

CISCO STRIKES OUT

Spring finally arrived in 1952. I was anticipating a great spring and a real warm summer. School would be out in late May and this summer would be between my junior and senior year in high school.

The Pittsburgh Pirates again ended up in last place in 1951. What a terrible team. A couple of our gang had gone to Forbes Field to see a baseball game in 1951. In that year I played baseball for the Verona Jets, I was a pitcher. This team was made up of local teenagers. We played teams around Allegheny County. We were only a fair team. Music on the radio was always a constant; Johnny Ray and his hit tunes. "Cry" was a big hit that 1952 summer. Movies at the Oaks Theater, this we did on the weekends. In the early spring, "The Pride of St. Louis", a great story of Dizzy Dean, a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals and since I was a pitcher, I identified with this movie story.

School ended in the last week of May. The Pirates, their season just the same as they ended last year, lousy and winning only one third of their played games. Our Jets team was at the .500 mark, not much better.

That season the Pirates had a first baseman "catfish" Metkovich, his nickname came from an accident when he stepped on a catfish and was on the DL for awhile. His real name was George. Another noteworthy player was Clem Koshorek, who was the shortest player to play major league ball at 5 ft. 4 inches, playing shortstop; he played one year at Pittsburgh. Ralph Kiner was on that team, along with pitchers, Bob Friend and Murray Dickson. Local Pittsburgher's on this team included Bobby DelGreco and Tony Bartirome

On the 12th of June, I received a letter from the Pittsburgh Base Ball Club, Minor League System. Are they kidding me? I was being invited to Forbes Field for a tryout for the Pirates on June 18, 1952 at 9:00 AM. It seems that a roaming scout of the Pirates had seen the Jets play. Two of my teammates also got invited. The letter was signed by George Sisler, chief minor league scout for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Mr. Sisler had been a major league player in the 1920's and 30's for the lowly St. Louis Browns and later for the Boston Braves. He batted over 400 in two different seasons. The letter gave full details about time to be at the gate at Forbes Field along with instructions as to what to bring; gloves, spikes and uniform and to bring the letter, which would get us into the ball field. Can you imagine going to Forbes Field to play ball?

This week the Pirates were playing away and we had full use of the locker rooms. When I reached the field, I looked over to the left field bleachers where I would sit when I was a paying participant. Strange scenarios entered my mind. Maybe I was destined to lead the Pirates out of last place. What a rush! The instructors were all in Pirates uniforms. They looked very professional.

There were 30 of us rookies on the field. We were divided by position and I was with four other pitchers. We were with a catcher and instructors. I was the third pitcher to throw to him. The other boys looked good and could throw hard and fast. I wanted to start slow, but no my ego said throw hard and make a grand impression. I was really firing them in there. I felt good and started to get confident. All of a sudden someone blocked out the bright sun and the catcher said, "OK, let's see your fastball." Saline gathered in my throat and the sun disappeared. He threw the ball back to me and I rubbed it down. The catcher was Lenny Levy, who at one time was a Pirate bat boy, usher, coach and now a scout. He stayed with the Pirates as a scout for six years. After that glorious baseball career, Lenny Levy opened up a new car dealership in Oakland, close to Forbes Field. Why didn't he ask to see my knuckle ball, or my curve ball? I can throw those good. Nope, he wanted to see the fast ball even after I had thrown my fast ball. Not fast enough. After this warm up, I was sent to the infield pitchers' mound to pitch to some of the other players. There went my major league career. I could see the scouts writing notes on a pad. We spent about one and a half hours on the field; one of the greatest thrills of my young life. My baseball career ended just as fast as it had begun. No hero for the Pirates, just another flunkie for the hapless Bucco's.

The scouts bid us farewell and said the universal words for goodbye forever, "Don't call us, if we need to see you again, we will call." Fittingly on the way home, the radio was blaring, "Cry" by Johnny Ray. Back to reality and back to Verona. I still have the letter that invited me, an invite to a dream, but I awoke too soon.

Storytelling Topic Submitted by:

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