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On the cover: Norton Shores realtor Anthony Lambers and members of his RP Scholars basketball team -- Diamonte Parks, Deion Parks, De'marion Parks, Carlo Bass Jr, Menalito Mcghee. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

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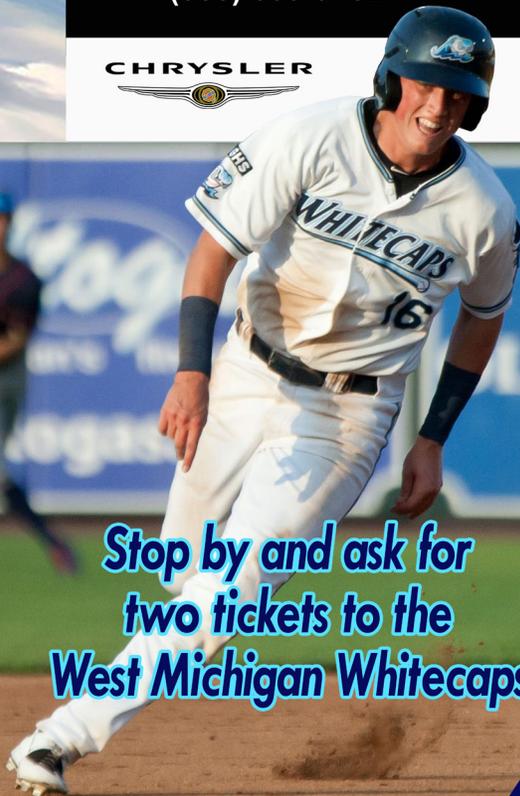
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Anthony Lambers was a homeless kid committing crimes. Richard Pullen was a respected teacher and coach who took Lambers under his wing, well beyond high school. This is their success story.

ALL BECAUSE OF A COACH

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

It's amazing how the work of a caring educator can reverberate and produce results, years down the road.

Richard Pullen, a legendary teacher and coach at the old Wyoming Park High School, was that kind of educator, and his legacy will impact another generation of kids who need positive adults in their lives.



Pullen, left, shares a moment with Lambers at his wedding, Pullen was the best man.

Anthony Lambers is making sure of that.

Back in the 90s, Lambers was a kid headed in the wrong direction, to say the very least. He was homeless, dealing drugs, breaking into homes and headed for prison.

Luckily he was still in school as the storm clouds gathered in his life, and he caught the attention of Pullen, who became a crucial lifelong friend.

Pullen stood by Lambers through a lot of bumpy years, well beyond high school.

He was there to help when Lambers was a teen on the

street, scrambling for food and shelter. He stood by Lambers when he was arrested and sent to prison for nearly seven years.

He was there when Lambers was paroled from prison, helping him get a fresh start and overcome the many obstacles to success.

He helped Lambers become a successful realtor who put his unhappy past behind him.

"There are all types of mentors in schools," said Lambers, 40, who lives in Norton Shores and works for @Home Realty in Grand Haven. "With some of them, when you graduate and leave, you're expected to go figure it out on your own. But he was more like, 'I'm going to walk you through this until I know you got it.'

"I was almost like a kid on training wheels. Good dads stay with that kid until he can ride that bike himself, no matter how long it takes. That's exactly what he was like for me."

Sadly Pullen died of cancer in 2015, and can't see how his loyalty to Lambers continues to pay dividends.

Lambers has established a scholarship fund for at-risk teens at two West Michigan high schools - including Muskegon High School - and plans to expand it to more schools and more states down the road.

He has also organized a basketball team, comprised of promising teens from Wyoming High School who need guidance in their lives. The team is organized around basketball, but Lambers and the coaches also help the kids succeed in school, find jobs in the summer, and deal with personal challenges.

The scholarship program is called the "RP Scholarship Fund." The basketball team is called the "RP Scholars."

The "RP" in both cases stands for Richard Pullen, that loyal coach who guided a troubled young man to success.

"When he was going through the cancer, I was really concerned that I didn't have a way to pay him back for everything he did for me," Lambers said. "Saying 'Thank you' and 'I love you' wasn't enough.

"Then it was the day of his funeral, and I went home afterward. I was really tired and I fell asleep. I had this dream that I was a teacher at Wyoming Park, and I was teaching in the room he taught in. When that dream came to me, about serving the kids, I realized that was the answer."

A homeless teen and a teacher

Lambers was born in Grand Rapids to a teen mother. His mom married his stepfather when he was small, and they were divorced when he about 12-years-old.

That's when his life started to unravel.

Lambers started out living with his stepfather, but felt abandoned by his mother. He went to live with his mother, but said he didn't feel wanted.

