



TRIUMPH OVER TRAGEDY

After a raging fire nearly destroyed Fifth Third Ballpark in early January, the Whitecaps were determined that baseball would return to West Michigan better than ever – without skipping a beat.

By Ben Chiswick

January 3, 2014, was a day that began like any other winter morning at Fifth Third Ballpark. With the holiday season in the rearview mirror and another new year underway, the staff of the West Michigan Whitecaps was back at work preparing for the upcoming baseball season.

As the frigid overnight temperatures in West Michigan slowly crept above zero, however, this particular Friday was far from a typical day at the office.

It was just after 10:45 a.m. when Katie Johnson, the Whitecaps' Food & Beverage Manager, noticed something unusual – first a feeling, and then a smell.

"I actually felt it coming into our office," recalled Johnson. "I could smell the smoke coming in from underneath the door. That's when I checked it out. I went into the hallway to see what was going on and that's when I actually opened up the suite door and saw the fire."

A fire had broken out on the upper level at Fifth Third Ballpark. Along the first base line, a work crew had been doing maintenance in Suite 306. Though some of the details may never be clear, the source of the fire was later determined by the Plainfield Fire Department to be sparked by a space heater.

Most of the administrative offices at Fifth Third Ballpark were located on the main level behind home plate, but

a handful of Whitecaps' employees worked upstairs in suite level offices. Employees in the Food & Beverage, Operations and IT departments suddenly found themselves facing an unexpected situation.

"As soon as I opened my office door the [fire] alarm started going off," continued Johnson. "You couldn't see the smoke in the [suite] hallway but you could smell it. [When I opened the suite door there] was a lot of black smoke and some flames in there too, but pretty much just a lot of black smoke."

At the same time Steve McCarthy, the Whitecaps' Vice President of Sales, was on the suite level behind home plate conversing with Technology Administrator Scott Lutz.

"We thought at first it could be a false alarm," said McCarthy. "About 20 seconds later we heard a hissing sound... like air being pushed through the pipes. We looked at each other and realized immediately it was the sprinkler system."

Just then, Johnson came down the hallway and told them what she had discovered.

Johnson and Lutz went back to the suite with a fire extinguisher, but it became clear that the rapidly growing blaze was already out of control. McCarthy went downstairs to alert the approximately 30 full-time

staff members that were on-site at the time that it was not just a routine fire drill.

Fortunately, everybody got out of the ballpark safely. Despite the fact that no injuries were reported, the next few hours were extremely difficult for members of the Whitecaps' front office to stomach. Due to the freezing conditions, the staff made their way to the Pepsi Stadium Club beyond the right-center field wall to seek refuge and heat. From there, they could do nothing but watch as the Plainfield Fire Department battled the powerful blaze. "We got everybody outside and basically just watched in horror as a small fire turned huge," recalled McCarthy. "We started to see smoke come out [of the suite] and then flames come out... We just watched from [the Pepsi Stadium Club] and smelled the awful smell of all those materials burning and just hoped they would be able to stop it."

As the Whitecaps' front office staff watched helplessly, the seriousness of the blaze became increasingly clear. Fifth Third Ballpark - considered a second home by many employees that spend countless hours at the facility - was literally burning to the ground.

"When it first happened, I didn't think it was going to be that big," said Johnson, expressing an initial reaction shared by most of the staff. "But as we watched it continue we realized that it was slowly, piece-by-piece destroying the ballpark. It took a bit to settle in. It was surreal."

Though the Plainfield Fire Department arrived on the scene promptly, a confluence of events came together to make the inferno difficult to control. The fire reached the attic space above the ceiling and spread quickly. For reasons that remain unknown, the sprinkler system failed to produce any water. As the "polar vortex" blanketed the country with exceptionally chilling temperatures, firefighters battled extreme elements that included a wind chill biting at 10 degrees below zero.

