

Fertile Ground for Baseball

Daffodils, trillium and children riding bikes around the village wearing blue baseball caps with the iconic red and white “LB” logo: these are signs that spring has arrived in Lake Bluff even if boots and winter coats are still in the hall closet rotation.

We’ll be seeing even more of the LB caps, since April 17 is Lake Bluff Youth Baseball's opening day. Just thinking about opening day put the Museum in mind of famous baseball players of Lake Bluff. One of these is Mickey Cochrane, a Hall of Famer considered to be among the best catchers in baseball history. He lived at 138 E. Sheridan Road in Lake Bluff for about 20 years prior to his death in 1962, from lymphatic cancer, at the age of 59.

Born Gordon Stanley Cochrane, he was known as “Black Mike” and was considered the best catcher in Major League Baseball and the second best player behind Babe Ruth in the 1920s and 1930s, according to the book *Mickey Cochrane: The Life of a Baseball Hall of Fame Catcher*. Cochrane played in three World Series for the Philadelphia Athletics and later led the Detroit Tigers to their 1934 American League championship, the team’s first pennant in 25 years.

What brought Cochrane to Lake Bluff? After retiring from baseball in 1937 due to a serious head injury from a Yankees pitch, he joined the U.S. Navy in World War II and served as a lieutenant assigned to Naval Station Great Lakes, just up the road from the Village. There he oversaw physical training and coached the base’s baseball team. This was no small feat given that many of the sport’s greatest players had left the Major Leagues to serve their country, and the best of the best played for the Great Lakes Naval base.

Later in the war Cochrane served as a lieutenant commander in the Pacific Theater, heading the Navy fleet's recreation center in Gab Gab Beach, Guam.



*The 1943 Bluejackets baseball team; Mickey Cochrane is seated in the front row, middle.
Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the American Sailor.*

Ryno: From Wrigley Field to Artesian Park

Another famous American baseball player to call Lake Bluff home is Ryne “Ryno” Sandberg, a 10-time All-Star who enjoyed a storied career with the Chicago Cubs and Philadelphia Phillies. Sandberg moved to Lake Bluff in 2016 with his wife, Margaret, to be closer to their grandsons, who (not surprisingly) play baseball with Lake Bluff Youth Baseball Association.

Sandberg joined the Cubs in 1981 and retired — for the first time — in 1994, saying at the time that he wasn’t playing at his peak. He returned to the Cubs for two seasons in 1996 and ‘97 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2005. His number 23 was retired in a ceremony at Wrigley Field on August 28, 2005.

Between 2006 to 2010, Sandberg managed the Cubs' Class-A Peoria Chiefs in the Midwest League, then the Class Double-A Team Tennessee Smokies in the Southern League, and later the Triple-A Iowa Cubs. In 2010, he was named manager of the Philadelphia Phillies' top minor-league affiliate, the Lehigh Valley IronPigs, until season's end in 2012, when he returned to the big league, literally, as third base coach and infield instructor of the Philadelphia Phillies. There his star rose again, being named interim manager and then permanent manager in 2013 with a three-year contract.

Sandberg resigned from the Phillies in June 2016. Today, in addition to being a devoted husband, father and grandfather and occasional pinch hitter for Lake Bluff Youth Baseball, the National League's 1984 Most Valuable Player and a nine-time Gold Glove is a goodwill ambassador for the Cubs organization.

But don't tell this to Kathy O'Hara, a non-baseball fanatic if there ever was one. She was doing research in the Museum one day before The Pandemic, when a visitor came in and asked if the Museum had anything on Ryne Sandberg. While Sandberg is featured in one of the Museum's "I am Lake Bluff History" street banners and on its website, there wasn't anything about him in the Museum itself. Said Kathy O'Hara to the man standing before her:

"No, we don't have anything on Ryne Sandberg—he has never given us any of his baseball gear!"

Said the visitor: "I'm Ryne Sandberg, and I'd like to give you some things of mine!"

A short time later, he donated a signed bat, two No. 23 jerseys and other memorabilia.

Thanks, Ryno!



Ryne Sandberg's Chicago Cubs jersey. He donated it to Lake Bluff History Museum in 2020, along with some other memorabilia.