He bounced back and forth between the two homes for a few years, before he finally left and hit the streets around the age of 15.

After that, home became wherever Lambers could find a place to sleep and a little bit to eat.



**Lambers, top right, works out with the kids on his team, which he named after Pullen.
Photo/Bob Campbell**

"When that divorce happened things got wierd for me," Lambers said. "I instantly felt abandoned. The guy I called dad had two other kids to take care of, and he told me I needed to go live with my mother.

"When I moved in with her in Wyoming, she was instantly irritated with me. So I would go back to dad's and things didn't work out and he would ask me to leave. It got to the point where nobody wanted me there.

"I kind of just ended up living in various friends' houses on couches or in basements, or I would go to the mission or a boy's home in Grand Rapids. A lot of the time I was just on the streets.

"I was an angry dude, to the point where I thought I wanted to die. I just wanted to live wild and die when somebody killed me. I was mad. I was probably depressed, but I was young and didn't know what depression was."

Lambers didn't realize it at the time, but his life changed forever when he entered the ninth grade and was assigned to an English class taught by Pullen.

To the outside world, Pullen was mostly known as a successful high school coach. He coached boys and girls track, girls golf, and boys and girls basketball during his 35-year career at the school.

"When he was going through the cancer, I was really concerned that I didn't have a way to pay him back for everything he did for me. Saying 'thank you' and 'I love you' wasn't enough."

He was particularly successful coaching girls basketball, posting a 314-229 record between 1981 and 2005, and winning numerous championships along the way.

Most people probably assume high school coaches are more interested in the student-athletes they work with, and Lambers was not in that category. He played football and basketball through the ninth grade and ran track as a senior, but for most of his school years his life was too chaotic for sports.

Yet Pullen took special notice of Lambers. He really didn't have a choice.

"I was the class clown," Lambers said. "I loved attention, and I did what I had to do to get attention. I was a problem. I disrupted the class a lot. I got into a fight in his class once. But he handled it. He never sent me to the principal's office.

"He loved to kick it with me because I knew about sports, and he loved sports. He would talk to me about all types of stuff. Maybe the biggest thing is he would listen to me. I could go in there and talk to him about anything. I could tell him I was hungry, or my mom wasn't answering the phone or letting me in the house."

Pullen's wife said her husband became more interested in Lambers' welfare one morning when he went to work and found the boy sleeping in the bushes outside the school.

"I think that was when Rich realized Tony was homeless," Betty Lambers said. "From that point on he started looking out for him, and it was more than just a relationship between a teacher and student."

While Pullen was big on encouragement and positive reinforcement, but could also be tough when it was warranted.

"One day we were sitting in his classroom, and he told me

that a lot of the bad stuff that was happening to me, I was bringing on myself, and if I didn't start doing things differently I would be stuck in place."

The coach also helped Lambers outside of school. While Pullen respected the rules of his profession, and never allowed Lambers to spend the night at his home or ride in his vehicle, he still went out of his way to help.

"One of the big things he always did, he would meet me early at school and open the locker room so I could shower, and he would wait in the cafeteria to meet me so I could eat," Lambers said. "He wanted to get me into homes where I could get some help, but I fought it. I wanted to be on the streets."

Lambers dropped out of school during his junior year, but Pullen made sure that didn't last long.

"I didn't drop out because I didn't like school," he said. "At that point I was sleeping in laundry rooms or on park benches, and I figured the only way to survive was to get into the work force or the drug scene. But I went back to school the next year, because he talked me into going back."

A loyal friend in the darkest days

Pullen's assistance did not keep Lambers out of trouble. The boy started selling drugs and committing other crimes while he was in high school, and it was just a matter of time before he was caught.

The crime spree ended in 1995, when Lambers was a senior in high school. He obtained a stolen gun from friends and used it to hold up a convenience store in Wyoming.

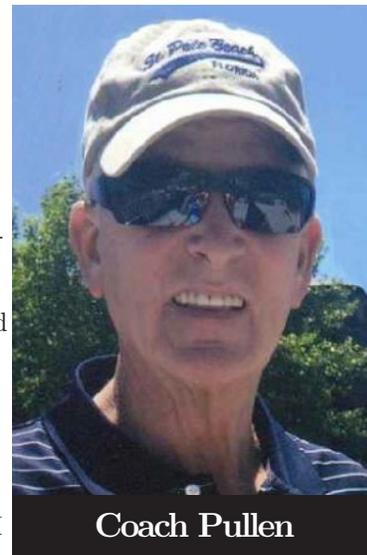
"One night I was just starving and it was freezing out," Lambers said. "So I decided I was going to rob this store, get a hotel room and order a pizza. I was just thinking about comfort at that point."

