

Jim McNulty – Colorful Manager of the Fairmont Martins of the 1950s

Before the Minnesota Twins, interleague play, and the astronomical salaries of today's professional baseball players, there was something called "Town Ball." The Fairmont Martins of the 1950s epitomized the "Town Ball" era as their "Boys of Summer" built somewhat of a dynasty winning state championships in 1954, 1955, 1957, and 1959.

Their manager through much of the 1950s was a former Brooklyn, New York, native named Jim McNulty. A previous member of the Brooklyn Dodger organization, McNulty, the colorful second baseman and manager, spent thirteen seasons playing a significant role in Minnesota town team baseball. He arrived in Minnesota in 1948 spending three summers in Fergus Falls and one summer with Estherville in the Iowa State League. From Estherville he went to Fairmont and carved out 197 regular season wins, six pennants, and five playoff championships in the Western Minnesota and Southern Minnesota Leagues, at that time considered the state's two premier leagues.

McNulty's baseball career began on the streets of Brooklyn, New York, playing "sewer-to-sewer ball," a form of stickball. He eventually became a baseball star in high school earning all city as well as all state recognition in soccer. He quit school and enlisted in the Marines. While in the military, he participated in the invasion of Iwo Jima. McNulty played on a Marine divisional team where he met Dick Durrell, a Minnesota native who was eventually influential in his coming to Minnesota.

McNulty wanted to play professional baseball; however, after an unsuccessful tryout with the New York Giants, he decided to enroll at Colgate University. At that same time, the Brooklyn Dodgers offered him a signing bonus of \$1,800.00 to play in their organization. He accepted and thus began his professional career in the Class D Georgia-Florida League earning a salary of \$125.00 a month plus a couple of dollars daily for meal money.

He had limited success in the minor leagues; consequently, he decided to come to Minnesota in 1948 following a telephone conversation with his Marine friend, Dick Durrell. He was offered a position with the Fergus Falls Red Sox in the North Central Minnesota League. His first game in Elbow Lake was quite a culture shock for the Brooklyn native.

Eventually the North Central Minnesota League collapsed, and McNulty then spent a year managing Estherville of the Iowa State League. The Martins at that time had just finished their first season in the Western Minnesota League with a very disappointing 13-22 record. They contacted McNulty and offered him a contract to become their

player/manager for \$300.00 a month. He accepted, and in addition was provided a sporting goods sales position in a local store. He also eventually purchased a bar and restaurant he named the "Martin's Nest" located in the 700 block of North North Avenue. McNulty's life at that time, although not exactly the major leagues he had hoped for, seemed to be sailing along quite smoothly.

McNulty was known as a winner, but his skill in recruiting players was also impressive. He recruited more than two dozen professional players, many with Triple A experience, in addition to several players with major league credentials such as Pittsburgh shortstop Grady Wilson, Hank Workman, and Cleveland outfielder Milt Nielsen. The Martins under McNulty won two Western Minnesota titles before moving to the Southern Minnesota League in 1955. They won the 1955 Southern Minny pennant, playoffs, and Little World Series. They finished second in 1956, they won the 1957 Southern Minnesota title, and in 1958 they won the pennant but lost to Austin in the playoffs. In 1959 they won the Southern Minny pennant again.

By 1960, the quality of competition had diminished, the players were playing for a share of the gate, and the Minnesota Twins would soon become Minnesota's baseball team. It was obvious that things were rapidly changing regarding what was known as "Town Ball." To quote one of Yogi Berra's eloquent yogi-isms that might be relevant to this time, "The future ain't what it used to be."¹ McNulty moved to the Twin Cities and remained in Minnesota for three more years. However, as a result of financial problems, he returned to Brooklyn where he drove a taxi for a time before establishing a limousine service. He later retired to the Poconos in Pennsylvania. He passed away in 2011.

A number of the "Boys of Summer" from that golden era of the 1950s Fairmont Martins still live in this area including Bill Dudding, Don Dahlke, and Harry Pritts. They recall that era and Jim McNulty with many fond memories. Bill Dudding, former Martin's second baseman now living in Bancroft, Iowa, is quoted as saying the following about the late Jim McNulty: "He was a fun manager to play for and he expected us to win – and we did!" Former Martins pitcher and Fairmont resident Harry Pritts says, "Jim McNulty was as good a manager as I've ever played for and one of the best competitors ever." Another Fairmont resident that played shortstop for McNulty, Don Dahlke, said, "He was always a players' manager. He took care of his players very well."

The Jim McNulty era had a lasting effect on Fairmont and Martin County. Many of those athletes that came to play for the Martins stayed in Fairmont and Martin County, raised families here, and contributed to the local area in many positive ways.

¹ <http://www.yogiberra.com/yogi-isms.html>

I would like to acknowledge *“Town Ball – The Glory Days of Minnesota Amateur Baseball”* authored by Armand Peterson and Tom Tomashek as the primary resource for this article.

For more information on this topic, and to see a copy of *“Town Ball”* autographed by Jim McNulty, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



1957 Fairmont Martins – front row, L to R: Harry Pritts (LHP), Myron Hoffman (RHP), Don Dahlke (3B), Dick Eaton (1B), Milt Nielsen (OF), Herb Banton (OF), Jim McNulty (2B, mgr). Back row, L to R: Ken Staples (C), Ken Yackel (OF), Loyal Bloxam (RHP), Bill Dudding (C, 2B), Gordy Figard (SS).

Professional experience (highest classification)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Highest Class</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>League</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Home state</u>
Pritts	AA	New Orleans	Southern Association	1954	Pennsylvania
Hoffman	AA	New Orleans	Southern Association	1956	Pennsylvania
Dahlke	Open	Hollywood	Pacific Coast League	1955	Iowa
Eaton	A	Albany, NY	Eastern League	1955	Ohio
Nielsen	Majors	Cleveland	American League	1951	Minnesota
Banton	AA	Mobile	Southern Association	1954	Virginia
McNulty	C	Greenwood, MS	Cotton States League	1949	New York
Staples	AA	Fort Worth	Texas League	1954	Minnesota
Yackel	*				Minnesota
Bloxam	A	Denver	Western League	1954	California
Dudding	--				Iowa
Figard	AAA	Buffalo	International League	1959	California

* -- Yackel was one of the most versatile athletes in Minnesota history – he earned four letters in hockey at the U of M, two in football, and three in baseball. He played on the Silver-medal winning USA hockey team in the 1952 Winter Olympics in Oslo, and briefly with the Boston Bruins in the NHL in 1959.