

County has groomed many sports champs over the years

BY JAY SODERBERG

Otsego County has had a very interesting sports history. Four state championships have come about, with three of them in more recent years. Only a few weeks ago the girls won the state Little League title. In 1969 the boys Little Leaguers won the title. Back in 1967 the Gaylord High School boys ski team won the state title. And still further back, in 1915 the Otsegos won the state baseball championship.

Several recent misses for state championships also occurred. Vanderbilt just missed a state Class D basketball crown in 1968 and Johannesburg - Lewiston came close to winning a mythical Class D football title last year.

Individual heroes. There were dozens of them. Maybe it was Jack Lovelace, or Norm Glasser, or Bob Butters, or then too it might be Ken Schreur, Martin Makel, Walton Fritz, the McCoy brothers, Wilson Howe, Gerald Drake, and John Criski. There were the stars of modern times as well. How about John Burnison, Tom Lick, Terry Walker, Rick Holeywinski, Darryl Smith, Gene Nowak, the skiing Walkers, Jim Peterson, Dave Johnson, Greg Sides and Bailey Oliver, and of course, Tyrus Raymond Cobb.

There were many others, too, all that will carve a niche in the sports history of Otsego County for years to come. The trophy cases in the schools around the county are full of trophies and memories that will linger forever.

It was very interesting digging back into the history of sports, especially in the early days. Records were burned out by the great fire that wiped out the Herald Times newspaper office in Gaylord late in 1946. Many memories fade with age, but after talking to dozens of old-timers in the community, we can come up

with somewhat of a picture of the "good old" days as they so often refer to.

MANY SPORTS weren't even invented before the turn of the century, and as far as sports go in the "north woods," they were greatly discouraged here, because they were deemed a "foolish luxury." Baseball was the great American pastime, and as far as I can tell, the only major sport in the county before the 1900's.

At the turn of the century, a new breed moved into the area. Gaylord High School fielded its first basketball team in 1904. Team members include Ray Hamilton, Will Shockey, Ernest Brain, Ernie Eby and Dick Durst. The record was not available, but the games were played in the old Opera House.

In 1905 the Livingston Town Hall was the scene of most of the basketball games, and Supt. of Schools, G. H. Curtis found a new playing field for the baseball team out behind the barn in the old Doc Harris property.

In 1906, Wilton Simmons, a star player at Albion College, coached in Gaylord. "Sam" was one of the best baseball pitchers around in those days, and his 1906 GHS baseball team lost only one game. During that time, Sanford Buck, the cashier at the Gaylord State Bank, let the local high school use his land for the baseball field. It was appropriately called "Buck's Park." That field was in use from 1906-1915 when the property was sold to Henry Stephens, the lumber baron from Waters, who owned the Gaylord baseball team.

Gaylord was considered the baseball champs of Northern Michigan during the 1907 season. The school had only 40 students in high school at that time. Leon Smith, the Gaylord catcher, and Pete Moena, an outfielder, both went out

West to play professional baseball in California.

From that span through the 1920's, Gaylord still seemed to be the pride of the North in both high school and semi-pro baseball.

Stephens became the baseball czar of the North, and promptly made his Otsegos the most fearsome baseball nine in the state. He imported all the big professionals from downstate, and inserted them into the lineups for all the big games. Fairtime always brought a big crowd to watch baseball, and the "top" games of the North were centered around the fair.

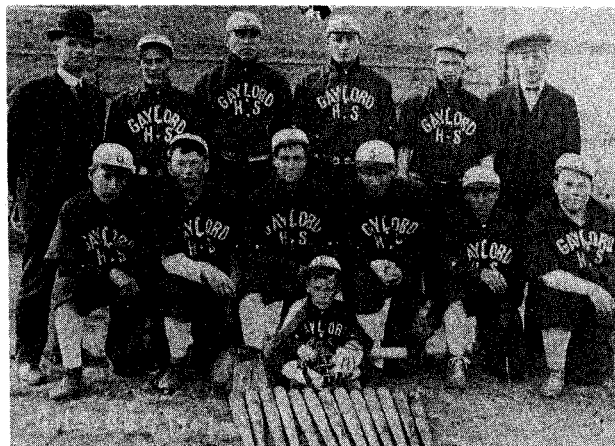
The 1914 Otsego Baseball Team owned by Stephens went on to win the state championship in Ypsilanti. A member of that squad was Ty Cobb, the "Georgia Peach," and most feared professional player who ever played Major League baseball for the Detroit Tigers.

Rumors have it that Cobb only played in one ball game for the Otsegos, but he was paid a hefty sum of \$1,000 for the game. At that time, Cobb drew a salary of only \$2,250 with the Tigers, so his trip to Gaylord was worth it.