Ironically, Lambers had been a regular customer at the store he targeted. He had been friendly with the clerk who was on duty at the time.

What he didn't know was that the clerk was adept in the martial arts. The man knocked the gun out of Lambers' hand, grabbed it and called the police. Lambers fled the store and hid out for several weeks, before hunger, exhaustion and depression overcame him.

"After two weeks on the run, I turned myself in," he said.

The police and prosecutors soon connected Lambers to a lot of...



Coach Pullen



Rich and Betty Pullen, who made young Lambers part of their family. Photo/School News Network

Continued on next page...

crimes, including a prior break-in at the same house where his friends had stolen the gun.

"I had actually robbed a whole bunch of places," he said. "When I finally went in they had like 15 counts on me. But if you look at my record, (the convenience store robbery) is the one that shows up.

"When I was sentenced, the judge said he had to give me this much time, because in the past few months I had committed more crimes that some people commit in their whole lives. He said I was building a career out of it, and he was going to stop me now."

Lambers' life hit an all-time low in prison. His remaining family connections disappeared. His friends quickly faded away. But Pullen stood by him the entire time.

"I was surprised when he stayed in touch," Lambers said. "Everyone else left. Nobody stuck by me – not my mom, not my dad – everyone was gone. But when he and his wife drove all that way and came to see me for the first time, I knew this was going to last. He was responsible for any money that was put into my account. He visited, sent me letters, sent me a TV.

"The biggest thing was that he was there for me while I was living in a negative environment. Being in prison is like being locked in a box full of negativity. It's like a huge coffin. He didn't fill me full of fake hopes or dreams when I was in there. It was more about keeping me filled on in what was going on, so I could feel like I was still part of the world.

"He was the only one who went the distance with me."

Betty Pullen said her husband's commitment to Lambers actually grew when he went to prison.

"I think Rich felt like he was one of the last lifelines Tony had - just the thought of him being in prison and not having any visitors really bothered him," she said.

Betty met Lambers for the first time when she went to the prison with her husband for a visit. She had to go to the visiting area first, without Coach Pullen, due to prison rules.



After Coach Pullen passed away, Lambers honored his memory by working with students in Wyoming. Photo/School News Network

"I remember asking Rich how I would know who he is, and he said 'He knows what you look like. He saw your photo lots of times on my desk.

"Tony was very personable when I met him. He kept thanking me, over and over. At one point he asked if he could have his picture taken with us. He ended up keeping that picture all those years in prison. He told people we were his parents

"We told him he could call us any time he wanted. We told our daughters, who are about Tony's age, to always accept the charges if they answered the phone."

Lambers was eventually released to a halfway house in Muskegon, and was allowed to leave during the day to secure



Lambers and his youngest son, AJ, in front of the @HomeRealty office in Grand Haven where Lambers works. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

employment. He found a job at a bookstore, then a factory where he worked for several years. Pullen co-signed for several loans during that time, so Lambers could buy his first house and get a car.

Transitioning from prison wasn't easy for Lambers.

"He would arrive on our doorstep sometimes and be really upset over something someone had said or done," Betty Pullen remembers. "He would pour his heart out.

"It wasn't always sunshine and roses between Tony and Rich. I remember several times walking out of the room while Rich pounded his fist on the table, asking Tony 'What have you got yourself into now?'"

"It was kind of a tough love. Tony had never had a male in his life that made him straighten up, while still being loving and supportive."

Lambers was eventually laid off from the factory and had trouble finding another job. He heard about a position in real estate that supposedly paid \$13 an hour, but the salary was based on commission. He preferred a guaranteed paycheck, and nearly rejected the job, but Pullen encouraged him to give it a try.

"I told him I wasn't going to do it, that I might as well go back to selling drugs," Lambers said. "He said 'Isn't selling drugs based on commission? Why not do it the legit way?'"

Lambers worked in mortgages at first and did well, but the law was changed so that felons could no longer have those jobs, and he was unemployed again for a time.

Pullen came through with a \$2,000 loan so he could keep his house and put food on the table. Lambers made sure the loan was repaid.

Then Lambers switched to real estate, got the hang of it and quickly became a very skilled salesman. He found his niche, became one of the top sales people in West Michigan, and made a very nice life for himself. He eventually got married and became the father of two sons.

Pullen was the best man in Lambers' wedding.

"It kind of changed me," Lambers said about his career. "I matured and grew. I've always had charisma. Sales is what I should have been doing from the beginning, but I lacked confidence. Once I tried it, it kind of clicked, and I haven't stopped yet."

Lambers knows his life would have been a lot different if it weren't for Pullen. He was happy his mentor lived long enough to see him make it in the world.

