

Minnesota Legion Board Memo – April 2024

Titled: Sorry We Lost You

Dear State Legion Baseball Director

All of us with the All-Star Project hope you are doing well. We wanted to let you know that we are disappointed to lose the State Legion Board as an All-Star sponsor for 2024. As you know, the State Board of Directors, hence Minnesota State Legion Baseball, has been our cornerstone all-star sponsor and partner from the very beginning of our All-Star development effort. You backed us before one pitch was thrown or one ball was batted. Without your support, we would not have undertaken the project.

- All Stars began as an idea in a basement room at the Chanhassen Legion in the fall of 2019. Not everyone at the meeting was in favor of the idea. We met with Randy and Brandon in the hopes of getting their input and their support to create a statewide all-star event. At the time, there were no Legion activities that had players from different communities playing on the same teams. We had the idea to create an event weekend to showcase Legion baseball and Legion baseball players.
- **2021** - We requested, and the Board approved \$1,500 to help us get our idea off the ground and onto the field. It was a two day, three team, three game affair that was geared to younger (junior) players. The all-star weekend included a PBR/Legion Showcase for Friday morning that sold out. We built a statewide data gathering and data processing system that relied on Legion coaches to submit nominations for all-star player candidates. The 2021 event was largely aligned with Junior Legion where the number of teams is relatively small. Yet the event drew far more interest than we expected with 140 names submitted for just 45 roster spots. We judged the first-time event a success, but we saw the need to evolve its direction toward the senior level versus a junior focus.
- **2022** – A State Board Director recommended seeking additional funding from the State Board of Directors which he guided through the Board to bring the State sponsorship to the \$2,000 level. We appreciated the support. It signaled to us that we should work to grow the event and keep working on it. We expanded to four teams with each playing two games. More games and more uniforms meant more costs. We instituted a “College Bound Breakfast” with a panel of four college coaches to provide an educational component to the event. That event sold out. The PBR Showcase grew from 60 kids to 85 players. During the summer of 2022, we were approached by Scheels who expressed interest in our developing all-star project. The Scheels representative told us that all-stars was not covered by the contract between Scheels and Minnesota Legion but they might be interested in becoming involved. The 2022 senior level All-Star event was more successful than the first go round. But for the second year, we were significantly impacted by weather. We had built a strong website and Twitter foundation which assisted us in managing communications to all participants. We live broadcasted games which we made available on our new YouTube

channel. The live audience for each game was about 500 with later views well over 1500 per game. Gosh. There was much more interest in Legion baseball and All-Stars across the state than we had ever imagined. Our on-field coaches pressed us to make the event a real showpiece, to step up our efforts and make the event weekend truly All-Star quality. Our college coaching staff predicted that moving the event to turf and expanding the event would draw a much more significant college coach's audience to watch our American Legion players.

- **2023** – With a couple of years under our belt, we felt we should go all out and really deliver the kind of All-Star event that you would be proud of. We wanted to give the all-star tournament a classy American look with uniforms to play off our American Legion heritage. We wanted to play on a college field where weather would not be a factor and the kids and families would recognize it as a premium experience. We wanted to try a Junior level again as there was probably a big demand still for that level (if we could find some helpers). Those were big ideas. Could we afford them? We were not certain.
 - Early on in January, we were informed by Randy, Jim and Tim that they had worked with Scheels and they had decided to add an additional \$2,000 to Legion funding with the added \$2K specifically earmarked for All-Stars. The state funding of \$20,000 from Scheels was not impacted. It was our understanding from the Legion folks that the Scheels funding was in addition to and not a replacement of State Board funding. A Scheels representative attending the 2023 event referred to their funding as a 'piggyback' to the state that they intended to help us grow and develop all-star programming. It appeared to us at the event that the Scheels representative was quite pleased with what she saw and experienced. Frankly, receiving the additional Scheels support was key to our decision to ramp up 2023 as much as we did. Of course, the State Legion \$2,000 was just as critical in providing us the foundation of support we needed to move the event to the next level.
 - We requested \$2,000 from the State Board and it was approved. While we expected additional Scheels funding, we did not include it with our grant request to the Board.
 - My understanding was that we received the \$2k from the State in one check. Then later when Scheels sent their funding into the state and included the additional \$2K for All-Stars, we received a second check from the State Legion.
- I think we delivered on what we said we would do (if anyone was listening). We took some huge steps forward last year. The major things in 2023 included:
 - We took the senior level and made what we felt would be a first class showcase All-Star tournament. Our vision was that 2023 would be something that every director would be proud of – a real showcase of Legion baseball. We expanded the number of games played per team. We added Sunday games. We moved the tourney to Northwestern University with a fully turfed facility to immunize us against the weather. We invested in four permanent jersey sets to give a premium look to our teams and a first-class flag themed appearance for Legion baseball. Jerseys ran nearly \$3,500. We added an optional Twins game for Friday night that drew 180 to Target Field (people bought their own tickets). Field rental included staffing for our event which ran over \$3,200. Adding more games meant paying more umpires and

