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### Rhinelanders Revisited: Athletics shape Hodag identity

Stephanie Kuski River News Features reporter

The Home of the Hodags is blessed with a stunning array of lakes, trails and parks which allow locals and tourists to enjoy a wide range of sports and outdoor activities.

Although sports have played a distinct role in our community for generations, the dynamic has changed considerably over the years. Up until about 1910, for example, high school athletes were largely untrained and had minimal access to sports equipment...

Boys' football, however, has been a popular sport in Rhineland since the turn of the 20th century; even the Rhineland-Antigo rivalry dates back to the 1910s.

Mike Webster was a well known Rhineland High School football player who graduated in the class of 1970. Nicknamed "Iron Mike," Webster was regarded as one of the best centers in the Big Ten when he played for the Badgers.

RHS basketball player John Kotz was another superstar athlete who led the Hodags to three consecutive state



The first Hodag International Cross-Country Snowmobile Marathon was held on Feb. 6, 1965. The 35-mile run from Rhineland to Eagle River began with racers lined up along Anderson Street.

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tournaments and the state championship in 1939. After graduation, Kotz attended the University of Wisconsin where he was named All-American his junior and senior years and even broke the Big Ten scoring record. But he only played 10 professional basketball games with the Sheboygan Red Skins before going overseas to serve in the war. In 1991 he was inducted into the University of Wisconsin Athletics Hall of Fame.

While local boys excelled in high school athletics for decades, girls had minimal options for organized sports until 1972 when Title IX required federally funded educational institutions to offer athletic programs to all students regardless of gender. Once this legislation was adopted, swimming, track and gymnastics were some of the first sports selected for girls. At this time, basketball and cross country were also popular for boys as well, according to John Heise, a member of the class of '75 and former cross country and track runner.

"Basketball has always been big in the community and at that time it might've been at its pinnacle as far as people coming to the games," Heise commented. "It was a big tradition that you'd go to every game when it was at home... The gym was filled to the rafters with people."

"Kids worked really hard both in school and out," he added. "We had some really outstanding individuals academically as well as athletically."

Prior to joining the Great Northern Conference (GNC) in 2010, Rhinelanders had been part of the Wisconsin Valley Conference and reported great success in a variety of athletic programs that have blossomed throughout the years. Local broadcasters John Wadd and Todd McEldowney were well known in the sports community for their color commentary and play-by-play announcing for RHS football and basketball games throughout the '60s and '70s.

In addition to an active athletic program in the schools, youth and adult municipal sports teams saw tremendous popularity in our community, especially when the city parks and rec department coordinated leagues.

In the mid-40s, the Wisconsin Valley League was the top rung for local adult ball players, and the Rhinelanders team - called the Shortys with sponsorship from the Rhinelanders Brewing Co. - was one of 10 teams in the league. Most of the players at this time were veterans of World War II or the Korean War, and some had played on teams during their service since most regiments had a baseball squad.

One such notable player was Mel Mode, who pitched for the Shortys and other local teams throughout much of the '40s. He played pro ball for the minor leagues, his son Mitch said, and even had a signed contract with the Chicago Cubs to report to the major league team for spring training, but a back injury forced him out of the running. When he returned home to Rhinelanders, Mode partnered with Del Stengl to establish The Trading Post, which his son still manages to this day.

Mode was a legend in the local baseball community as a player and Little League coach, which is why Mel Mode Memorial Field in Hodag Park was named in his honor.

Pioneer Park was another popular hangout for ball players and spectators. Local schools would play against each other in the youth league, and the annual 32-team adult men's fastpitch tournament drew large crowds every summer during the mid-70s.

During those games, Heise said Pioneer Park would be "ringed at least five people deep and the outfield would have trucks set up weeks in advance to make sure people got their place to be able to watch the games," which many looked forward to every summer.

Baseball was also successful at the youth level with the local Little League, which made the sport a family affair.

Sons and fathers would play alongside or against each other on the pitch, and parents would often coach their children's team.

Since it was common for parents and other volunteers to coach these athletes, programs thrived. Youth leagues for basketball, baseball, football, soccer, tennis, track, swimming and so many more were made possible with the support of coaches, who typically had personal ties to the sports they coached. But as available time for athletics began to decrease as the daily demands of our present society grew, that dynamic changed in turn, and so did the sports culture.

Men's adult fastpitch, for example, was a big league in the '70s, but as interest began to wane, league participation dwindled considerably. Though most organized sports have a tendency to ebb and flow as interest comes and goes, outdoor recreation for locals and tourists has been a consistent economic driver in our community for generations.

