

180 years on the diamond: 6 Toledo area baseball coaches have 30-plus years of experience

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Baseball coaches from left: Jeff Mielcarek (Central Catholic), Chris Hardman (Ottawa Hills), Greg Wilker (Lake), Dave Hall (Perrysburg), Kyle Reiser (Elmwood), and Larry Tuttle (Blissfield), in the Mercy Field baseball stadium.

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Baseball might no longer be considered America's national pastime, but you could not convince six area high school coaches who have devoted a large portion of their lives to the game.

Never before — in any high school sport in the Toledo area — has there been a collection of active coaches combining for such longevity.

Counting the current season, through May 5, they have combined for 4,224 victories in 226 seasons. All but one of those seasons has been spent by the six coaches at their current schools.

From nearby Blissfield, Mich., is the area's true dean of coaches, Larry Tuttle, who is in his 52nd season guiding the Royals. Along the way have come 1,282 victories and seven state championships.



At Ottawa Hills, Chris Hardman has led the Green Bears for 39 seasons, compiling 618 wins, one state title, and six other appearances in the state final four.

In Millbury, Greg Wilker is in his 35th season leading the Lake Flyers, accumulating 611 victories and one trip to the state semifinal round.

Dave Hall, in his 34th season, has led Perrysburg to 640 wins and two teams to the state final four, including a runner-up finish.

Further south in Wood County is the home of “Country Hardball,” a slogan

Elmwood coach Kyle Reiser and his “Country Hardball,” a slogan he borrowed from his grandfather and applied to the Royals teams he has led for 32 of his 33 seasons, has racked up 571 victories and a state runner-up finish.

Jeff Mielcarek, who almost never got the chance to be a high school head coach, is in his 33rd season at Central Catholic, a run that has included 502 victories and back-to-back trip to the regional final round near the start of his career.

All six already have been inducted to their respective state association’s halls of fame before their careers have concluded.

D-DAY B-DAY

Tuttle was born on one of the most significant dates of World War II — June 6, 1944.

Now 74, Tuttle’s memories stretch back to the Truman Administration and the Korean War.

Through all of that, Tuttle has been in love with baseball.

From the time his parents, Leland and Irene, put him on his first Little League team at age 11, through four unbeaten seasons at Morenci High School, a career at Adrian College, and his time at Blissfield, Tuttle’s unmistakable grin under the bill of a cap has been a fixture throughout southeast Michigan.

He has a steel-trap memory on details of the games he’s coached — good and bad.

“In 1999, we were playing for a state championship, up by a run in the top of the seventh,” he recalled. “My ace pitcher was able to go, [but] I had a young man who had shut Saginaw Nouvel Catholic down for three innings [and] I left him in to pitch. The first batter singles, and the next batter hits a walk-off, two-run homer. I have kicked myself ever since.”

Mostly, he remembers all the young faces wearing the Blissfield “B” on their caps, and how driven they were to continue their school’s, and their town’s, greatest tradition.

“Coaching baseball was always something I wanted to do,” Tuttle said. “I started coaching Babe Ruth baseball in Morenci during the summer of my sophomore year in college. Not talented enough to play beyond college, it was my way to stay involved in the game.

“I don’t believe you get burned out with something that you love to do. The positives outweigh the negatives in the great game of baseball.”

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Hardman grew up in Piqua in southwest Ohio. He’s the son of Jim Hardman, who coached baseball for more 30 years at Central High School, where the baseball diamond bears his name.

So after Chris grew up having played baseball for his dad, graduated from Piqua Central in 1969, from Ohio Wesleyan in 1973, and added a master’s degree from Bowling Green in 1974, teaching and coaching seemed to be a natural direction.

Although he might have had second thoughts early on, Hardman settled in on his original choice and decided the grass was greenest at Ottawa Hills High School. Especially on the Green Bears’ diamond, which he has tended like an award-winning garden.

Like father, like son. That carefully manicured field now bears Chris Hardman’s name.

“I was always around the game because of my father, and my best memories are my teammates and the competition,” Hardman said. “... I feel blessed to have had the support of the Ottawa Hills administration and community, but mostly, the incredible support of the parents and the players. I am as passionate today about coaching as I have ever been.”

As the Green Bears coach in 1977, 1979-80, and 1984-2019, Hardman has all the wins and, as he is quick to point out, 521 losses.

“I do know I will have coached more losing games in a career than anyone else in the state,” he said.

But there is a reason for that number, and it has nothing to do with Hardman’s knowledge of baseball or ability to coach it. It has everything to do with another number — seven — which is how many times his Green Bears have advanced to the state final four.

With Hardman pushing the Green Bears to their highest potential by scheduling most of their nonleague games against bigger schools each year, Ottawa Hills has taken its lumps. But the trade-off has been producing a more battle-tested, formidable tournament team.

OH, BROTHER

As the youngest of six sports-loving boys in Coldwater, Ohio, Wilker was destined to remain in sports throughout his adult life.

Now 57, it has been a comfortable fit for the longtime Lake baseball head coach and Flyers football assistant.

“I come from a sports family with five older brothers ranging from seven to 17 years older than me, and we used to play Reds versus Cards in our backyard,” Wilker said. “Thanks to my late brother, Stan, and late uncle, Clete, I became a lifelong St. Louis Cardinals fan and was hooked on the game [baseball] from a very young age.”