- buying more baseballs. We continued the College Coaches Breakfast that drew 130 parents and players. Apple Valley Legion helped subsidize breakfast. It was a hit.
- We took a gamble and set up a Junior level All-Star tournament to mirror the senior event. Our technology allowed us to obtain and process names. But I can assure you that the extra time it took for the three of us of us to set up, manage, and juggle two simultaneous events was significant. But someone had to do it. We placed the 'experimental' event at Eagan. We found barely enough coaches. We found the response and demand again to be overwhelming from across the entire state. The experiment was a success. We offset many costs with a player fee. Most paid. A few did not. Our senior event and fundraising covered the loss differential for junior all-stars. Junior players played in their hometown uniforms last year. The response from players and parents was overwhelmingly positive. They came from all corners of the state to play All-Star Legion baseball.
 - All of these folks that know about all-stars, all the umpires and players and coaches and parents; they are all grateful to American Legion Baseball (you!) for putting on the all-star weekend. They thank us as a way of thanking you.
 - 2024 – Every year you learn and try to improve. We intend 2024 to really nail it. We are planning to honor a Vietnam Veteran, we invited the Mayor of Roseville and the Roseville First Responders. We are putting both junior and senior tournaments on turf at two college baseball stadiums just two miles apart. We are cutting down roster size and adding teams. We are putting permanent uniform jerseys on all players in both tournaments. We are hoping that 2024 delivers a really first-class season ending celebration of Legion Baseball that we envisioned five years ago in the basement of the Chanhassen Legion.
 - First – the Senior tourney at Northwestern University was by all reports a smashing success. It was a first class showcase for Legion Baseball and the Legion players. Twenty-six college coaches attended the games smashing any of our expectations. The website had over 25,000 visits. There are areas to improve including getting more coaches and more playing time for players. We are cutting team rosters down from the 16-17 level to 13. Kids come to play, and our coaches told us they spent too much time juggling playing time while keeping quality players on the bench. Rather than reduce opportunities for players, we added a fifth team for which we have to buy jerseys and pay for an expanded game schedule. We just need to tweak what was already a success.
 - Second – We are putting the Junior tournament on par with the Senior event. That takes additional investment and will need more volunteers and support. The Junior tournament is moving to Bethel University just two miles from Northwestern University. We will outfit five teams all with new permanent jerseys bringing our permanent jersey cost for 2024 to nearly \$4,500. Game costs will rise significantly with field rental, baseballs, umpires and other costs being significantly higher than last year. Rental cost alone should exceed \$2,500. Player fees and attendance will not cover 2024 Junior costs.

But we lost you as a sponsor. We think we still have Scheels. But not the State Legion Board this time around. Did we fumble our 2024 funding request from the State Board? Were we wrong to possibly lump the State Board funding of \$2,000 in with the Scheels funding of \$2,000? Did we call

our request \$4,000 which perhaps some Board members thought was a doubling of our State Board funding request (from two to four thousand)? Did we cause confusion? Did Scheels intend to help grow All-Stars as we have done with their verbal and added financial support? Or did Scheels intend to replace the State Board two grand with their added contribution of two thousand? Do Board members know what we are doing and how the effort has developed and expanded? I for one have no idea. None of us have been included in your meetings or discussions. I suspect there is a potential information vacuum.

Board Members:

We started All-Stars to ADD something to Legion Baseball. We intended to develop something that would benefit players, parents, and coaches. Your Legion All-Stars discovered Jack Spanier from Cold Spring. He literally was discovered at our 2022 event. Jack just broke into the starting lineup with the U of M Gophers as a freshman at shortstop as he went from unknown to Division One starting shortstop as a freshman. A Legion player! There are many more stories that are developing. I attended the state tourney a couple of years ago in Burnsville. One of the team coaches took me aside to tell me how upset he was to be in the state tournament and have players openly discussing on the bench during a game how Legion does not help them get to college. I guess they were noticing what they thought was an absence of college coaches following games. I said – I don't really know about that. Plenty of kids that played baseball on my Legion teams made it to college and a few to the pros. But I also said I understand that is a common perspective even if I don't buy into it. Some of us see lots of opportunities for Legion Baseball. Yes, there are a lot of teams registered. But we can and we should think beyond that metric alone. All-Stars gives you an additional product. Players and parents think what we are doing is valuable. They come from all over the state. They come from your district. They drive hours and they stay two to three nights. A few families have flown in to watch their player. How can we get you to come to All-Stars? How can we get you to watch some games where you can just enjoy and not have to work the field?

We invite you, as a prominent Legion Director, to come see the tournaments in August. Yes, you all will be exhausted from your state tournament duties. But why not come out and see your top players from around the state who are loyal Legion players? Why not, as a Director, take the attached flyer and promote All-Stars to all of the team coaches in your District? Why not promote All-Stars during June so that your coaches make sure that they send in the names of their top players? I can tell you this – college coaches and recruiters are telling us that they are putting Legion All-Stars on their permanent schedule. All-Stars could be on your schedule, too.

We wanted to develop a program that the State Legion would be proud of. An All-Star showcase for you and for the boys. I think we are almost there. 2024 should be a nearly fully developed product. We have not taken up your time and you haven't had to come to meetings or rake a field. We may have lost you as a sponsor this year, but we will want you back. We want you to get on board with us and promote All-Stars for your kids and your coaches. Most everyone in the state thinks that what we do is a function of the Minnesota State Legion. You get the credit. We just get personal satisfaction. And we worry that if one of the three of us that drive the all-star effort decides to pack it in, the concept of Legion All-Stars will just die and fade away.

We invite you to take an interest.

Sincerely,

Bruce

Bruce Barron