

# BUILDING BASEBALL

By John Baldrige

When the Fond du Lac Panthers (a Class-D minor league baseball team in the Wisconsin State League) left Fond du Lac after the 1953 season, it would be 64 years until an organized baseball team would return to the Fond du Lac area. When the Fond du Lac entry into the Northwoods League was created with a partnership between the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers (Milwaukee Brewers High-A affiliate) and Marian University, the community once again had a team to root for. Prior to the team's first game in 2017, over 800 names were submitted from the Fond du Lac area for a new team. Dock Spiders beat out the Barn Owls, Lake Flies, Pipsqueaks, and Shantymen. The team was born and took the field in May 2017.

Over the previous seven years in franchise history, Fond du Lac Dock Spiders fans have had seen a lot of great players play at Herr-Baker Field. From the first Dock Spiders draft pick Joe Breaux (2017 Dock Spider) to the first Major Leaguer Nick Fortes (2017 Dock Spider), to the all-time stolen base leader in the Northwoods league Chandler Simpson (2021 Dock Spider), and the newest Dock Spiders to reach the majors in 2024 – Victor Scott (2020-21 Dock Spider) and Ryan Loutos (2020-21 Dock Spider) – Dock Spiders fans have had a lot to cheer about.

With ten drafted players in the 2023 MLB First-Year Player Draft, the Dock Spiders have had 38 former players drafted plus numerous others in the professional baseball ranks. With games almost every day during the summer, the Northwoods League schedule provides players with a taste of baseball at the next level.

"It definitely gave me my first taste of playing every day," said Fortes. "The college schedule is pretty scattered with games on the weekend and maybe one week midweek here and there, but the Northwoods gave me that first little taste of playing every single day."

Making the jump from the Northwoods League to professional baseball is harder said than done, but the Dock Spiders have had success with preparing players for baseball at the next level. Fortes is in his fourth season with the Miami Marlins and has great advice for current Dock Spiders players.

"Enjoy your time (in Fond du Lac) and enjoy the relationships that you create along the way," said Fortes. "I had a great time that summer. I made some really good friends, made some good memories, and that's honestly the biggest thing that I take away. Those relationships, enjoying the process every single day, not trying to look too far ahead, and just enjoying where your feet are. Just enjoy your time there."

Through the first seven years in team history, the Dock Spiders have won two championships (2018 & 2020) and have seen a lot of success on and off the field. General Manager Jim Misudek, a Fond du Lac native with a career in baseball spanning nearly two decades, credits a strong commitment from the community for the team's popularity and accomplishments.

"The support that our team and organization receive from the community is absolutely incredible," said Misudek. "From our fans to our community and corporate partners, to our host families, players, coaches, and staff – we are constantly reminded of how special this team is to people in our area. The measurable successes of our team and players are a direct result of the continued support this community!"

Baseball support continues to remain strong in Fond du Lac and the Dock Spiders are proud to be a part of the community in numerous meaningful ways.