"He always said, 'I told you that you were going to be somebody special. You just needed someone to tell you that good things can happen.'"

A legacy lives on

Richard Pullen died of colon cancer on Dec. 20, 2015. He was 69.

"When things got really bad I was on vacation in California," Lambers said. "I was under the impression at the time that he was beating the cancer. He never let anyone know otherwise. He was super strong. He never once complained about it.

"When I got back, he called me and said he had to talk real quick, because he was having trouble breathing. He said, 'I think you should come see me.'

"So I went to see him. He was within days of dying, but he didn't look like it. Then the family called me over one more time after that. He grabbed my hand. I said 'This is messed up. I don't know how to repay you for everything.' He said 'you repaid me by being a decent human being.

"He always liked to be clean shaven, and he couldn't do it himself at that point, so he asked me to shave him. I went and got his razor, and he fell asleep while I was shaving him. I remember putting my hand on his hand and telling him I loved him.

"Two days later I was in the movie theater with my son, and this weird feeling came over me. Then we went back to my car and I saw I had a call from his daughter on my phone, and I knew he had died."

Pullen's obituary listed Lambers as a "special son." Lambers' youngest son, AJ Lambers, was listed among the grandchildren.

Lambers was asked to speak at the funeral. He has stayed in close touch with Betty and the rest of the Pullen family.

But he quickly decided that he needed to do more to honor the man who saw him through the tough times.

"I was under the impression at the time he was beating the cancer. He never let anyone know otherwise."

He started by volunteering to help at Wyoming High School, which opened in 2012 following the merger of the old Wyoming Park and Rogers high schools. He was soon assisting in classrooms, making motivational speeches to students, and working one-on-one with troubled kids.

Last winter Lambers went a step further, using his own money to establish the "RP Scholarship Fund," which will provide college money for at-risk students for years to come. Lambers will donate 10 percent of his commission from future real estate sales to the fund, and has started raising money from other contributors. His goal is to eventually expand the scholarship program throughout the state and nation.

He plans to use \$50,000 from the fund to establish an



The RP Scholars celebrate their title at the recent AYBT tournament.

endowment through the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. The endowment will provide scholarships to two students each year, beginning next spring – one from Wyoming High School and one from Muskegon High School.

"Wyoming is in my heart, and my business is in Muskegon," he said. "The money will go to kids from lower-income, single-parent homes. We want the kids who apply to write essays about their personal hardships, and how they managed to stay in school. I'm looking for kids who have gone through the type of things I went through, but have fought hard to stay on track."

In February, Lambers established the RP Scholars, a basketball team comprised of Wyoming High School students. The team, with nine kids and three coaches, meets once a week to prepare for tournaments throughout the summer.

The RP Scholars have been very successful on the court. Their latest triumph came in an AYBT national tournament in Grand Rapids, where they went undefeated and won the championship in the ninth grade elite division.

But the basketball team is about more than basketball.

"We're a family," said Lambers, who added that he plans to start a second team next year. "Basketball is the teaching tool we're using, but it's about developing physically, mentally and academically. All these kids are great kids, but some are struggling with grades, some are right on the edge.

"What I really want to do with them is teach them to be leaders, so they can turn around and lead their peers. That's what needs to happen."

One kid who has benefitted from his time on the team is 15-year-old Rayvon Anderson.

Lambers says Anderson is one of the most talented young basketball players in the area, but he didn't play on his school team last season because he didn't keep his grades up.

"I missed it," Anderson said about sitting out the basketball season. "It really hurt. I was just playing around too much, having too much fun, rather than doing my work."

That started to change a few months ago, after he joined RP Scholars.

"Near the end of the last school year, he was skipping every class, and I told him he wasn't going to be able to keep playing with us this summer unless he got his grades up fast," Lambers said. "And some coaches told me if he didn't do that, he wouldn't be playing junior varsity next season, either. Within three weeks he had his grades up to passing level.

"He reminds me of me growing up, the way he thinks, the situations he has to deal with. I know his potential is way up there.

"He can do all of this. He's got the charisma, the looks and the game. It's going to come down to how seriously he takes it. He's here today for practice, and he remembered his jersey – that's a new thing."

Anderson said he took Lambers' warning about his grades very seriously, and plans to stay on top of his studies when school starts in a few weeks.

"I wanted to play, so I locked down on my work and did better than I thought I would," Anderson said.

There's no doubt Coach Pullen would be proud.



Lambers instructs a player during a time out at the AYBT tournament.



