

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
BASEBALL IN PENNSYLVANIA

1. Student's Name Lon Hazlet
2. Subject's Name Mike Surkalo
3. Subject's Background Sports Editor Eagle 1946-85 39 yrs.
  - a. date and place of birth Oct 12, 1920, Du Bois.
  - b. Present address [REDACTED]
  - c. Present Occupation Retired: Sports Editor, Butler Eagle.
4. Date of Interview Nov. 14, 1994
5. General Comments:

Very enjoyable experience. Mr. Surkalo is a great gentleman. He reminds me of a grand father, just story after story. I've known him quite some time and he is very knowledgeable. I would be interested in speaking with him anytime. If I can ever assist you by speaking to Mr. Surkalo please just ask.

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DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE

Baseball Interview with  
Mike Surkalo, Former Sports Editor  
Of The Butler Eagle

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down at length with Mike Surkalo. Mr. Surkalo is the former Sports Editor for the Butler Eagle. He was born in 1920, in Dubois, Pennsylvania. He went on to college where he majored in journalism. After World War II, in 1946, Mike moved to Butler where he was the Sports Editor for over forty years. The first twenty-six years of service at the Butler Eagle, he was the only sports writer on staff. He did it all from covering the games to writing the articles, to laying out the paper. I had the great fortune of meeting Mr. Surkalo in the late 1970's. He covered a number of my summer baseball games, and later, much of my football career at Slippery Rock High School and University. I am now the football coach at Slippery Rock High School, and as recently as last season, had the pleasure of Mr. Surkalo covering some of our ballgames on a part-time basis for the Butler Eagle. I have transposed the areas of our interview that I felt best covered our topic of baseball in Western Pennsylvania.

L.H.: Were you familiar with the Negro Leagues in Pittsburgh?

M.S.: When I came here in '46, after the war, the leagues were breaking up, but I did have the opportunity to see Josh Gibson play. He really creamed them. But, no I never really got to see them play. A guy that did play in the Negro Leagues is a fellow by the name of Elmer Massey.

L.H.: Sure I know Elmer.

M.S.: Elmer played here for many years for the Butler Athletics. The Athletics were the best of the Amateur Crop, alot of the former college players, and a few professional players.

L.H.: Similar to the Eagle County League Now?

M.S.: No, this is separate. This was in the Tri-County League. They played Springdale, Dormont, and a number of teams in the outskirts of Pittsburgh. They had some former major league stars that played in this league. It was a good league. Butler won this league three years in a row.

L.H.: Was Elmer a good ball player?

M.S.: Oh yes, he played second base. When he started to get old, and was pushing his mid-thirties, they had a lot of good second basemen. Charlie Croftchock was one. Elmer Massey was also a second basemen. The dentist, uptown, Dr. King was also a second baseman. He was a good one. He played for about three years. He was really tough, a Lenny Dykstra type.

L.H.: Did you cover many of these ballgames?

M.S.: I covered them all. All the home games, and a few of the away games. Being a one-man staff it was nearly impossible. They had a former pro, a fellow by the name of Frank Komer, who played third base. He was from Boyers, probably one of the best base runners I ever saw. Chuck Ekas was a shortstop, probably one of the youngest guys. There was a kid from Mars named Don Wicks. He was just out of highschool and he held his own. In the outfield they had some good ball players, one was named Loyle Park. He'd played baseball at Cincinnati, and coached at Boston College. I saw him hit a couple of homeruns to center field at Pullman Park- That's no easy feat. He was 6'2, 6'3, about 220.

L.H.: Did they have a lot of good pitchers?

M.S.: Not too bad, a guy named Nabath who was a former professional. They had a guy by the name of Marie Hamilton. Had another guy by the name of Mills. I can't remember his first name. He was a solid lefthander. They had a good player out of High school, Connie, Connie Lang. His brother Joe was the catcher. And Eddie Calderone did some catching. Bernie Barnes.

L.H.: I have heard of Barney, yes.

