

A Fresh Look At Nebraska

-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

Walt Whitman called it "the American game." Omaha's Johnny Rosenblatt made it "Nebraska's game."

The Division I Men's College World Series belongs to the NCAA, but the heart and soul of college baseball's crowning tournament belongs to Omaha and the legions of baseball fans from Nebraska who embrace the national pastime.

In the summers of 1947 and 1948, the top two teams played in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for two years before venturing to Wichita, Kansas for the four-team '49 run. Once was enough.

The boys of summer selected a city in America's heartland to host the tourney, and since 1950, Omaha has been host and home to the event. When making the move, the tourney added four teams, doubling the competition. Alabama, Bradley, Colorado State, Rutgers, Texas, Tufts, Washington State and Wisconsin comprised Omaha's inaugural championship summer.

The first year, approximately 17,500 sports enthusiasts attended sessions. Last year's attendance records show a record 336,076 baseball fans flocked into Omaha and Rosenblatt Stadium throughout the series.

Those early years in Omaha weren't profitable, either. Would Omaha and its citizens drop the catch at home plate or would they hit a home run?

A group of four Omahans believed in the event's potential so much, they devoted time and energy – and probably cash – to ensure the road to Omaha, or at least South 10th Street, never made a detour.

Morris Jacobs, Byron Reed, Ed Pettis and Johnny Rosenblatt worked a little Midwest mojo to attract the NCAA. The 3-year-old Omaha Municipal Stadium, completed in 1947 for the Omaha Cardinals farm team, would be the perfect site for the collegiate finale. In 1964, the stadium changed its name to Rosenblatt Stadium as a tribute to the city's former mayor and baseball player.

And now, 60 years after the first pitch screwballed across home plate, it's all ending. At least for Rosenblatt Stadium.

With the construction of the new TD Ameritrade Stadium located in NoDo - North Downtown (read: Old Market area) in Omaha lingo - the CWS guarantees the Series will stay in Nebraska's largest city until 2035.

The new stadium features the biggest and best of everything: additional seating, wide concourses, handy concession stands.

But will it possess the Rosenblatt magic?

As much as I enjoy baseball, I hate to admit I've never attended a CWS game. I've seen the Royals play in the stadium a handful of times, but something tells me it is not the same.

Part of the ambiance of the CWS is what happens outside the stadium. I've tailgated with the best of 'em, grilling hot dogs and eating apple pie outside the field. All that was missing from my All-American day was a game ticket.

That ambiance spills over to Zesto's ice cream and greasy burgers, to people-watching along the 10th Street Bridge, to cheering for an out-of-state team throughout the double-elimination tournament.

And sometimes, magic happens in Omalot, where fastballs fly 408 feet to the center field wall, and young boys – and men – play in Nebraska's field of dreams.