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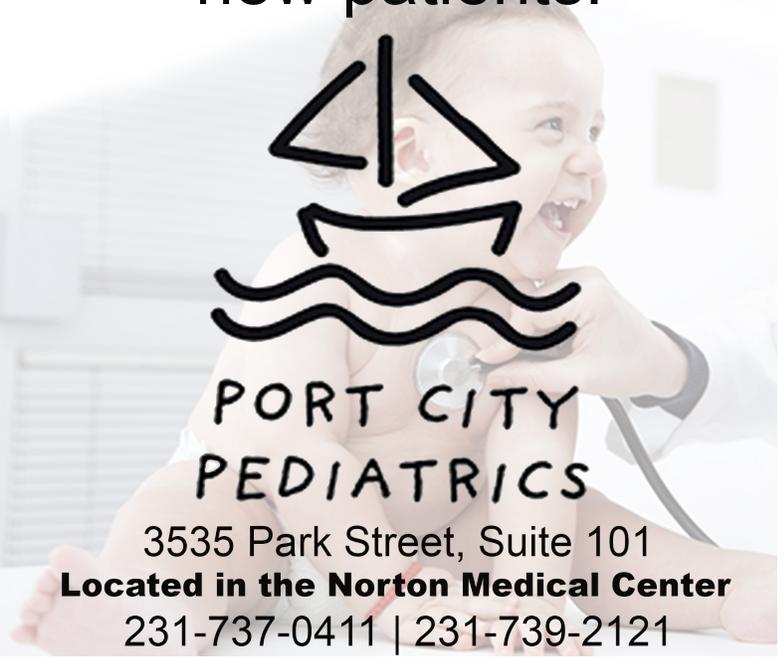


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TOUCHING THEM ALL

Muskegon Clippers pitcher Mitch Ashcraft and his dad are finishing a 16-year tour of all the big league ballparks

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Later this month, Muskegon Clippers pitcher Mitch Ashcraft and his dad will embark on two pretty cool baseball trips.

They will attend a Cardinals game in St. Louis on Aug. 9, then a Red Sox game at Boston's historic Fenway Park on Aug. 15.

Those trips would be great adventures for any baseball-loving father and son. But for the Ashcrafts, the trips will be the final leg of a much longer, amazing baseball odyssey.

They've already been to games in 28 of the 30 current Major League Baseball stadiums, over the course of about 16 years. St. Louis and Boston will make it a clean sweep.

They've been to a game in St. Louis before, but not since the new Busch Stadium was built. The same is true for Atlanta, where the new SunTrust Park opened this year, so they went there in April to cross that off their list.

Their stadium adventure was launched in a pretty normal way for a Michigan family - by attending Detroit Tigers games when Mitch was very small, long before they realized what it would lead to.

Back then the Motown squad played in old Tiger Stadium, and was really bad. So bad, in fact, that the Tigers lost the first three or four games the Ashcrafts attended, which didn't sit very well with a pre-kindergarten fan like Mitch.

"After one game, when the Tigers lost again, he started crying and saying, 'The Tigers are never going to win,'" Mike said. "A man nearby heard him and said, 'I know how you feel.'"

As Mitch got older, the trips became more ambitious. They attended games in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, St. Louis and



Chicago. By the time he was around 10, they decided they would try to attend at least one game at every big league park, no matter how long it took.

"It's always been a goal of mine," said Mike, 51, an Ada resident who works as the Conference Manager at Grand Valley State University. "Once Mitch was a little older, and was so into baseball, we just decided we were going to do this.

"I wanted to do this, but not without him. It's kind of cool that we're actually going to get to all of them. Doing it in 16 years is pretty good. There are some major league players who haven't been to every park."

Mitch, 21, a senior pitcher for the GVSU baseball team who recently finished his final season with the summer league Clippers, said "It's been a great way to bond with my dad, traveling all over the U.S."

Visiting every stadium could take a great deal of time and money, so Mike started figuring out ways to hit multiple stadiums in single trips.

They saw the Houston Astros and Texas Rangers play home games on one trip. They drove to Denver to see the Rockies, then grabbed a flight to Phoenix to see the Diamondbacks. They took in a Twins game in Minneapolis, then jumped on a plane and flew to northern California to see the Oakland A's and San Francisco Giants.

Their biggest baseball adventure came in 2010.

"We drove to Milwaukee and went to a Brewers game, flew from there to San Diego and drove to Anaheim and went to the Angels game that night," Mike said. "Then we drove back to San Diego and saw a game, then the Dodgers were home the next night, so we went to that. We flew back the next day and caught the Cubs game the next night.

"That was five days, five games, five stadiums."

That may sound like an expensive journey, but it really wasn't, Mike said.