Seemingly straight out of a movie, the scene captured the attention of the entire West Michigan community. Local television stations chronicled the entire episode with live "breaking" news coverage. Motorists on US-131 watched in awe as they drove by the giant plume of smoke rising from the burning ballpark. Within hours, a "Rebuild Fifth Third Ballpark" Facebook page was created by fans. News spread quickly around the country as well, and former Whitecaps' players began to offer their prayers and support.

"[Fifth Third Ballpark] is everything that a baseball player can dream about," said former Whitecaps' second baseman Devon Travis, a 2013 Midwest League All-Star, while speaking to a local television station during their

live coverage of the fire. "Once I left there it was almost bittersweet. I was going up a level, but at the same time I didn't really want to leave. Up until now, that's been the best place I've played."

"The support the Whitecaps receive from their fans and the entire community is outstanding," said the Detroit Tigers' Don Kelly to Mlive.com. "The team means a lot to the Grand Rapids area. You hate to see stuff like that happen to a great organization."

"Just saw some of the pictures," added the Tigers' Alex Avila in the same story. "Pretty crazy. I'm glad no one was hurt. That is one of the best Minor League Baseball stadiums. Always a packed house and a great atmosphere."

Eventually, through the heroic efforts of the Plainfield Fire Department and four other local departments, the blaze was put out. Most of the first base side from the concourse up was destroyed. The concourse ground itself was charred black. The home clubhouse and first base concession stands were gone; the suite level too. All that was left behind along the first base concourse was a heap of ash and rubble to remind onlookers of the structure that used to be.

As the days and weeks unfolded, it was discovered that the extent of the damage reached well beyond simply what was touched by the flames. Between the smoke and water damage left in the wake of the treacherous



First base concourse

fire, the Whitecaps learned that much of the still-standing structure – including the administrative offices and the rest of the suite level – would have to be completely gutted and rebuilt.

But, thankfully, everybody was safe and most of Fifth Third Ballpark was still standing.

For the ownership and staff of the West Michigan Whitecaps, the only thing left to do was to figure out the next step. After all, Opening Day was just three months away.

As fate would have it, the two men most responsible for originally bringing the Whitecaps to West Michigan in 1994 were both off-site that fateful morning. Co-owners Lew Chamberlin and Denny Baxter, both of whom have management roles with the club and offices at Fifth Third Ballpark, were quickly made aware of the situation.

The news was especially challenging for Baxter, who was across town helping his wife prepare for a chemotherapy treatment. After hearing the news, he made sure she was settled in and raced to the very same ballpark he worked for a decade to bring to West Michigan 20 years ago.

At approximately 2:30 p.m., Baxter – with the somber faces of his staff standing supportively behind him – made the team’s first public statements to a bevy of reporters at an impromptu press conference. His leadership and conviction in such an emotional moment set the tone for a rebuilding project that was not yet even fully formed.

“It’s a very emotional time for us,” said Baxter. “I do believe this is going to be a time where our mettle is tested, as they say. But... we believe in this organization. I think that, although we have some difficult times ahead, to be sure, we are going to survive this and we are going to come out on the other end in a very positive and strong fashion. Twenty years ago, folks used to say, ‘If you build it, they will come.’ I’d like to believe here, once again, if we rebuild it they will come once again. We’ll get through this. We’ll be seeing baseball in April.”

“Our commitment remains the same,” continued Baxter. “This is a hurdle to overcome, to be sure, but we will overcome it. To see the place in flames was very, very difficult, but I’m absolutely firm in my belief that with the support of [the staff] behind me and with the support of this community, we’ll rebuild it and we’ll be just as strong and just as vibrant as we ever have been.”

With the strength and resilience of Baxter’s words, the course was set. As long as Fifth Third Ballpark was still standing, the Whitecaps’ organization was determined to ensure there would be baseball in West Michigan by the April 8 home-opener.

While Baxter was forced to scramble across town,

Chamberlin was in Chicago when he received the unexpected phone call.

