

# THE OPINION PAGE

In the Mail: letters@gfherald.com; Box 6008, Grand Forks, N.D. 58206

OUR VIEW

## As Manitoba reels, hockey doesn't stop

## Fans, give new team a chance

Herald editorial board

Fifty-one years ago, in 1960, the Grand Forks Chiefs had six players who eventually played in the major leagues. Most notable was Willie Stargell, who spent two decades with the Pittsburgh Pirates and earned induction into the Hall of Fame.

The Chiefs that year were a minor league affiliate of the Pirates, in the Class C Northern League. The team folded in 1964.

The Grand Forks Varmints, of the Prairie League, played one season in 1996.

In 1998 came collegiate summer baseball. The Channel Cats folded after three seasons in the Northwoods League.

Friday, another attempt to bring high-level baseball to Grand Forks begins when the Whiskey Jacks host the Sioux Falls Sunfish at Kraft Field. The team is part of the Expedition League, a 12-team circuit in the Dakotas, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Nebraska. The Whiskey Jacks are an adopted team – the closure of the U.S.-Canada border means the squad cannot play in its usual city of Brandon, Manitoba.

Grand Forks is expected to get an expansion team of its own next summer.

Will summer baseball succeed in Grand Forks? The odds are stacked against it, based on previous experiences, but simple math shows it could work. Consider the league's recent attendance numbers.

The Western Nebraska Pioneers have led the league each of the past two seasons, averaging 1,140 fans in 2019 and 936 in 2018. The Pioneers are based in Gering and Scottsbluff, Neb., with a combined population of about 23,000.

Other attendance leaders in 2019 were Dickinson (population 18,000), which averaged 743 fans, and Casper, Wyo., (population 58,000) which averaged 739. The team in Minot (48,000) averaged 653 in 2019. The average attendance in 2019, according to league figures, was 612.

Greater Grand Forks has a population of roughly 64,000. Will just 1% of the community's residents attend Whiskey Jacks games this summer?

We're hoping so, since we see summer baseball as a quality-of-life perk, in the same vein as parks, walking trails and other outdoors activities.

But here's a problem: While Red River Valley summer evenings are perfect for baseball, they also draw many people away from the community each weekend. Greater Grand Forks is, after all, the closest Expedition League community to Minnesota's lakes country.

And, aside from hockey, folks here don't pack local arenas. The UND men's basketball team has been averaging only about 1,800 per game; the UND football team averaged 8,340 during its 2019 playoff season, which is still about 4,000 below capacity at the Alerus Center.

The Whiskey Jacks are college players and are not paid throughout the course of the 64-game season. Will a future professional be among them? Probably not, yet these kids are still good enough to dream, and there's a certain charm that comes with that.

We wish the Whiskey Jacks success this summer at Kraft Field, and we remind the team that sportsmanship, effort, fair prices and fun will go a long way to consistently drawing fans.

The Whiskey Jacks opened the season Tuesday with three games in Minot, but they return for their home-opener Friday against Sioux Falls. First pitch Friday and Saturday is 7:05 p.m.

Our suggestion? Give them a chance.

The National Hockey League held a playoff game in Winnipeg Sunday night, May 23, and nobody came. COVID-19 kept fans away.



MIKE JACOBS

Brian Pallister declared. He is equivalent to a state governor in the United States.

For much of the pandemic, Canada has had COVID rates below the United States. This prompted much discussion and some smugness. Were Canadians more likely to follow government health guidelines? Are cultural attitudes different enough in the two countries to protect the one while the other suffered?

These notions were explored in an earlier column, printed here on July 8, 2020. At that time, Manitoba had 325 cases and seven deaths compared to 3,816 cases and 80 deaths in North Dakota, despite a wide difference in population. Manitoba's population is not quite twice the population in North Dakota.

"Why the disparities?" the column asked. "Any answer would be speculative, but let's try. First, Canadians seem less aggressively individualistic than Americans, more

likely to respect authority and more inclined to build and respect collective institutions. It would be possible to create quite a long list, from universal health care to local credit unions to multi-tiered hockey programs that draw in almost every interested athlete, without the huge cost that American parents face ..."

But these factors didn't protect Manitobans after all.

At the end of last week, the rate of COVID infections in Manitoba was 482 per 100,000 people, the highest in Canada. Alberta was second at 440 cases per 100,000. Saskatchewan and Ontario, provinces bordering Manitoba, reported infection rates of 222 per 100,000.

These figures are borrowed from the Winnipeg Free Press newspaper's daily COVID report.

The situation was so dire early last week that Premier Pallister ordered schools closed and banned large gatherings, such as fans at hockey games, even Stanley Cup playoff games.

