

SCL: A Look Back At A Season-Long 'Road Trip'

BY JEREMY HOECK

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Our goal was simple: Drive to every town in the South Central League. Take game photos. See every team at least once.

With no 'big' summer project to tackle (unlike last summer when I spent a month doing a recruiting series), we figured this amateur baseball road trip would be a fun experience.

And hey, who wouldn't mind the mileage reimbursements?

Plus, if you're as big of an amateur baseball fan as I am, you can't really complain about such a trip, right? We have been writing weekly SCL notebooks for the past few years, and as you can imagine, it helps to have some sort of knowledge about the teams and players.

As we get ready for post-season coverage for our Class A (Yankton) team and the remaining Class B squads, here is a look back at what we experienced this summer at various small towns in the area.

With apologies to Avon, myself or Sports Editor James Cimburek have met our goal. We have each been to a handful of Yankton Tappers home games at Riverside Field, while James trekked to Lesterville and I hit seven other towns. Here are our jottings from the road, beginning with Yankton and going in order of the trips.

Yankton

Though technically a non-league game on June 13, I am including Yankton's game with the Sioux Falls Flying Squirrels for one reason: Flying Squirrels.

That name immediately cracked my list of top-5 amateur baseball team names. (Sorry Platte Killer Tomatoes, you are now number two).

This game sticks out in my mind for one other reason: A comment I heard while standing at the edge of the Sioux Falls dugout. The manager leaned over to me and said something like, "I love your guys' announcer here. He's awesome to listen to."

Joe Vig is that guy.

More than names, positions and numbers, Vig provides fans with some running commentary (though not in an over-bearing kind of way, or during pitches) and one of his staples is baseball trivia.

Though not at every Tappers game, it's always fun when he's in the press box.

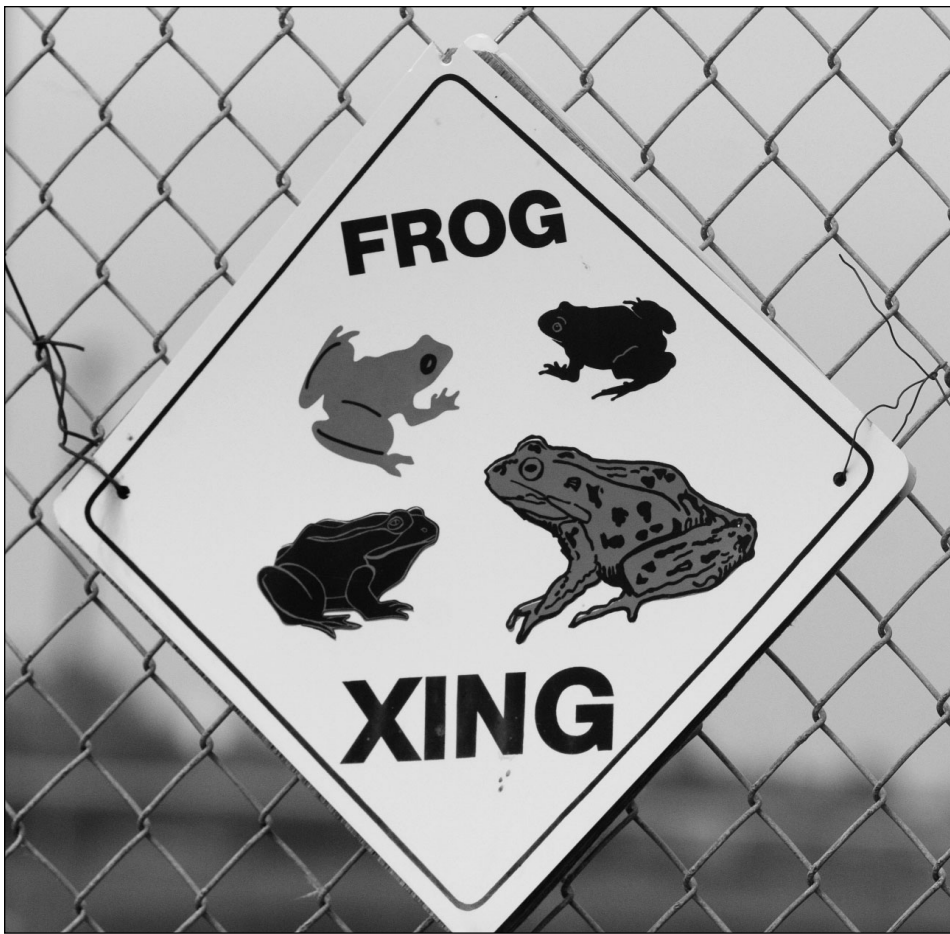
Wynot

This trip to Wynot, Neb., shall be known as "Media Day."