M.S.: Barney owns a golf course up in Slippery Rock. Barney just showed up one day and took over lock, stock, and barrel. He, and Ed Calderone split time. Barney was the class of the team...a nice guy to talk to. Ed Casener used to be the druggist in Chicora...He ran the team. He put a lot of money into the team, the team did a lot of traveling. What hurt the league was when one guy who worked for the phone company used to make all the long distance calls for free. When he retired, nobody wanted to take on that task. Slowly, the team just folded up.

L.H.: You mentioned earlier that you were a one-man staff at the paper. You said that you started there in 1946, how long were you by yourself .

M.S.: 26 years.

L.H.: Were you able to get out and cover many baseball games?

M.S. You know with baseball, games would start about 6:30, so I would get there about 6:15, then afterwards, I 'd go to the office. I also used to cover some independent teams and the University when possible. They played those games at 4:00. One time in my career, I covered 13 football games in 13 days.

L.H.: That's a lot of football.

M.S.: The cubs would play on a Sunday night and Wednesday

The Cubs were drawing more on Sunday afternoon than Butler High School. The Sun Telegraph, The Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph ran a semi-heavyweight division. The Cubs won it three years in a row with teams from all over the Pittsburgh area. Guys were getting out of football after the service. They had jobs, families and kids to worry about--they didn't want to risk getting hurt. Slowly this league just disappeared--guys got too old for it.

Mr. Surkalo then went on to speak of how he got involved in journalism. He told me of how he wasn't much of a student, but how his older sister, who was very intelligent, had pushed him to go to college. While in college, he was drafted into World War II. His tour of duty included many different areas before ending up in Guam. While stationed in Guam, he was being prepared to go the front line. He claimed that his base then became very hush as a large amount of brass began coming in and out of his base. He said that shortly thereafter, the A-Bomb was dropped on Japan. He seemed to have great remorse for all of those who died in Japan, however; he felt the bomb saved his life as well as hundreds of thousands of Americans. Mr. Surkalo then spoke of his return voyage to the United States on a freight trolley that was overloaded with U.S. soldiers. He spent thirty-nine days meandering around the Pacific on what should have been an eleven day trip. He said that they had been "sitting ducks" and were lucky to ever see the States.

L.H.: In covering all of the baseball games that you have in the past, who would you say were some of the better high school players in the area?

M.S.: It will be a little one-sided because most of the ones I covered were Butler High. IN the Eagle County League, but they were more adults than high school kids. Butler High got rid of baseball in the late 20's and early 30's and didn't resurface until the early 50's. One of the better players was a pitcher named Hahn, Eric Hahn. Eric was a good ballplayer, he went to Penn State. He's in the Pro's now, in the minors. I'm not sure how successful he is.

L.H.: That's a different level. Now and then you find a kid that can throw 90 miles an hour, and everyone thinks he's a Pro pitcher. You better have more than that to go around.

MS.: The one kid that can throw 90 miles an hour is that Clemente. Matt Clemente. He can throw 93, 94. He's been successful I understand that he's gone from Bottom A to Top A in San Diego. John Gristar was a pick-up catcher for Butler. There have been a lot of good players in the area. One of them Connie Lang was a good pitcher for Butler. And his brother was a catcher for quite awhile--they practiced a lot. They were quite a battery.

L.H.: How about Eddie Vargo?

M.S.: He didn't play any baseball for Butler. He played football. He was a real strong runner. I think he played some legion ball

I guess he was pretty good, but I never saw him play. He was just a good athlete, a strong kid, and intelligent kid. I don't know if he didn't want to play since his father was involved in umpiring. Eddie Sr. was a good baseball player himself. He was a catcher, but he didn't have a great arm--not a great arm, I mean for the Pro's. Before they're gonna spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on you, they're gonna see that you can throw runners out at second base. Before Eddie went into umpiring, he was with the Cardinals. He was fortunate, the Pirates were also interested in him. He really had a great temperment for umpiring. I don't know if you've ever heard of Nate Boring. Eddie got him into umpiring school. Boring was an excellent umpire in baseball. But he didn't have the temperment for it...the fans and the managers got to him.