Other professionals to play for Stephens include Frank Bowerman, a catcher for the New York Giants, Urban Shocker, who pitched for the St. Louis Cardinals and later for the New York Yankees, Lefty Oldham and George Mullin, former Tiger pitchers.

Stephens had a beautiful field in Waters and one on the present site of Gaylord High School. Both fields were examples of sure beauty and luxury, and were by far, the best fields north of Mt. Pleasant.

Sometime along in the 1920's, Gaylord and Grayling had their classical baseball battle. Gaylord was rather badly beaten by Grayling in the first encounter on the Grayling field. This



THE GAYLORD HIGH SCHOOL baseball team of 1907 was North Michigan Champions. Pictured above from right to left: bottom row, Clarence Bladget, Frank Burlingame, Leon Smith, Herbert Hutchins, Elmer Warner, and Joe Hazard. Top row: Superintendent of Schools George Curtis, Jim Mohena, Wiley Humphrey, the others not identified. In front, Grosbeck, first name unknown.

seemed to bother the locals, so on Grayling's return trip, the Gaylord team journeyed to Detroit to pick up the likes of the Kelly Greens, a top professional team of their time. Three of their best players came up for the game. They included Tellie Voss, Marty Cavanaugh and Joe Dermody. It's needless to say what the results were of the return match.

A FEW YEARS before that, Harry Covaleski, a player for the Philadelphia Phillies and later the Tigers, came up for one of the fair games. Covaleski was a big name pitcher of the 1916-1917-1918 seasons, winning 20 big league games each of those years. He pitched for Gaylord one day, and also hit a home run for the Otsegos. As he approached home plate to complete his home run, there was Stephens himself, chewing on a gigantic cigar, and clenching a \$100 bill in his hand. As Covaleski crossed home plate, Stephens handed him the bill.

During the 1924 season (some say it was in 1925), Gaylord won 19 games under Coach Clare Kidder, and were the high school champions of the North.

In 1925-26, Gaylord went 18-5 with Bill Burkett being Supt. of Schools, coach and teaching five classes besides. He started football in the fall of 1925 and the GHS team went 2-3 in their initial season. They beat both Onaway and Grayling. Al Kowakeski was the center, Archie Campbell and William Johnson the guards.

In 1927, the VFW sponsored an independent

baseball team that only lost two games. Eddie Hubbell of CMU fame, along with Andy and Al McCoy and Archie Campbell, were the big stars. Al Kowaleski, Bill Johnson and Dr. Berry joined the team for the 1929 season and did equally as well.

It was Monsignor Kaminski, then a priest at the St. Mary parish, who started basketball for the school during the 1928-29 season. The Snowbirds took home the consolation trophy during the 1928-29 season. The Snowbirds took home the consolation trophy in the district tourney in Petoskey. Al Kowakeski was the first coach, and Tony Dreffs and Kise McCoy were the big stars.

The Snowbirds went 12-5 in their second season with Ed Jozwiak and Kise McCoy the two big stars of the team.

ALL COUNTY TEAMS in those days played their games in the Gaylord Auditorium and practiced in the old wooden frame building where the present high school now stands. The only regulation playing court in those days was located in Grayling.

Most county teams played games on successive nights. Teams would usually take the trains in the winter months because most of the roads out of town didn't get plowed. The games were played on weekends, and most of them were overnight trips. Does the old BC-G-A Railroad ring a bell to you oldtimers?

During the 20's, Carl Guggisberg, Don Campbell and Herb Hutchins played

on several outstanding baseball teams here.

John Makel came to GHS in 1930 and immediately took over all sports at the school and led the squad to 11 district championships in basketball over his tenure here.

In 1931, both Gaylord and St. Mary won district basketball titles. GHS had a great football team that year, winning the Little 6 championship. They beat everyone except Alpena, who was the Class B champ. Ken Schreur was the captain of that team and Harry Shields was as good of a linebacker as anyone in the area.

Around that same time, Mike Pomarzynski was the newly-hired St. Mary baseball coach. They had to raffle off \$600 worth of tickets to supply the team with uniforms, but it was worth it, because the Snowbirds only lost two games in the next three years. Roy Fitzek and Bruno Mankowski were only two of the better players on those teams.

Makel's first football team at GHS in 1930 had a good year, but in 1931 it was just super. East Jordan was considered to be one of the best small teams in the state, but they lost to Gaylord, 7-6, on the East Jordan field. Gaylord averaged only 148 pounds "soaking wet" but were very fearsome. Some of the stars on that squad included John Criski at quarterback, Bull Wilson and Wilson Howe in the line, and Harold Noirot at the halfback. Key subs included Keith Hale and Hector McKinnon. Gaylord was offered a post-season

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