

CHC: Former Vandy Coach Weicker Talks Career

by Bill Traugher

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When former Nashville Sounds first baseman and Vanderbilt coach George Weicker was a kid growing up in Baltimore, he had dreams of playing for his hometown Orioles. Weicker was inspired by his visits to Memorial Stadium witnessing the play of such Oriole greats as Brooks Robinson, Frank Robinson, Boog Powell, Dave McNally and Jim Palmer. He got to play in the big league stadium during state high school tournaments.

Weicker was a star athlete at Cardinal Gibbons High School where he was All-State in baseball and football. Cardinal Gibbons was originally St. Mary's Industrial School, which was the high school to Babe Ruth. Weicker played his prep baseball on the same field as "The Bambino." When time came to choose his college and sport, Weicker turned to a friend.

"I was best friends with a kid down the street named Mike Mikolayunas who was four years older than me," Weicker said recently. "Mike and I went to the same high school and he went to Davidson College in North Carolina. I'd never heard of it, but I kind of followed him there. He was an All-American receiver that was drafted by the Baltimore Colts.



George Weicker

"When it came time for me to select a college, Mike used his influence with the coaches and got my game film down there. I went on a football scholarship and thought that I could also play baseball. I played a pretty competitive big school baseball in Baltimore."

As a freshman at Davidson, Weicker was the leading hitter in the Southern Conference. During his senior campaign, he became Southern Conference Player-of-the-Year and an All-American while leading the nation in hitting (.448). Weicker once had a string of 11 hits in a row and still maintains the school record for slugging percentage (.810).

On the gridiron, Weicker played against teams like North Carolina, Wake Forest and Virginia. Weicker said that a big thrill for him was when the team flew to Colorado Springs, Co. to play the Air Force Academy. The Honorable Mention All-Conference player once recorded 27 tackles against VMI as a linebacker. He was the recipient of the Tommy Peters Award in 1974-75, symbolic of the highest athletic honor at Davidson.

Weicker was honored with his induction into the Davidson Athletic Hall of Fame. After graduating Davidson College in 1975, Weicker also continued his athletic pursuits with football.

"There was a football league back then called the World Football League," Weicker

said. "It only lasted a year or two and I had an opportunity to play in Charlotte. I was preparing to tryout and hopefully make that team. Then I got the opportunity to play in the Cincinnati Reds minor league system.

"I decided to go that route and the first year I played was in Billings (Pioneer League). I did pretty well there. I was on the All-Star team and then played in Single-A in Tampa (Florida State League) the following year. And in Three Rivers, Canada (Eastern League) in 1977, I had my best year when I hit 20 home runs and 97 RBIs.

In Billings, the first baseman appeared in 72 games and batted .311 (76-for-244) with seven home runs and 50 RBIs. In Tampa, he was 104-for-373 and a .279 batting average with three home runs and 48 RBIs in 123 games.



Weicker did hit 10 home runs to lead his team during his senior year in college, but at that time the number of games played was relatively small compared to current college schedules. While playing in 129 games in Canada, he batted .293 with 475 plate appearances while driving in 97 runs. Weicker seemed to have located a power surge in Canada with his 20 home runs.

"I hit 10 home runs my senior year and that was just in 40 games," said Weicker. "We played with aluminum bats so I had to go back and start using wood again. Up in the Northeast, in Canada, it is very cold. In the first game we played it was 35 degrees. Pitchers really couldn't throw real hard since they couldn't get a tight grip on the ball. To me, it was more of a hitter's league.

"Then I came down here (Nashville). A lot of the guys that played on the Three Rivers team played in the first year in Nashville. And it was so hot down here. The fences were 20 to 30 feet longer. I was used to playing with 365 feet in the power alleys. That first year at Greer Stadium I took a tape measure and in left center field it was 395 feet."

One of the great experiences Weicker can reminisce about being a former minor league player is the contact with major leaguers. When he was in the Reds spring training camp the minor leaguers would practice in the mornings giving way to the major leaguers after lunch.

Weicker would take a quick lunch so he could have conversations with such Reds' greats as Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Joe Morgan and Dave Concepcion. He took the advantage of being part of the Reds organization to stand behind the batting cage in awe and learning from these great hitters. Weicker saw the Big Red Machine up close.

Professional baseball returned to Nashville after a 15-year absence. The old Southern Association Nashville Vols last season was in 1963 at the aged Sulphur Dell ballpark.

Weicker moved with the Three Rivers franchise to Nashville as a Southern League (Double-A) expansion team. Herschel Greer Stadium was not prepared for baseball when the season began. The first home game was rained out and work equipment was still on the field the next day preparing for the opener.

"We had to play on the road for two weeks; the field wasn't ready," said Weicker. "We were thinking, wow the field isn't ready. We came back, I think it was from Memphis, the night before our first regular game. They had not set the pitcher's mound yet. Conway Twitty was up there overseeing them laying sod in the infield. And that was the night before the first game.