L.H.: You got to have a thick skin for that.

M.S.: I'm sorry that he didn't make it because he was a good umpire. I went with him to cover some exhibition games with him between Pittsburgh and Cleveland. I don't know if you ever heard of a guy named Dale Mitchell, but he played for Cleveland one time. He was a good hitter, a slap hitter. He could hit 300. That's when they finally started to develop ball players into backup roles. So when Cleveland played in Pittsburgh, they put Dale Mitchell at first base. He made a tag at first base and Eddie called him safe..and Eddie tells him, "You missed the bag." This is the third inning and again in the sixth inning, the same thing happens. Mitchell called Eddie everything in the book. On the way home, I said, "What did he say?" Eddie said, "Everything you could think of he said. I was gonna throw him out but it was an exhibition game and a lot of people had come to see him play. If it had been a regular game, he'd been out a long time ago."

L.H.: It takes a pretty special person to keep him in there under those circumstances. What do you think of the money the ballplayers are making now? the demands that they are putting forth?

M.S.: They're partly right, but I also think that the owners are partly right. Alot of those owners like Steinbrenner thought that they could buy a pennant. So now they see that one guy gets alot of money, and they hold out for more. I think that one of the ways that they could save alot of money, as well as in Pro Football and Pro Basketball is alot of these College kids coming off campus haven't made a put out, caught a pass, or scored a basket yet they're getting 5 and 6 million dollar contracts. where guys that have been in the league 5 and 6 years, and have proven that they belong there, are making less than half of that. Before World War II, the Pirates signed Bob Pettot for \$100,000. This was the first big money deal and the Pirates could have run their entire minor leagues for this amount. Right after the War, when the GI got out, they were no longer

the farm kid they were when they went in. Some of these guys had come off the farm and never seen anything. Now they'd been around the world. They talk about the Gulf War, and guys being overseas for 30 days. There were guys in World War I who been overseas for 3 years. They were in the front line for a long time and really had a reason to be punch drunk and shell shocked. So when they came home, they were used to some better things. Why would they go to see the Butler Yankees play, when they could drive down the road 35 miles to the 'Big City' and Forbes Field, and watch the Pirates. Five Six in the afternoon you would see hundreds of cars heading down the road to the ballgame.

We skip ahead now after discussing the Great Josh Gibson and the qualities of Satchel Paige. Mr. Surkalo told a story of when Satchel Paige had called the entire outfield in and proceeded to strike out the side.

L.H.: What do you see now as far as baseball and the kids in the community? Do you think that it is growing or is it a step backward in the time that you've been observing it?

M.S.: Well I can't say that it has gone backwards...it's reached a saturated point. What's wrong is sometimes the parents get so totally involved that they run out the good managers and umpires. I've known a lot of good guys who after 2 or 3 weeks have had enough. They say, "The kids are great, but I just can't take the parents." I'll give you a great example: a guy I know said he would be there when his son signed his Pro contract. His son was 10 years old. There was a game down here in Butler, the parents were giving the umpire a hard time and the argument got so severe that they had to call the game off, and call the entire playoff series off. So the kids left and there were 2 diamonds there. So finally it wasn't my place to get involved in the argument and I don't write on arguments, but I finally opened my mouth and said, "You guys can argue or not but you're keeping YOUR kids from playing baseball. Look over at the other ball diamond. What do you see playing over there? The same teams that were supposed to play over here are playing over there with no adults, no umpires, and no coaches. That's what it's supposed to be about.

Mr. Surkalo went on to say that in talking with reporters and coaches through the years, and all over the world, parental influence was a problem everywhere. Mr. Surkalo is a wonderful man to talk to and the details and knowledge he has are immense. He asked that I come back anytime and talk about any subject. I suggest that any student or professor that needs information pertaining to any sport in Western PA call this fine gentleman. I only left because I had to. I think we could have talked for hours on end. I only wish that I would have had the time.