Not only was I joined by our summer intern (and part-time sports reporter) Emily Niebrugge, we got to Wynot to find John Thayer of KVHT in town to broadcast the game with Crofton.

I had circled this game on the calendar because we had wanted to write some kind of story on the Expos overcoming the off-season death of long-time manager Terry Foxhoven. It was still a weird sight not having Terry in the dugout, but all the Wynot players were gracious enough to talk about the loss.

The thing that also stands out in my mind about this trip was standing in the Crofton dugout as Rand Thygeson was warming up (the "bullpen" is right near the dugout, though there is a fence as a backstop). I was



standing right to the left of that fence, constantly turning around to make sure he didn't launch a fastball at me.

Trust me, if you've ever watched Thygeson pitch, you can imagine my fear. He tops out at probably 90 miles an hour.

Tabor

In part because there was nothing else local on the schedule, I ventured to Tabor one Friday night in early June to take some photos.

More than just baseball, though, I was greeted with a pretty tasty burger, right off the grill. And yes, bosses, I did pay for it. The older woman who was working in the concessions stand had just got done chasing away a mouse, but the burger was just as good.

There wasn't a huge crowd at the game that night, but Tabor is known for its loyal fans. You see many of the same faces at every home game — at least the times I'm there.

Joe Vavruska, a veteran pitcher with the Bluebirds, had returned to the team a few days before I got there, and he politely declined an interview. His response: "My brother (manager Jon) can

make up some good stuff about me."

Menno

Of all the parks I visited this summer, Menno was the one time where I immediately second-guessed where I parked my car. I chose a spot just off center of home plate, and near some cattle. With foul ball after foul ball sent back that way, I considered moving my car.

Luckily, everything was intact later.

As I walked to the Menno dugout before the game to chat with Josh Berndt for part of our upcoming SCL notebook, I noticed a sign on the fence. "Frog Xing." Yes, welcome to the Lily Pad — a clever nickname for the park.

Typically for road trips, I would stay for four or five innings and either send back photos from our laptop (if the town was further away), or simply drive back to Yankton to finish up. This night, I brought along the laptop, so I had the luxury of staying a little bit longer.

The few fans in the stands weren't disappointed, either. Menno pitcher Macon Oplinger threw a complete game 2-hit shutout against Irene, and by the time I left

after an hour, the game was already in the sixth inning.

Talk about working fast.

Freeman

As I got out of my car and walked up to the Yankton dugout on this night, manager Ron Heine saw me and said, "Did you get lost?"

"No," I replied, but it was at this point where I started telling people about our SCL road trip; that we wanted to hit every town — and it just so happened Yankton was the visitor this night.

Before the game as I stood by the fence behind home plate, one of the older Freeman fans looks at my camera and jokes, "Are you from the New York Times?" And no, that's not the first time I've heard that joke, sir.

Yankton eventually had to forfeit this game because of a pinch-running error (something to do with the name not being on the lineup), but I remember Trey Krier having one of his usual dominant performances on the mound.

There were plenty more of those to come.

Lesterville

Lesterville is one of those parks where you can still

SCL Road Trip 2013

Press & Dakotan assistant sports editor Jeremy Hoeck tried to make it to all 10 South Central League towns during the 2013 regular season. A rain-out cancelled the chance to go to Avon, and sports editor James Cimburek hit a game in Lesterville, but Hoeck made it to the other eight. Here are some of his notes from a season on the road.

ABOVE: A young Lesterville fan relaxes in his "box" seat at the Broncs' South Central League amateur baseball game with Tabor on July 6 in Lesterville. Though Tabor took the game 17-3, the home fans still were sent home happy with a fireworks display after the game. (James D. Cimburek/P&D)

LEFT: A sign at Menno's ball park denotes a "Frog Crossing." Menno's team is known as the Mad Frogs. (Jeremy Hoeck/P&D)

park all the way around ... except on fireworks night.

With the Broncs' Fourth of July fireworks set for Saturday, July 6, fans could not park on the "home run porch" at the park. The fireworks, handled expertly by the Lesterville Fire Department, were set up behind the center field wall.

The post-game fireworks — and the opponent, Tabor — meant for a big crowd for the game. Cars and trucks lined both fences, with several others parked near the softball field across the way, with many using truck tailgates as their own personal luxury boxes. The Broncs took advantage, as a big "split the pot" and the final day of the team's raffle were planned for that night. The "split the pot" was pretty big, one of the biggest I've seen for a regular season game.

(from James Cimburek)

Crofton

Scot Donner vs. Eric Hames.

This night in early July had the makings of a quality pitching duel. And by the end of the night (when I was already), Donner and Crofton had won 4-2.

The real winner — not to

sound corny — that night was the crowd. There was a huge gaggle of fans that night, mostly because they had post-game fireworks, but also because the Crofton-Wynot rivalry is pretty unique. They are, after all, the only Nebraska teams in the SCL.