"I just happened to have an airline voucher I had to use up," he said. "At the Dodgers game we only spent a dollar on each ticket. There are a lot of specials out there, with all the ticket exchanges and promotions now. You can go to a game really cheap."

The Ashcrafts always try to take a unique form of transportation from wherever they are staying to the game.

"In Pittsburgh we took a river boat

Have you checked out the Whitecaps'

Very Cool, Old School SCOREBOARD?

By Andrew Johnson
LocalSportsJournal.com

It was 1967 when Sonny and Cher released the hit song "The Beat Goes On," which included the lyrics "...electrically they keep a baseball score."

That was about baseball modernizing and keeping up with the times.

But baseball's biggest strength is tradition, with generations of families visiting their local ballparks every summer, enjoying a beloved game that hasn't changed very much since it became popular in the 1800s.

The West Michigan Whitecaps embraced that concept in 2011, when they announced they would no longer "electrically keep a baseball score."

Instead the team went old school, installing a manual scoreboard in left field at Fifth Third Ballpark in Comstock Park. There's nothing electronic about the main part of it. There is a person behind the scoreboard throughout the game, posting metal number plates in slots as the innings go by.

The metal plates tell the crowd the number of runs scored each inning, and the total runs, hits and errors for each team - just like they did way back when.

The scoreboard is reminiscent of Boston's Fenway Park and Chicago's Wrigley Field, the two oldest Major League Baseball stadiums, which both still employ manual scoreboards.

It's also been the bearer of great news for Whitecaps fans this year, because the team is having a tremendous season.

The Whitecaps won the first half title in the Midwest League's Eastern Division with a 45-22 record, including a 25-10 mark at home. As of this writing



record through July
71-31

they were in first place in the second-half standings with a 25-10 record, including 14-3 at home.

The scoreboard keeper also keeps track of all Detroit Tigers games being played at the same time, and posts the score and inning as each game goes on. That's a nice touch, since the



The West Michigan Whitecaps introduced their old fashioned manual scoreboard in 2012. Photo/Bob Campbell

Tigers are the Whitecaps' parent team, and virtually all the fans are Tiger fans.

Fans may notice an occasional hole in the scoreboard where a metal plate will announce the number of runs scored in an upcoming inning. It's open so the scoreboard keeper can peep out onto the field and keep track of what's happening.

Now that's old school.

The manual scoreboard runs counter to the modern trend of baseball teams competing to install the most obnoxiously large electronic video/scoreboards they can afford. The Whitecaps are not stuck in a time warp in that regard. They have a very nice video board in center field.

But they also give a welcome and popular nod to tradition.

"I think that it just makes sense, as we continue to add new high-tech fan amenities like the new video board, that we also stay connected to the traditions of baseball," Whitecaps CEO and Managing Partner Lew Chamberlin was quoted as saying in 2011. "I've always loved the old manual boards, like the one at Fenway Park. This old-style scoreboard will pay homage to baseball history. It will also be great fun for the fans."

Mickey Graham, the director of marketing and media relations for the Whitecaps, says the manual scoreboard has been popular with the crowds that pack Fifth Third Ballpark.

"I think they like it," Graham said. "It's a throwback baseball thing and traditional part of the game. A good opposite to

the giant video board we have. Fans can see brand new technology, but still get the old school baseball feel.

"I think for people who haven't been here before, it's one of the first things that catches their eye. They don't get to see manual scoreboards very often anymore. Often the first thing they think of is Wrigley or Fenway. When they see someone back there, they see that it's not all about bells and whistles, but that baseball tradition is alive and well."

Scott Koetje, a fan who attended a recent game at Fifth Third Ballpark, said "I really like the old school scoreboard. It really just kind of takes me back a bit. I think you have to keep a little bit of the old school to just remember your roots."

Fan Tom Denhon added, "I think of old Tiger Stadium when I see it."

While fans enjoy the manual scoreboard, perhaps nobody loves it more than Jack Lindsay, a second-year employee with the Whitecaps promotional team.



Mickey Graham, the Whitecaps' Director of Marketing and Media.

Lindsay said he noticed the scoreboard right away when he joined the team last season, and felt an instant desire to be the anonymous person behind it, posting the numbers throughout the games.

"It's the coolest thing to me," said Lindsay, 21, a student at Grand Valley State University. "You really can't beat it. I always saw people changing the score, and I really wanted to do it. I kept asking my boss Matt Hoffman if I could get up there."

He didn't have to wait long to get a chance to substitute for the regular scoreboard keeper.

Lindsay was assigned to do a

game in April 2016, when it was still frigid outside.

"It's usually pretty cold back here to start the season," said Lindsay, who was on duty during a game this summer and gave Local Sports Journal a behind-the-scenes tour of the scoreboard. "My first year I got to do a game in April and I had to wear a winter hat, a hoodie, and sweats under my pants - but it was still cold."

