

This is how I celebrated my 50th birthday.
On vacation. Seeing baseball. In Alaska.

June 23, 2005----

FAIRBANKS, Alaska -- Every young baseball player has a golden vision. Every old ballplayer has a dusty memory. The spirits met along the horizon Tuesday in the 100th Anniversary Midnight Sun baseball game at Growden Park.

For one day, the sun never sets on a dream.

The game between the Alaska Goldpanners of Fairbanks and the Omaha (Neb.) Strike Zone began at 10:30 p.m. The sky looked like midday in Chicago. The game finished around 1 a.m. The Midnight Sun game never has been played under artificial lights.

Fairbanks is 160 miles from the Arctic Circle. On the June 21 summer solstice, sunset technically was at 12:47 a.m. The sun crept along the horizon, creating a snow-globe blue sky until sunrise at 2:59 a.m. Frank Sinatra would have loved this town that never sleeps.

The sun hovered over left field and the Chena Ridge hills in the north. The 4,000-seat park was illuminated with local color, including the Frigid Aires 1940s swing-music trio playing Sunny Side of the Street." The accordion-string, bass and trumpet group is led by 85-year-old hornplayer Bill Stroecker. The combined age is 200. Stroecker is president of the Goldpanners, and his father, Ed, was the catcher in the first Midnight Sun game.

The game was stopped at midnight for the singing of the Alaska Flag Song." Mary Ann Warden sang the song in Inupiat, an Eskimo language spoken in the North Slope of Alaska, above the Arctic Circle. Hall of Famer Bobby Doerr, the former Boston Red Sox second baseman, was in attendance. Back in the long day of 1964, Doerr scouted the Alaska Baseball League.

The Midnight Sun game began in 1906 as a bet between bartenders from the California Saloon in downtown Fairbanks and the Eagle's Club service group. Ed Stroecker was a bartender and catcher who came to Fairbanks during the Gold Rush.

There was no entertainment, and there were no cars," Bill Stroecker said. There was no place to go. That's why baseball was so big here in 1906."

The game was adopted by the Goldpanners in 1960. (Alaska became the 49th

state in January 1959.) Growden Park was built in 1962.

The Goldpanners beat Omaha 3-1 in the 100th Anniversary game. Fairbanks native Sean Timmons was the winning pitcher. He is now the winningest pitcher (3-0) in the history of the Midnight Sun game. Immediately after the game, his No. 33 jersey was shipped to the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.

On Friday, Timmons, 28, will leave the Goldpanners and head to Georgia to resume his studies to become a physician's assistant. Timmons has played for the Goldpanners for nine seasons.

The ball was hard to pick up at midnight. Cottonball clouds eclipsed the sun, creating the afterglow of an all-night party. Strange things started to happen. In the top of the eighth inning, Goldpanners reliever Garret Hill struck out the side -- all on called strikes. In the bottom of the eighth, Goldpanners right fielder Quinn Stewart was hit in the head by a pitch. He did not see stars and continued to play.

The Goldpanners are part of the Alaska Baseball League, which includes two teams in Anchorage, the Peninsula Oilers, Athletes in Action (based in Fairbanks) and the Mat-Su Miners in Palmer. Players have remaining college eligibility, but the ABL is not a fully collegiate league. For example, the late Cubs relief pitcher Dick Selma was a player-coach in Fairbanks at the end of his major-league career. The Goldpanners have sent more players to the major leagues than any other amateur team. More than 180 Goldpanners have gone on to play pro ball.

We encompass anybody that isn't under a pro contract," said Don Dennis, the Goldpanners' general manager since 1967. But Red Sox pitcher Bill Lee was here in '66 and '67. Around 1970, he got fined by the commissioner for something, and he donated the money to the Mission of St. Mary's, which is in a little Yukon River town in Alaska. Bill's first wife was from Fairbanks."

Dennis, 65, came to Fairbanks after working as sports editor of a newspaper in Grand Junction, Colo.

When I got here, there were a lot of log cabins, dirt streets, and downtown was mostly bars and dance halls," he said. "It literally was a frontier. But the pipeline changed everything. It brought a more sophisticated businessman and transformed Fairbanks."

Now Fairbanks has caught the attention of people like Tom Manshreck. The 38-year-old native of Chicago's Northwest Side now lives in Brooklyn. On June 5, he quit his job as managing editor of a publishing company, fetched his spaniel mutt, Faulkner, got into his 1993 Honda Accord and drove 5,100 miles to the Midnight Sun game. He arrived two hours before the gates opened.

It was a voyage of discovery," said Manshreck, holding a paperback version of John Steinbeck's "Travels With Charley." I grew up a Cubs fan. My mom still lives in Belmont-Cragin. She was not too pleased when I announced this trip. I do not have an address. I don't have a cell phone." But he will always have Fairbanks.

Now with a population of 60,000, Fairbanks hosts a Midnight Sun Festival." Fans could participate in goldpanning while listening to bands such as the Arctic Gypsy Swing Band.

There's a lot of baseball fans out there, and I know," Dennis said. Our history is only 46 years old, but we're kind of steeped in history. We love that around here. We're a lot about tradition."

And a midsummer night's dream.

MIDNIGHT TO MAJORS

Noted major-leaguers who are Midnight Sun alumni. All played for the Alaska Goldpanners.

Rick Monday 1964

Graig Nettles 1964

Tom Seaver 1964

Dan Frisella 1965

Eddie Leon 1965

Tom House 1966, '68

Bill Lee 1966-67

Bob Boone 1967-69

Dave Kingman 1968-69

Jim Barr 1969

Pete Broberg 1970

Dave Winfield 1971-72

Steve Swisher 1972

Floyd Bannister 1974-75

Steve Kemp 1974-75

Dave Smith 1976

Scott Sanderson 1976-77

Vance Law 1977

Terry Francona 1978

Dick Selma 1978

Harold Reynolds 1980

Dan Plesac 1981

Oddibe McDowell 1982-83

Shane Mack 1983

Mike Harkey 1986

Bret Boone 1988

Jason Giambi 1990

Jose Cruz Jr. 1993

Travis Lee 1993-94

Jacque Jones 1994

Adam Kennedy 1995

Cole Liniak 1995

Bobby Crosby 1999

Before he broke into the majors, the New York Yankees' Jason Giambi batted .377 in 51 games with the Goldpanners in 1990 -- including the Midnight Sun game.