After playing baseball for the Coldwater Cavaliers of legendary coach Lou Brunswick, Wilker, a 1979 grad, earned his degree from Wright State in 1983 and embarked on his career as a teacher and coach at Lake.

The coaching seed was planted a few years earlier.

“While in college, I coached Pony League baseball [Coldwater High School] with a group of players who were extremely talented and fun to coach,” Wilker said. “They went on to win two state championships while in high school.”

After one season as the Flyers JV coach, Wilker got the varsity job in 1985 and still is going strong.

“I have [endured] in coaching by remembering why I coach,” Wilker said. “That is, to teach my student-athletes lessons that they’ll take with them into adulthood — teamwork, sportsmanship, strategy, and how to have fun.”

IN HIS BLOOD

Hall, 63, barely has a memory that does not involve baseball.

From the time he was a 5-year-old bat boy for his older brother Steve’s youth teams, which were coached by his father, Bob, his heart and soul have been entrenched in baseball diamonds — from his early years in St. Marys, Ohio, through his tenure at Perrysburg.

Guiding the Yellow Jackets since 1986, Hall’s teams have won 11 Northern Lakes League championships and six district titles to go with the two trips to the Division I state semifinal round. His 2011 team was state runners-up.

“Baseball is in my blood,” Hall said. “It was my dad and uncles’ favorite sport. My brother was a four-year starter at the University of Toledo. My son is a high school coach. I honestly do not know what I would do without baseball.

Along the way, Hall has seen just about everything.

“The most bizarre thing was having a game stopped in Florida when an osprey on a light pole dropped a mouse,” Hall said. “It shorted out the transformer, shutting down the lights and canceling the game.”

COUNTRY HARDBALL

In the Bloomdale and Jerry City area, where baseball has been the most successful sport at Elmwood, the game has been played the past three-plus decades with a style painted on the home dugout — “Country Hardball.”

It is a term Reiser often heard as a youth and seemed a perfect slogan for how he wanted his teams to compete.

Reiser, 58, took his first coaching post at Tinora in 1984, and had his first stint at Elmwood from 1985-87 before becoming a college assistant at Ball State (1988-89) and Bowling Green (1990). He returned as Elmwood’s coach in 1991 and has been there since.

His Royals have won 17 league championships and five district titles. Reiser’s 2007 team ended as Division III state runners-up.

“My first memory of baseball was playing catch in the front yard with my dad,” Reiser said. “He was a little league coach and later coached Legion baseball for Pemberville. I was hooked on baseball from the very beginning.

“I organized a group of kids on my block into a team and playing against other kids from the other side of town. Purely sandlot, like the movie. When I was 16, I coached a T-ball team of 18 kids [7 and 8 year olds] in Pemberville while I was still playing Legion baseball. It was a lot of fun. We went undefeated. I was hooked. I have been coaching ever since. After that I knew what I wanted to do.”

Reiser has seen the highs and the lows of the game, and one year both at once.

“We only had 12 players in the program one season after a group of kids decided not to play, for whatever reason,” Reiser said. “The kids were a little down. My assistant bought a toy gopher that was made to be like the gopher in the movie ‘Caddyshack.’

“When you wound it up it danced, and the Kenny Loggins song ‘I’m Alright’ played. We kept it in the dugout for every game. We went on to win a league championship and called ourselves the ‘Dirty Dozen.’ I still have it.”

GIVING BACK

When Mielcarek was 22 years old, he had two golden opportunities presented to him at the same time.

One was to be the athletic director for the Catholic Youth Organization in the Diocese of Toledo, a career he quickly accepted. The other was to be head baseball coach at Central Catholic, which he wasn’t sure he would be allowed to take in light of the CYO responsibilities.

Thanks to Diocese officials, he was permitted to lead the Fighting Irish.

For Mielcarek, 56, the early years weren't easy, even though his 1989 and 1990 teams reached the Class AAA regional final round. He was a young, inexperienced coach learning on the fly.

Mielcarek never will forget the rival coaches who taught him the ropes, like Don Kober, his coach at St. Francis de Sales, the late George Filby (DeVilbiss) and Al Mocek (Rogers), Rob Rose at Whitmer, and Mike O'Reilly at Southview.

Now a longtime coach himself — and a statewide figure in the Ohio High School Baseball Coaches Association, and organizer and coach in the state's Mizuno All-Ohio series and for the former Team Ohio group that played in Oklahoma's Sunbelt Classic — Mielcarek strives to share his expertise with younger coaches.

"It's about giving back," Mielcarek said.

After graduating from St. Francis in 1981 and earning his bachelor's degree after two years each at Xavier University and the University of Toledo, Mielcarek's professional career has revolved around sports. After almost 30 years as the CYO athletic director, he is now general manager of Twos Athletic Club in Toledo.

"I grew up in a neighborhood where the older kids played baseball all the time," Mielcarek said. "My brother and me would watch them play and then we would figure out ways to play on our own. It was a family passion."

The passion led to an opportunity he covets.

"The best part of coaching, to me, is the relationships with the players," Mielcarek said. "There is no close second to that."