I've said this before and I'll repeat it here, but Crofton is by far one of my favorite amateur baseball parks (Yankton would be right up there too). Not even from just a space issue, because there's plenty of space all around the field in Crofton, but the layout of the grandstands, the look of the field and the location makes it a pretty cool place.

And having a good team to watch sure helps, too.

Irene

Here was another situation where a) Emily, our intern, joined me for the road trip (she knows a few of the Yankton players), and b) Yankton was the visiting team.

Aside from Riverside Field, this was the second time on the summer where I stood for part of the game actually inside the fence. In Yankton, James and I usually stand in the dugout, which jets out into the field of play, while in Irene I stood down the left field foul line, but behind a light pole.

Last thing I wanted was a Mike King line drive to smoke me in the leg. Or Simon Healy. Those guys can slug the ball.

Instead, I was there as Yankton's Heath Arens drilled a 2-run home run in the second inning, prompting me to text James, "Heath Arens, of all people, homered." Even with an aluminum bat, he'd probably the last person you would expect to homer.

Irene didn't hit any home runs while I was there, but it always amazes me that wood bats don't seem to affect this team. They've got some guys who can really hit the ball, as I pointed out earlier, and it wouldn't surprise me if the Cardinals make some noise at state — as long as their pitching shows up.

Scotland

If I could do a whole other story on amateur umpires, I would, because this night was probably the fifth or sixth time on the summer that I showed up to a game that John Wieseler of Yankton was working.

There are only a handful of umpires who work District 6B teams, but Wieseler is a character. I'm not saying you're not, Dave Edler.

A trip to the Scotland baseball park is never complete until you see Sam the dachshund; sort of the Highlanders "biggest" and "smallest" fan. He typically walks around in the dugout, but on this night, he was up in the pressbox with his owner, Glen Baker.

Never once have I heard Sam bark during a game, or even attempt to chase a ball (though I'm sure it bugs him not to).

These are the things you find at amateur baseball games: Enthusiastic fans, energetic PA announcers, cows just beyond the outfield fence and dogs in the pressbox.

You can follow Jeremy Hoeck on Twitter at twitter.com/jhoeck

Vikings, Mankato Extend Camp Deal By 3 Years

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — The Minnesota Vikings have agreed on a three-year contract with Minnesota State University to continue their training camp on the Mankato campus through 2015.

The deal was announced Tuesday. Players report to camp Thursday, which will begin the team's 48th season training at MSU. Back then, off-site camps were the norm in the NFL. This season, the Vikings are in the minority, one of only 13 teams training away from headquarters. The other 19 practice year-round at their own facilities.

One change for players this time will be their lodging. After living in the twin Gage towers for all but one year previously, the Vikings will be in the newer Sears residence just to the north of where the old dorms once stood. They were torn down this summer.

Post 12 Goes 1-1 On Opening Day Of Region 2A

SIoux FALLS — Yankton First Dakota Post 12 had a late rally stall out, dropping a 7-4 decision to Brandon Valley in the Region 2A American Legion baseball tournament on Tuesday at Harmodon Park.

Brandon Valley advances to face Mitchell today (Wednesday) at 1 p.m., with the winner securing one of the region's two spots at state.

Yankton, 16-19, will face either Sioux Falls East or Sioux Falls West, who faced off in Tuesday's late game, at 4 p.m. The winner of that game will face the loser of the BV-Mitchell game at 7 p.m., with that team taking the other berth out of the region.

Mitch Gullikson had three hits and Landon Withrow had two hits for Yankton, which scored one in the eighth and three in the ninth, bringing the tying run to the plate in the ninth.

Zach Benjamin took the loss, with Austin Johnson and Withrow throwing in relief.

YANKTON 3, S.F. EAST 0: Tanner Termansen and Austin Johnson combined on a shutout as Yankton opened the Region 2A Tournament with a 3-0 victory over Sioux Falls East.

Mitch Gullikson had two hits and a run scored to lead Yankton. Lane Sawatzke had a hit and a run scored. Landon Withrow drove in two runs in the victory.

Termansen pitched seven innings for the win. Johnson picked up the save.

MITCHELL 2, S.F. WEST 0: Michael Sadler tossed a complete game four-hitter as Mitchell blanked Sioux Falls West 2-0 in their opening game.

Evan Mastel had a double and a RBI, and Matt Larson had a hit and a RBI to lead Mitchell.

Seth Bjordal had two of West's four hits.

Sadler struck out four in the win. Austin Serck struck out five



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D

Yankton Reds baserunner Carter Peterson slides safely past Sioux Falls East catcher Nick Marnin into home plate to score during the opening game of their VFW Teener baseball doubleheader on Tuesday at Yankton's Riverside Field. Results were not available at presstime.