just did our thing and continued to be ourselves.

"We took it one game at a time throughout the season. If we had looked too far ahead or behind someone could have beaten us. We had to focus on making each week its own and going 1-0 for that week."

The Broncos were very competitive in the Cotton Bowl. They fell behind 14-0 and fought back, only to lose 24-16 to Big 10 power Wisconsin.

Brown, a 6-1, 203-pound linebacker, had an outstanding game, recording a team-high 12 tackles, including two for losses.

While the game didn't go the Broncos' way, Brown said it was an experience he will never forget.

"The hospitality was unmatched, and we give a lot of thanks to the people who provided it for us," he said. "They did everything they could to make it an experience of a lifetime.

"Nobody likes to lose. But it's the nature of the beast in football. To not come out on top was a bit disappointing, especially to have the seniors go out that way. But we had each other's back and did everything we could."

Players from WMU and Wisconsin participated in a lot of fun

and exciting events in Dallas in the week leading up to the Cotton Bowl. But there was one experience that impacted Brown more than any of the others – a visit to the Children's Medical Center in Dallas, where he saw kids struggling to win battles that make any football game seem pretty unimportant.

"You see things that you've never seen before - kids fighting for their health," Brown said. "It shows us that life is more meaningful than wins and losses."

Helping bad teams get better

Brown's ability to help his teams go from terrible to terrific goes back to his high school days.

He joined the Mona Shores varsity as a sophomore in 2011, and became part of a program that had never gained the six wins necessary to qualify for the Michigan High School Athletic Association postseason playoffs.

The Sailors finally ended that streak of futility in his senior season in 2013, when they posted a 7-3 record. They officially qualified for the playoffs on Oct. 11 that year with a 49-26 home field victory over Zeeland East that set off a big celebration at the school, with hundreds of former players taking part.

"It was exciting to make the playoffs for the first time," Brown said. "To be able to be on a team like that was unbelievable. The coaches and the players were really excited. We made history, and it will be a memory for us for a lifetime."

Brown played a big role in the turnaround at Mona Shores. He earned first team All-State honors as a wide receiver in 2012 and 2013, and made the Detroit Free Press Michigan Dream Team as a senior, when he caught 56 passes for 1,094 yards and 11 touchdowns.

He finished his prep career with 100 career receptions for 1,951 yards and 22 touchdowns.

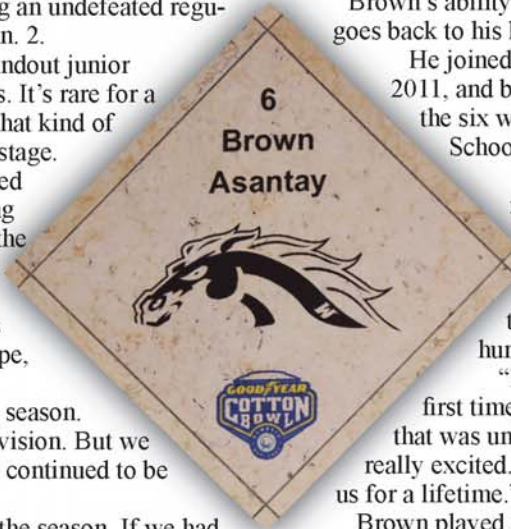
Brown's contributions at Mona Shores weren't limited to his play on the field, according to Sailors head coach Matt Koziak.

"He was not only an incredible athlete, but a phenomenal leader on and off the field," Koziak said. "His teachers raved about him. It was great to have a kid like him be a face of our program.

"He worked as hard as anybody I've ever coached. He's going to be very successful at whatever he does."

Koziak traveled with his wife to Dallas to watch Brown and another former player, Hunter Broersma, participate in the Cotton Bowl for the Broncos.

"It was very special to have two Mona Shores guys in that game," he said. "We actually spent New Year's Eve with them in their



hotel. My wife and I got to spend a lot of time with Asantay.”

Brown was heavily recruited by colleges, and finally chose Western Michigan, which like Mona Shores had a recent pattern of football futility when he entered the program.

The Broncos were 1-11 under new head coach P. J. Fleck in 2013, the season before Brown arrived.

But Brown was accustomed to big team challenges, and the Broncos' poor record didn't scare him away.

The other side of the ball

Brown's days as an offensive star ended when he reported to Kalamazoo. The Western Michigan coaches made him a safety, a position he also played at Mona Shores as a two-way standout.

He got plenty of playing time as a true freshman. He recorded 11 tackles and had two forced fumbles in 10 games. The Broncos made progress that season, improving their final record to 8-5 and earning a berth in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, which they lost to Air Force 38-24.

Brown's college career took off in 2015, when he recorded a team-high 103 tackles and had two interceptions, two forced fumbles, one sack and one fumble recovery. He was a third-team All-MAC selection following his sophomore season.

