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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Career In Big League Is Island Boy's Dream

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I TALKED a few days ago to Vern Handrahan of Charlottetown, the only Prince Edward Islander who ever made a Major Baseball league roster. He was with the Kansas City Athletics early last summer, long enough to get into 18 ball games, until the lack of a good curve ball finally headed him to a Class AAA or Triple A Club as the next class to the majors is called. Vern played the rest of last season with Rochester Red Wings where he had a record of five wins, four losses and what is more important, an earned run average of 2.24, which is excellent. Anything up to an ERA of 2.5 is considered really good, and anything up to an average of three earned runs per game is considered good in baseball.

"I HAD no trouble with clubs like Minnesota, Boston, Washington or Baltimore, but the Yankees just murder fast ball pitching," he told me, and a fast ball was the only really good pitch the big Charlottetown boy had at that time. By now, however, he has developed a good curve ball and a slider, and he's working on a sinker ball. A "slider", by the way, is a fast ball that breaks.

It takes time to develop some of these pitches. Warren Spahn is one of the great all time pitchers and he worked five years on one of his pitches, before he finally got it right, Vern told me.

Mr. Handrahan is a big chap and is 26 years old. He stands 6 foot, 1 inch and weighs 195 in playing condition. He's just 200 now so he has only five pounds to trim off at the training camp which opens today.

How He Got His Big Chance In Ball

I WONDERED how Vern got his chance at professional baseball, and also how he got his chance at the major leagues. I found both stories interesting.

The Charlottetown man, then a youngster of 18, wrote to two clubs in the Halifax-Dartmouth professional league, in 1953 and was accepted by the Stellarton club which was in the league. Young Handrahan made a good enough impression to be signed by a scout for the Milwaukee Braves at the end of the season. A Cleveland scout was also interested, but it was too late for him to do anything about it by the time he talked with Vern.

But the Milwaukee club didn't show much interest in the Charlottetown boy as they sent him to a Class D club, which is just about as low as you can get in professional ball.

But the big break Vern was looking for was really fashioned by a bit of adversity, that must have been tough to take at the time. He had been drafted by the Kansas City Athletics in the fall of 1962 and he had the misfortune to cut a finger on his pitching

hand, just before spring training opened in 1963. That meant no pitching practice, though he absorbed all of the other training and instruction that was available.

Vern Ready When Big Break Came

HE WAS sent that year to Lewiston, Maine which was a class C club at the time. But Vern's lucky day came when a Class AAA club came in from Portland to play an exhibition game, and Vern's manager sent him to the mound with a slap on the back and a "Go get 'em kid" challenge.

It happened that Vern was in rare form for that one and he set the "Triple A" club down with only six hits while his mates were backing him solidly with a splendid performance, and the Charlottetown boy turned in a neat 8 to 1 victory. Vern had six strikeouts and the AAA club had at least five men of major league caliber. He gave up only two walks. For readers who are not baseball fans, this was a really tremendous performance. And that's the story of how he got his chance at the major leagues.

Manager Ed Lopat, a former Yankee pitching great, signed the husky Charlottetown lad to a contract as the 1964 major league baseball season opened and it was after Lopat had been fired in mid-June that his replacement, Mel McGahs, sent Vern to Rochester Red Wings.

Incidentally Rochester finished fourth in their league, which got them into the playoffs, and they went all the way in the finals to take the title.

In the something more than two months he had been with the Athletics he saw action against mostly every club in the league – he was used 18 times in all – and he had many impressive performances.

He's used as a relief pitcher – he had one or two spot starts – and though relief pitchers are specialists and are indispensable to a club, they get little chance for glory.

Major Ball A Boyhood Dream

I WONDERED as I talked with Vern, just when he had thought first of making the major leagues and I found he always did have that dream from the time he first started playing ball at home. "It seemed an awfully long way to go as I used to practice, and play in Memorial Field here", he told me, and I can well imagine. But the youngster persisted and he finally landed in the league that has the world's best ballplayers.

Just when he gets a call to the parent club will depend on many things. Part of it will depend on how strong an impression Vern makes as he takes his pitching turns this year in the strong Triple A ball league. And part of it will depend on how much need develops on the parent club for pitching aid, and how soon it develops.

But when it does come I'll be one of the many thousands of Islanders who will be pulling terribly hard for Vern Handrahan to make good.

INCIDENTALLY THE man who caught for the Triple A club that Vern beat 8-1 back in Lewiston in 1963, Haywood Sullivan, will be managing the team Vern will be with in Vancouver this season. Sullivan is a former big leaguer who had everything a big leaguer wanted, except he couldn't hit big league pitching. The fact he will manage the club leaves young Handrahan happy for Sullivan has always been interested in him

since he first saw the Charlottetown boy and already he has given valuable tips to the local boy who is seeking to fashion a big league career for himself.

The promising young athlete hasn't forgotten those who helped him on the way up. He has a warm feeling for Tom MacFarlane who helped him "with the thinking angle of baseball. He often encouraged me", Vern said. And Jimmy "Fiddler" MacDonald is another man who helped. Incidentally young "Fiddler" MacDonald is tabbed by Handrahan as the best fielder he has seen in Island baseball.

John Kane, the man who coached the St. Dunstan's University club to a Maritime College title this year, could have made the major leagues in baseball in Vern's opinion.

Billy MacMillan's Dad Is Recalled

I OFTEN think as I follow the brilliant career of Billy MacMillan, who will be playing tomorrow in Winnipeg with the St. Dunstan's University club in the Canadian Intercollegiate Hockey finals, how proud his late father would have been of the son, had he lived to see his development.

I knew Stewart MacMillan and valued the friendship of the quiet athlete – he was a hammer thrower when I met him first – whose big interest in sport was the development of his young sons.

Stewart used to encourage Billy, I am told, in a backyard rink, he built for the youngsters. He was an ardent advocate of minor hockey and he virtually died with words about the value of minor hockey on his lips.

Mr. MacMillan was attending a Dale Carnegie course that night and was speaking in Prince of Wales College on the sport that was so close to his heart. He had just finished speaking when he took a heart attack and died.

No wonder I think of my old friend as I follow the activities of his promising young son.