Summers here have always been reserved for spending time on the lake - Townline, Buck and Shepard lakes were popular destinations for Northwoods dwellers to swim, boat, kayak and canoe. Fishing was also popular on these lakes, and in more recent history, fishing tournaments have become popular for trophy anglers near and far.

Hodag Holidays was a popular summer program during the '70s, which featured city-wide canoe and boat races, softball and baseball tournaments, biking and running races, water ski shows and various other entertainment, including a parade that was associated with the Fourth of July and the Belles of St. Mary's Drums in the Night competition.

While summertime has always been the prime season to generate local tourism, winter sports were also successful in the outdoor recreation industry.



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Not too long ago, Pioneer Park was a popular destination for southside skaters and hockey players, since the two lots adjacent to the ball fields were flooded to make skating and hockey rinks. The Rhinelanders Hornets, as they were known at the time, were a powerhouse team that played at Pioneer through the '50s and '60s, since the sport wasn't sanctioned by the WIAA until 1971. During the '80s the Dough Boys hockey club was organized to raise funds to build the Rhinelanders Ice Arena, which was completed in 1987 and has since been a mainstay in the local hockey community.

Another popular winter sport during the '60s was downhill skiing, especially since Camp 10 Ski Area launched operations in January of 1960 and quickly became a popular destination for family outings. Downhill skiing at Camp 10, as well as numerous area cross country ski trails - many of which are still maintained by volunteers to this day - continue to be a dominant economic driver for outdoor winter enthusiasts in our area.

The World Championship Snowmobile Derby that is held annually in Eagle River actually had some roots in Rhinelanders. With sponsorship from the local Lions Club, the first Hodag International Cross-Country Snowmobile Marathon was held in February of 1965. Preparations for the event began the day before the race with a dinner and parade in downtown Rhinelanders; even the Belles of St. Mary's marched for a winter parade.

That first race began in downtown Rhinelanders and finished in Eagle River. The next two races began at Hodag Park, then in '68 and '69 crowds filled the grandstand at the old Oneida County Fairgrounds to watch the action before the races moved to Pine Lake in 1970. Snowmobile races were equally popular in Eagle River, which has operated a snowmobile derby since the '60s, and today the Eagle River derby attracts athletes and spectators from around the world.

Fishing at all times of the year and hunting during season have always been popular pastimes in our neck of the woods. Local sports shops like Mel's Trading Post, Leo's Sports Shop and Larson's Service and Sporting Goods provided quality equipment to Northwoods fishermen and hunters.

Touring sportsmen were also likely to reside in local family-owned resorts, many to the east of Rhinelanders, such as those on Lake George, Lake Thompson and Moen Lake.

For generations the resort industry has been - and still continues to be - a big driver of local commerce in our area, but in recent history, many of these family-owned resorts have been traded in favor of privately owned lakefront cottages.

With countless picturesque trails and parks within driving distance, our community has reaped immense benefits from the outdoor recreation and sports industry. Even as early as the 1900s, Shepard was instrumental in marketing this area as a prime spot for vacationers and outdoor enthusiasts. Tourists continue to flock to the Northwoods in pursuit of recreation in all seasons, which is why this sector continues to be an important driver of local commerce to this day.

Although the dynamic of this sports culture has ebbed and flowed throughout the years, athletics continue to be central to the Hodag identity. Countless community members have proudly donned green, black and white jerseys representing the Rhinelanders Hodags and many locals continue to support these rich traditions.

Without a doubt, the highly-anticipated Hodag Dome and sports complex adjacent to Mike Webster Stadium set to open this year, will serve as a significant milestone in the Rhinelanders sports community and will support local athletics for generations to come.

Stay tuned for the next installment to this continuing series.

Visit [rivernewsonline.com](http://rivernewsonline.com) to read previous installments.

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## Reader Comments

*Posted: Saturday, December 12, 2020*

Article comment by: **Paul Ellenbecker**

This was an awesome article. Thank you!!!

*Posted: Wednesday, December 2, 2020*

Article comment by: **John Helgeson**

Your articles are great reminders of our "Hodag" history. I would like to add a bit about hockey before the RIA came into being. The Rhinelanders Hornet hockey team was more of a amateur/semi-pro team. There were Hodag hockey teams in the 50's and early 60's. While the WIAA may not have formally sanctioned them, there was a small high school league and it did have a championship. Al Baker, the wood shop teacher was the coach and his teams brought home several championships

*Posted: Friday, November 27, 2020*

Article comment by: **Robert/Barb Thompson**

Barb and I as well as both our parents were born and raised in Rhinelanders. Stephanie's on going series is great!