“That was pretty devastating to hear,” said Chamberlin. “I probably went through a short period of futility in terms of not being able to control any of the circumstances. In the final analysis, it was probably an advantage for me, being in Chicago. Unlike all the rest of the staff, I didn’t have to stand in the Pepsi Stadium Club and watch the place burn down. I had a three-hour drive to get my mind around it and start thinking forward and not backward.”

“Thinking forward” has been a focal point for the Whitecaps ever since. By the time Chamberlin arrived at the ballpark later that evening, the plan was already in motion.

“I think as an organization, and certainly for me, our thoughts turned very quickly to, ‘How are we going to rebuild this?’” said Chamberlin. “How are we going to be ready by Opening Day? That’s just in our DNA. How are we going to accomplish this?”

With a major construction project on their hands and a short time-frame to carry it out, the Whitecaps’ front office began planning immediately. How could they make the best out of such a terrible situation? How could they make the ballpark even better and more fan-friendly?

As is often the case, out of tragedy sprouts opportunity. According to Chamberlin, the organization was already going through internal evaluations to determine what kinds of improvements were necessary for the long-term sustainability of the 20-year-old Fifth Third Ballpark.

“I think the real irony is that for several years we’ve been going through a capital strategic planning process,” said Chamberlin. “We didn’t actually have plans for them to occur for another couple of years, but I guess that’s one thing that comes out of the tragedy of the fire. It motivates us and enables us to begin making some of those changes earlier than we thought.”

The most prominent change fans will notice in 2014 is the construction of a brand new souvenir shop where the administrative offices used to be. The new retail store is three times as big as the old souvenir shop, allowing the Whitecaps to service more fans and offer a larger variety of inventory while putting the store on par with some of the best in all of Minor League Baseball.

As construction continues throughout the 2014 season and beyond, other changes to the rebuilt structure offer new amenities for fans as well as enhanced functionality for the business.

The rebuilt suites along the first base line will be bigger than before, including an even larger Super Suite, natural lighting in the suite hallway and a more functional layout

for food service. The main concession stand on the first base concourse will gain an additional 1,700 square feet, allowing for the expansion and reorganization of what was already the busiest concession stand in the ballpark. The home clubhouse will receive a brand new laundry room among its improvements. There are even plans to eventually turn the old souvenir shop, located along the third base line, into a new bar area that can be used to feature Michigan-made craft beers.

By 2015, new administrative offices will eventually be constructed along the right field line behind the lawn seating. In addition to giving the organization the space it needs for the front office staff, the new building will have a group deck on its roof that will provide fans with a spectacular view of both the field and the Grand River. "Well, we're back in the construction business," joked Chamberlin in March, with his desk once again covered by blueprints. "I remember so well going through this whole process of planning and building and looking at plans and making changes and working right up until the last minute in April of 1994 to get the facility ready. And here we are doing the exact same thing again."

While the circumstances may be different, the Whitecaps' hallmark attention to detail and commitment to customer service remains the same. As always, the

fans come first.

"It's hard to describe just how gratifying the support is that we've gotten from everybody, first and foremost the fans," said Chamberlin. "Almost immediately we began hearing from all of our fans... I got calls from plumbers and electricians and contractors. Everybody wanted to lend a hand... It's important to know how much the community cares about the ballpark and how invested they are in its rebuild."

In turn, the entire Whitecaps' organization is committed to finding the silver lining and emerging better than ever from the tragic events of January 3. Chamberlin recalled a meeting in February with all of the contractors, architects and other key players in the rebuilding effort. It was an opportunity for him to share the organization's vision for the rebuilding.

"When people come back to this ballpark, what I want is for them to be amazed," said Chamberlin. "I want the community to be amazed that we were able to overcome this adversity, that we bounced back, and that we did it in such a timely fashion."

After all, baseball fans in West Michigan have come to expect nothing less. ●