The Broncos posted another 8-5 record that season, and captured the first bowl game victory in school history, a 45-31 win over Middle Tennessee in the Bahamas Bowl.



Cotton Bowl moments: Brown is interviewed by media the day before the game; at right he makes a tackle against Wisconsin. Photos/Brendan Buffa.

Asantay Brown
2016 season: 83 tackles,
six for losses, one pick-six.
2017 Cotton Bowl: Team-high
12 tackles, two for losses.

The WMU coaches gave Brown a new challenge prior to the 2016 season by moving him to linebacker.

He accepted the assignment

without blinking an eye.

"I got pulled aside by Coach Fleck and he asked me how I'd feel about it," Brown said. "I told him that I'd do whatever the team needs, and he tried me out at linebacker."

Brown was successful in the transition, to say the least. He finished the 2016 season with 83 tackles, including 6 ½ for losses, with one forced fumble, one fumble recovery, and an interception he returned for a touchdown.

His big numbers helped the Broncos post their historic season, which was capped by a victory in the Mid-American Conference championship game and the berth in the Cotton Bowl.

"I have to give credit to my coaches and teammates, who helped develop me into a better linebacker," he said. "The things they taught me helped better the team."

Not a lot of college players earn postseason honors at more than one position in their careers, but Brown did it. He was recently named a second-team All-MAC linebacker.

But Brown doesn't seem very interested in talking about his individual honors or personal statistics. He enjoys football as a team game, and relished his ability to help WMU turn its program around and reach historic heights.

"I don't pay attention to individual goals," Brown said. "We're team-oriented here (at Western) and those awards are picked by someone else."

Family ties

Brown's says his strong work ethic and team-first mentality came from his family.

Both his sister, Keziah Brown, and his brother, Bryan Rundell, are members of the U.S. military. He says he's inspired and driven by their service to the nation, and wishes he could see and talk to them more often.

"They're risking their lives to protect us," Brown said about his siblings. "They're the real heroes. For them to allow us to play football and be safe, I can't thank them enough."

Brown also credits his father, Robert Brown of Muskegon, for teaching and challenging him as he grew up.

"He taught me about having a work ethic," he said. "He always challenged me and pushed me to do my best."

"He challenged me to beat him in video games. We'd play (video) football games that helped me eventually better understand the game. The things he taught me are what helped shape me into the man I am today."

Brown has one year of eligibility remaining at WMU, and the experience next season is bound to be different, because Coach Fleck, who gained national recognition for turning the Broncos program around, recently accepted the head coaching position at the University of Minnesota.

He was replaced by Tim Lester, a former WMU quarterback who most recently served as the quarterback coach at Purdue.

"People come and go," Brown said. "It's college football and you have to understand coaches will leave or stay. The life lessons they teach you can always apply."

"I just want to carry on from last season. It'll be tough to do. It doesn't happen every day where you go undefeated. But I want to build upon this last season and finish strong as a senior on top."

Brown admits he would like to play in the National Football League, and many experts believe he has real pro potential.

CBS Sports recently ranked him as the 14th best strong safety that will be available in the 2018 NFL draft.

"To get a shot in the NFL would be a dream come true," he said. "If I get the opportunity, then I'll do what I have to do, but if it doesn't work out I can't let it defeat me."

Brown will graduate from WMU with a degree in criminal justice with a second completed major in sociology.

"If it doesn't work out (in pro football), I'll look into the FBI or Secret Service," he said. "I want to help and give back, and those are jobs that would give me that opportunity."

GREAT STUDENT, GREAT ATHLETE

North Muskegon senior Riley Fairfield may be the best player in the area this season, but his college plans are more focused on books than basketball

By Nate Thompson
LocalSportsJournal.com

In 17 seasons of coaching, Chuck Rypstra says he's seen three true impact players come through the North Muskegon basketball program.

He calls them "capstone players."

It started with the towering presence of Drew Naymick in the early 2000s and continued with the illustrious scoring talents of Spencer Krannitz. Now the torch has

been taken up by senior Riley Fairfield, who may be the best high school basketball player in the area this season.

Rypstra first noticed Fairfield's potential years ago, when he was in the third grade.

"At North Muskegon, we run our winter camps and the

varsity players get a chance to work with some of the younger kids on various drills and fundamentals," Rypstra explained. "I remember Riley at that age. We'd have these skills contests and he'd always be the grand champion. His numbers were just blowing people away.

"So right then we thought this kid had a chance to be pretty talented. You just wondered if he'd stick with it and keep progressing. You never know at that age."

Fairfield kept progressing. Rypstra discovered that three years ago when he was coaching North Muskegon's junior varsity team and Fairfield, who was only a freshman, stepped on the court at Ludington High School and scored 36 points.