"But all the concessions were all up and running. I got to thinking, now wait a minute, they have it backwards. The field should have been ready and maybe the concessions should be late. The thing about the first year was the enthusiasm of the fans. You could rope off the outfield and put 12 to 15 thousand people out there. It was crazy. Nowhere else would we ever go and there were a quarter of those fans."

The Sounds won that first home game on April 26, 1978 against Savannah, 12-4 with manager Chuck Goggin. Weicker collected a single in five trips to the plate and scored one run while batting fifth in the lineup. Something that would catch the Sounds first baseman's attention that season was a sign on the fence several feet away from first base. The sign was at all the home games and read, "Weicker's Corner."

"I'm hard pressed to remember the guy that was always there with that sign," Weicker recalled. "In fact, one night he was drinking pretty good and I remember going over for a foul ball. I went right over to him and he reached out when I reached up. He flipped right over the fence and did a somersault. He landed on his back right next to me on the field. It was funny."

Weicker was asked to talk about his Sounds teammates.

"We knew when we started that the pitchers we had were supposed to be really, really good," Weicker said. "We had the impression that the fielders were organizational kind of guys. Guys like Timmy Doerr at third and Gene Menees came in at second after a while. Rafael Santo Domingo played shortstop some with Steve Hughes. In the outfield, Mickey Duval played centerfield; we had a catcher Dave Van Gorder in from Southern California that was a real good player.

"The pitcher's in particular, Bruce Berenyi, Jay Howell, Geoff Combe and Bill Dawley. There were four or five of them that had pretty good major league careers as pitchers. We were primarily a pitching team. As for me, I had gone from 20 home runs in Three Rivers and here I'm hitting fly balls going to the warning track. They weren't going out when I thought they were over the fence."

In Weicker's only year in a Sounds uniform he appeared in 129 games, batted .263 with 429 at bats. He totaled 53 RBIs, 22 doubles and three home runs. The Sounds concluded that inaugural 1978 season with a 64-77 record in ninth place.

Weicker also had a story to tell about Jim Bouton, the former New York Yankees pitcher who wrote the controversial book, Ball Four.

"We were down in Savannah, Ga., one night and I will never forget this," said

Weicker. "I played against the (Savannah) Braves. The game is over and it's starting to rain. I looked out on the field and there was Jim Bouton who was starting a second career as a knuckleball pitcher. He had just been signed with Savannah. I'm the last guy to leave the field for the Sounds.

"Bouton goes out with a shovel and starts shoveling around the mound because he is pitching the next night. When he pitched against us the next night, I hit one of my three home runs was off of him. He threw me a high knuckleball and I can still see it. I hit it right over the centerfield fence."

After the season, Goggin arranged for Weicker to play in the new Triple-A Inter-American League. The six-team league included Caracas and Maracaibo (Venezuela), Miami, Panama, Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic). The league played just one season.

"I was with the Caracas Mets," said Weicker. "That was a winter ball haven down there. All the stadiums seated about 30,000 people. In winter ball, the major leaguers from the United States would go down there to make some extra money. I was playing on a team that had a bunch of major league guys. I'm 25 years old and I down there playing with Tom House and Cesar Tovar played second base for us.

"There were a lot of guys down there in Miami that played for the Baltimore Orioles. A lot of those guys were 35 to 40 years old. Once we played a doubleheader and I saw Cal Ripken who was about 19 years old play for Miami's minor league team. Davy Johnson was the manager of the Miami Amigos. I learned most of what I know about baseball when I played that year."



Weicker was unable to hook up with another minor league team after that season. He did accept a job in 1980 as Vanderbilt's hitting instructor. The Commodores won their last SEC baseball championship (1980) in Weicker's first season. Weicker left Vanderbilt after five years to become head baseball coach at Nashville's Franklin Road Academy.

Weicker later became FRA's head football coach and won a state championship in 1991. He gave up coaching football a few years ago to spend more time with his

family. Weicker continues coaching the FRA baseball team where he won state championships in 1986, 1988 and 2000. Longtime assistant and former Vanderbilt baseball player Jerry Williams have aided him.

So does Weicker have any regrets about never appearing on a major league roster?

"I really was hoping to get up there just to be able to say I was up there." Weicker said. "If you have 20 home runs in Double-A, you think you may get a shot. It was playing for the Cincinnati Reds where the roster didn't turnover.

"There were two years of world championships so the Triple-A was always the Triple-A and the Double-A was always the Double-A. Nobody could really move up. You look back on it and how many guys can say they played five years of professional baseball?"

Traughber's Tidbit: Vanderbilt once was involved in a college baseball record with a 16-inning game. The game occurred at Birmingham's Siaslaw Park against the University of Alabama. The game against the Tide ended in a 2-2 tie April 15, 1893. The 16-inning game was mentioned in The Sporting News as the record broken by the 1924 Brown vs. Providence game (20 innings).

Next week read about the 1921 Vanderbilt baseball team's 1921 Southern Championship and "Cap Alley Day."

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail at WLTraughber@aol.com.