Lindsay said the scoreboard operator is responsible for keeping up with the game and continually changing the score and stats. He updates the numbers by taking the old number metal plate off the scoreboard and locating the proper numerical plate behind him in a basket.

If he decides he doesn't want to watch the game through an open slot in the scoreboard, he can walk down the catwalk toward center field to an overhang, where he has possibly the best view of Fifth Third Ballpark.



Scoreboard keeper Jack Lindsay peeps through a slot in the scoreboard during a recent game. Photo/Bob Campbell

On the overhang, the operator can watch the game from a view behind shortstop and third base. On a fly ball, outfielders can be heard calling for the catch while their feet pound the turf as they race to make the play.

But the operator can never venture too far away from the center of the scoreboard when the Tigers are playing, Lindsay said. That's because he has listen to the small radio plugged in there, to keep up with the Detroit game and update that score.

There are times when the scoreboard operator has to use his cell phone to double-check a stat in the Whitecaps or Tigers game. But for the most part he keeps track by watching the action at Fifth Third and listening to the Tigers' radio play-by-play.

That may sound busy, antiquated and unappealing to some people, but Lindsay loves to be the scoreboard guy, every chance he can get.

"My grandpa played baseball his whole life, so I was around the game," he said. "I played hockey, so I didn't have much time to play baseball, but I always liked the sport and enjoyed spending time at Comerica Park.

"If I could go back in time and tell a younger me that I'd be doing this job periodically to get through college, I would have been ecstatic.

"It's a really unique job. Not many people get paychecks for watching baseball and changing the score."

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HUNTING WITH THE

STARS

By Jason Goorman
LocalSportsJournal.com

Sam Palmer loves to hunt, and like a lot of hunters he loves the Outdoor Channel, particularly the Jackie Bushman Show.

But he never dreamed he would get a chance to be on the show, hunting with Bushman and his crew.

And he certainly never dreamed that a national television audience would witness him bag his first buck.

But that all came true for Palmer late last year.

The Jackie Bushman Show, which draws millions of viewers from across the nation, has several online drawings every year, and the prize is an all-expense-paid hunting trip with the crew from the show.

The trips are filmed and highlights are shown on the show.

Palmer, a 23-year-old who lives in northern Muskegon County, saw a notice for one of the drawings last fall and decided he might as well throw his name in. He knew the odds of winning were pretty long, since roughly 30,000 people enter each contest.

But lo and behold, he won!

"A lady called me to tell me I was in the running, then Jackie Bushman himself called me back five minutes later and told me I had won," said Palmer, a 2013 graduate of Reeths-Puffer High School who works at GE Aviation in Muskegon.

"At first I didn't know if it was 100 percent real, but he asked me if I knew who he was, and I thought I recognized his voice. He said 'Yeah, this is Jackie Bushman, and you won a hunt and you're going to Louisiana."

"It was a pretty good day!"

Jackie Bushman said he gets a kick out of calling the contest winners himself, rather than having a staff member do it.

"It's always fun because they think I'm messing with them when they get my call," Bushman told Local Sports Journal. "A lot of times I have to call a winner back because they hang up on me!"

Highlights of Palmer's hunt will be

televised on the Outdoor Channel on Aug. 21 at noon, Aug. 23 at 3:30 p.m. and Aug. 26 at 9 a.m.

A good old time

Palmer flew to Monroe, Louisiana, where he was met by the show's camera crew, then they were off to a privately-owned lodge in Olla, Louisiana for five glorious days of deer hunting and fun.



Muskegon's Sam Palmer won a hunting trip with Buckmasters and the Jackie Bushman Show... and shot his first buck on film for millions to watch on TV.

The hunting trip lasted from Nov. 29 to Dec. 3.

One of the prizes Palmer won was a new Savage 308 hunting rifle, which he took on the trip.

"They sent the gun to me up here, so I could have two weeks to get acquainted with it," Palmer said. "They sent two boxes of ammo, too."

"I flew the rifle down there with me. You have to have it in a hard case with several locks on it. I actually bought the case myself. You can use any cheap old

case, but I wanted a good one because they tend to throw your luggage around pretty good.

"I saw them loading the gun case and throw it on the plane. I thought, yup, I'm glad I bought that case."

Palmer was greeted at the lodge by Bushman, co-host Jacob Landry and his brother, the owners of the lodge and the television crew.

He said the hunting lodge was spectacular and the southern hospitality was great.

"They have 20,000 acres," he said. "Two thousand acres are fenced in. In the other part it's fenced in on three sides so the deer can come and go. They planted a huge food plot all up and down miles and miles of power lines, so the deer just love that."