"I remember that game," Fairfield said. "I remember how many points I scored because they showed your point total right on the scoreboard. So when you were looking to see how much time was left near the end, it was hard not to see the big numbers."

"I knew right then he was going to be pretty special," Rypstra added.

A year later, in 2014, Rypstra was promoted to the varsity coaching job, and Fairfield joined him as a sophomore. Rypstra said it took some time for Fairfield to "feel his way" at the varsity level, but he started getting into the swing of things when it mattered most, in the Class C district tournament.

In the district semifinals against Western Michigan Christian, Fairfield scored 12 of his 19 points in the fourth quarter to help the Norse steal a victory. In the championship game victory over Mus-



kegon Heights, he scored 18 points, including two key free throws and a three-point play late in the game.

Fairfield's game exploded last season, when the 6-foot-4, 220-pound forward averaged 18.2 points and 7.3 rebounds as a junior, and led the Norsemen to a 14-7 record.

But that seventh and final loss was a heartbreaker for the Norse. They lost 60-56 in the opening round of the Class C districts to a Muskegon Heights team that was seeking revenge for the district tournament loss. Suddenly a promising postseason was done almost before it started.

Fairfield said the loss does not haunt him, but makes him think about lost opportunities, and doing things a bit differently this season.

"I've watched that film about 20 times," he said about the district tournament defeat. "It's all about taking care of the ball and making the most of your possessions. We were one possession down with like a minute left, we missed a three and then we turned the ball over and they came down and hit a three. That's a six-point swing right there.

"And we were 12-of-26 from the free throw line. If we shot our normal percentage, like 70 percent, that's the game (for us) right there."

"We had that game and could have easily won," Rypstra said. "The message I've tried to relay to the boys moving forward, in that type of game in the clutch, you need to get a stop defensively every time and then come down and get a solid possession (offensively). Every possession is critical. Sometimes, it's kind of hard for the kids to grasp that."

North Muskegon seems well equipped to challenge for the West Michigan Conference championship this season, and perhaps make a longer run in the postseason tournament.

The Norsemen are equipped to outmuscle their opponents physically. Besides Fairfield, Rypstra can throw out big bodies like 6-3,



"Maybe it's kind of an old-school way of thinking, but I want to put academics before athletics." said Fairfield, who wants to major in biomedical or mechanical engineering. "I've always been pretty good at math and science. But still, I can't imagine not having basketball a part of my life in some way."



225-pound forward Thomas Montgomery, 6-5 sophomore center Jesse Cook, and 6-1, 210-pound guard/forward Vernonell Smith, who is used to banging on the low blocks.

The Norsemen also have plenty of scoring punch. Senior Dalton Fuller may be North Muskegon's best pure outside shooter while sophomore TJ McKenzie is an emerging talent at point guard, although he suffered a broken wrist early in the season and will miss a considerable part of the schedule.

But Rypstra said everyone is looking at Fairfield to lead the charge. Through their 4-3 start, he's averaging 17.6 points per game and is a matchup nightmare on a game-to-game basis.

"Who's guarding him in this league?" Rypstra asked rhetorically. "If a big guy's on him, he's got enough moves to beat him to the hoop, and against a small guy, he can just post them up down low or shoot over the top. That's his strength."

Fairfield has taken his game to the next level by playing on the AAU circuit, including this past summer at tournaments across the country with the Grand Rapids-based Michigan Basketball Academy.

Compared to two or three years ago, Fairfield said he's much better at driving the ball and using his body to finish at the rim. That skill, combined with his deadly outside shooting stroke, has drawn the attention of scouts from the University of Buffalo, Youngstown State

and several Division 2 and 3 college basketball programs.

But Fairfield, who sports a 3.97 grade point average, has a different mindset for his college experience.

"Maybe it's kind of an old-school way of thinking, but I want to put academics before athletics," said Fairfield, who wants to major in biomedical or mechanical engineering. "I've always been pretty good at math and science.

"But still, I can't imagine not having basketball a part of my life in some way,"

Fairfield said his most ideal situation might be a Division 3 school like Hope College, where he could find a good balance between academic excellence and sports. His older brother, Justin, is an offensive lineman on the Hope football team.

It's not common for highly-recruited high school athletes to follow that route. Fairfield could lose the chance for a full athletic scholarship, since they aren't offered at the Division 3 level.

But before he makes any decisions about college, Fairfield has important business to finish on the high school basketball court. And his coach has the rest of the season to enjoy having the latest of the North Muskegon "capstone players" in his lineup.

"You think about it, all three of those guys, Naymick, Krannitz and now Riley were such great kids in the classroom, and just great kids to be around," Rypstra said. "We've been pretty blessed to have three kids like that go through a small school like North Muskegon."



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