The crisis arose in part because Canada doesn't have an in-country source of vaccines, and so found itself dependent on world markets for inoculations – and the goodwill of its neighbors. The Free Press reported on Friday that 1,000 Manitoba truck drivers had been vaccinated in North Dakota under a program directed by Gov. Doug Burgum, who made vaccine doses available that weren't being used in the state. Truckers

have been vaccinated at rest stops on interstate highways near Drayton and Oriska, N.D. Vaccinations are also available at highway rest stops near the Saskatchewan border. Truckers are regarded as essential, and they can cross the international border, which has otherwise been closed for more than a year.

Manitoba's health care system has been overwhelmed, and COVID sufferers have been sent to hospitals in Ontario, which has a lower rate of infection.

Pallister has faced some pushback, just as Burgum did in North Dakota. Resistance to mask mandates, the Free Press reported, was strongest in areas around Winkler and Morden. These Manitoba towns are just north of the international border, near Walhalla and Langdon, N.D.

Canadian cases have an impact on nearby North Dakota. With the border closed, Canadians can't come south for weekend getaways or seasonal shopping sprees. This has an impact on retail centers such as Grand Forks and Fargo, but the effect may be greater in smaller border towns, which have historically welcomed Canadian revelers. Food and liquor prices are lower on this side of the border. Recreational areas just south of the border are often filled with Canadian revelers – and some are short of camping sites this year because Canadian travel trailers have been stranded in U.S.

campgrounds.

There's an impact on Americans seeking recreation, too. Americans can't go fishing in Manitoba, for example – a frustration for Americans but a financial loss for operators of Canadian resorts and fly-in fishing destinations.

And there's no end in sight. Canada Premier Justin Trudeau has hinted that the border may remain closed through this year – suggesting that travel could be disrupted until the spring of 2022.

Canada did relent a bit, allowing Americans who own recreational property on Minnesota's Northwest Angle to travel through Manitoba to reach it, providing they don't stop en route.

COVID did not diminish the drama of Sunday's hockey game, despite the nearly empty arena. The hometown Winnipeg Jets trailed the Edmonton Oilers 4-1 with 8.19 minutes remaining in regulation. The Jets staged an amazing comeback, scoring three goals in three minutes and three seconds to tie the game.

The Jets won in overtime and now lead the Oilers three games to none in the seven-game playoff series.

Last year, the NHL season was suspended as the pandemic began and as uncertainty gripped the world.

This year? Hockey, it turns out, isn't stopping for COVID, even as Manitoba reels from the pandemic's latest surge.

Mike Jacobs is a former editor and publisher of the Grand Forks Herald.

DOUBLE PLAY



IN THE MAIL

Pass legislation to protect children

To the editor, After 102 years of service to North Dakota communities, Lutheran Social Services has had to file for bankruptcy. As reported in the Herald (May 19, 2021), overwhelming debt related to providing affordable housing in rural areas is the underlying cause. Evidently their over-extension was in response to the Oil Patch housing shortage during the Bakken boom. This sad outcome points to the fact that it is unreasonable to expect charitable organizations to compensate for gross inequities in housing caused by market forces. It is time for us as a nation to face up to the actual costs visited upon communities and individuals.

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 24% of North Dakota's rental households are considered extremely low income, that is, earning no more than \$26,670 for a family of four. Based on HUD's Fair Market Rent, it takes \$33,647 in North Dakota to afford a two-bedroom rental home. At the same time, we have a shortage of 16,313 affordable rental homes for them. Fifty-eight percent of extremely low income renter households are severely cost-burdened: they do not have enough money to feed, clothe and shelter themselves, even the 48% who usually work more than 30 hours per week.

There are public policy actions which can help, such as permanently expanding the Child Tax Credit (CTC). According to a study conducted by

Columbia University, North Dakota's share of children left out of receiving the full Child Tax Credit is 21%; that is, their family's income is deemed too low for them to qualify for the tax credit, yet they are the most needful of all. Impoverished children need this support so they can be well nourished and have a roof over their head. The Earned Income Tax Credit also provides necessary funds for families.

Congress will decide whether to make the expansion of the CTC and EITC permanent, not just a stopgap to address the effects of the coronavirus. I ask our members of Congress, Sens. John Hoeven and Kevin Cramer and Rep. Kelly Armstrong, to favor this expansion, for the sake of our most vulnerable children.

Kathleen Ness  
Grand Forks

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Postmaster Send address changes to Grand Forks Herald Box 6008, Grand Forks, ND 58206-6008

Periodicals postage paid at Grand Forks and additional mailing offices

The Grand Forks Herald (ISSN 0745-9661; USPS 225580) is published digitally daily and printed Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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