"We ate pretty good. Every day they had an in-house cook. She knew what she was doing. She made us a four-course meal every day. Every meal was huge."

"On one of the nights Landry cooked us up some alligator and venison backstraps. That was the best. Most people will fry up the tail of the alligator because it's cheaper meat. The best though is the alligator cheek. He rolled it in egg and dehydrated milk and threw it in the fryer and that was really good."

"They made everything real comfortable. They were super nice people. I felt like I had been there a few times."

Palmer said his hosts weren't afraid to have a good time when the hunting was done for the day.

"I was with my camera guy each hunt, and then we would

all meet up at the saloon," he said.

"I told Jacob Landry where I was from and he said 'Wow, you're a Yankee, huh? They called me 'Michigan Yankee.' But he was a super nice guy. Really funny too. One of the nights we talked all kinds of craziness, like about when he was a kid and he'd go gator hunting and all kinds of stuff."

"One night a guy named Big Bill fell down because he got a little tipsy, and he almost fell on me. He's about seven feet tall and I couldn't catch him. He cracked

his eye brow. Jacob is an EMT and ended up patching him up for the night so he didn't have to go to the hospital.

"They laughed about the idea of me trying to catch him. They said no way, he would have squished me."

Not every part of the hunt went according to plan. There were several rainy days, and one notable breakdown, according to Palmer.

"They have these bad boy buggies we would ride in," Palmer said. "They run off gas and electricity. Ours ran out of gas and we were running on the battery. Then the battery ran out when we were half way out to the blind. We just walked the rest of the way to the blind and they picked us up with the truck."

While he's obviously busy hosting and producing his show, Jackie Bushman was a full participant in the hunt, and took special pride in making Palmer feel comfortable with his crew.

"I was there the whole week and we just had a good old time," Bushman said. "Sam and I would see each other in the morning, then at lunch and supper. We hung out. He got the full red neck indoctrination."

"To have a young man like Sam win, and to watch him come into camp and be nervous meeting the crew, then by the end of the week have him be part of the camp, was really great."



Palmer with Jackie Bushman

That first buck

Palmer has been an avid hunter for a few years, but he had never shot a buck before.

"I really got into hunting when I got into high school," he said. "My cousin Patrick Stone got me into it. He asked me if I ever shot a bow before. Before that all I ever did was squirrel hunt. He let me try his bow, I hit the target every time, and he said 'You know what, we're



Palmer shows off his buck with Jackie Bushman, left, and Matt Busbice in Louisiana. Photo/Buckmasters

going to take you hunting.

"The first time he took me hunting a big old six-point came walking in. But I dropped my arrow because I was too excited. He said that was the best chance we could have had, right there. It was 20 yards away and I had the perfect shot."

Palmer saw plenty of deer during the hunt in Louisiana, but for most of the trip his bad buck luck persisted.

"Each day we would wake up at 6 a.m. and hunt until noon and then come in for breakfast and lunch and then go back out and hunt until dark."

"We saw a whole bunch of deer every day. We saw this monster six-point. He moved out at 400 yards and we couldn't get a shot. We saw him every day but he just wouldn't cooperate."

His luck finally changed near the end of the trip, when he shot a nine-pointer.

"It was on the second to last day," Palmer said. "I got him about a half hour before dark."

"I had some chances with a goofy-antlered deer. They called it a tall buck. I decided to wait for the right one, and then this big buck walked out and pushed the goofy one away and I ended up taking him."

"He stepped out on the power line to eat at the food plot. Once he got clear from the other buck, I took the shot."

"It was about an 80-yard shot. It was a big thrill rush. I had my heart in my throat a little bit, just because I didn't want to miss on camera."

"The camera guy was pretty excited. He said he was glad we got it done, because the weather forecast wasn't looking too good and neither one of us wanted to go out the next day in the rain."

Amazingly, Palmer's first buck was

a drop shot. While the vast majority of deer run after they are hit, and sometimes have to be tracked for hours, Palmer's buck went down on the spot, saving everyone a lot of trouble.

"The camera guy told me they don't get many drop shots on film," Palmer said. "Most of the time they have to do some tracking."

"Right when we got back to the lodge, they replayed the film for me. Jacob said it was super cool, especially because it was the first buck I got. Jackie was cool too. He was really happy for me."



Palmer gets ready to take the shot that dropped his first buck.

"It was pretty special to get down there for a once in a life time chance. There were 30,000 people entered in that contest. That's like lottery odds! It was pretty crazy. I was shaking a little bit because it was my first buck."

"It's at the taxidermist right now and it's almost done!"



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