

# A love of baseball

COLIN BUDD STAFF WRITER

*"I'm just floating on Cloud 9," said Jay-Del Mah from his home in Nakusp, B.C. Tuesday afternoon.*

*The reason? After close to two decades of meticulously chronicling the history of the sport of baseball in Western Canada, Mah had received word in May that he was going to be inducted into the Saskatchewan Baseball Hall of Fame.*

*Many around here will remember Jay-Del as Harvey Mah, the son of Jim, a restaurant owner – including the Elite Cafe, a hangout for ball players along with a gathering place for families in the 1950s and '60s.*



Jay-Del Mah as a batboy with the Lloydminster Meridians in 1956. – Photo Courtesy Jay-Del Mah

It was here that Mah developed a lifelong passion for the sport and began the steps to developing what might be the largest database for semi-pro and amateur baseball in the country, if not North America – even if it would be decades until he would start inserting data into a computer with dialup internet, making posting big pictures impossible.

But the ongoing process is what Mah will be honoured for this weekend. Ongoing because even though he has spent countless hours scouring yellowed newspapers, carefully scanning old photographs and talking to hundreds of people on the phone hearing their stories and publishing them, his current project on his website [www.attheplate.com](http://www.attheplate.com) is going through every single box score from the 1909 Western Canada Baseball League because no statistics were kept.

He will be in North Battleford on Friday night. He had hoped to drive down and pick up an old high

school friend in Lloydminster, but a back problem meant a 12 or 14-hour drive was out of the question. Still he will be surrounded by friends and family when he receives his place in the Hall.

"It's going to be just a marvellous event," said Mah.

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To understand how Mah got to this point is to grasp his love of the sport and his love of his years in Lloydminster.

When he begins telling his stories you're taken back to a time when kids would race on their bikes to the local ball park and make their way through the crowds at the Legion Sportsman Park, hoping to get a glimpse of their favourite players donning the Lloydminster Meridians uniform. Names like Roberto Zuyas, Chuck McGuigan and Max Weekly were treated like

Big Leaguers as Lloydminster ushered in its highest level of baseball, joining what would ultimately be the Western Canada League, a semi-pro circuit.

"You have to remember we were maybe two or three thousand people at the time," said Mah of the city, who was now in a league playing against major centres like Edmonton, Calgary and Saskatoon. "We were the little guys. Thank God for guys like Slim Thorpe and Scotty MacNeil, we kept the team going."

There had been local teams for years but, in 1954 the team began bringing in imports – including Cuban import Roberto Zayas – ushering in what might be the Golden Age for the sport in the city. No longer was it just the best of the prairies, now there were young men from across the United States that had dreams of making a living in the game.

"It was very good baseball," said Mah. The Meridians lasted in the league until 1961, even combining with North Battleford Beavers to form possibly the clumsiest handle of all time – the Lloydminster North Battleford Beaver Meridians, at one point.

"Which everyone called it the Combines," said Mah.

The club was heavily supported in those days, in large part by the local service clubs, but also by the people in the community. And for many it was their first interactions with the talented black players that made their way up north, hoping to carve out their place in a game. A game that hadn't truly accepted them yet, despite Jackie Robinson breaking the colour barrier during this time. But players like Curly Williams, Collin Jones and Barney Brown all felt comfortable.

"(In Canada) we were treated so well up there that's why I stayed up there so long," Williams is quoted as saying on [www.attheplate.com](http://www.attheplate.com). "We had so much fun there and everybody was accepted, you know, didn't have problems going any place we wanted to eat. Just wonderful people. May not have made a whole lot of money, but people were excited and they enjoyed you and would invite you to their homes."

"And from talking to these guys over the years they were so enthusiastic about the treatment they received in Canada – especially on the Prairies, compared to what they had received in their home country," said Mah. "They loved Canada, people accepted them as human beings, they could go into restaurants, they could stay in hotels, they could travel on the trains, it wasn't a problem. But they couldn't do it in a lot of areas in the States at the time."

Young Harvey was in the middle of it all. He began chatting with the players in his dad's restaurant, eventually becoming the clubhouse boy before being batboy. Later he'd do statistics and gather information on the players before eventually writing about them for the *Lloydminster Times*.

"Before my Mom passed a couple of years ago she used to joke about the fact that I wouldn't do a lot of work around the home for the family, but there I would be in our basement washing sanitary socks for the players – by hand," he laughs. "I loved every minute of it. One of the best experiences of my life."

"It was just remarkable that one was able to take it all in and enjoy it to the extent that I did."

Just how closely tied are people from that era?

Chuck McGuigan was a second baseman, that stayed in the Mah residence, as happened over the years. McGuigan played a couple of seasons before departing in 1955. During his research for his website project, Mah gave him a call in 2001 – 46 years later – in Burlingame, California.

"Within maybe 10 or 15 seconds – and I didn't give him any clues, except that I was calling from Canada and it was about baseball – and he recognized who I was," said Mah.

"He knew my name, he said 'how's your family? Is your dad still alive? Is your mom still alive? How are your brothers, because I had two brothers. He knew all this immediately and I thought well isn't this stunning? The fact that you'd recognized the human voice after all this time and he remembered everything."

By the time the '60s roared in, good roads were being constructed so people were able to head to the beach and other hot spots to enjoy their summer, electrification came along and television gained

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“It was just remarkable that one was able to take it all in and enjoy it to the extent that I did.”

in popularity giving people further options. The Twins relegated back to the Northern Sask. League.

“It kind of meant the end of local baseball – not just in Lloydminster but across North America,” said Mah.

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While those days faded into years and decades, Mah also moved on. There was a career and a family and life as everyone finds out.

But always close by was a box with the label “Western Canadian Baseball League” on it. It followed Mah through a successful radio and media career. It was with him when he left Lloydminster in 1960 for Peace River and onto Fort St. John B.C., Red Deer and Calgary, in the late ‘60s onto Toronto for the next 35 years before retiring. It may have been unopened for awhile, but it was going to allow Mah to get back to his roots.

When he retired from the CBC in ‘95-96 his family planned on downsizing their possessions to make the move back out west when he came across that box he’d kept newspaper clippings and pictures since he was just a boy.

“I finally opened it up and started to go through and there were all those clippings from baseball games and a couple of autographed baseballs and old baseball hats – surprisingly I had lost my glove,” he joked. “And I had this autograph book, which I had the players sign and it really peaked my interest.”

The names brought back a whirlwind of memories for Mah, drawing him back to the days when people flocked to the ball park by the thousands,

when kids knew the names of all the players on their local team.

“I thought 40-plus years is it possible to contact any of these guys?” said Mah. He picked up the phone, picked one name randomly and went about getting in touch with Modie Risher, who is listed as a utility player who spent one season with the Meridians.

To preface, just finding someone isn’t as easy to do today with online search engines that can spit out millions of pages within a few seconds. Mah called the operator asking for Risher’s number in Charlestown, South Carolina. He was no longer at the address Mah had, but there was someone with the same last name a few doors down.

“It was Modie Risher,” said Mah with an excitement in his voice.

“He remembered me, he remembered

the town, remembered my dad, remembered the restaurant. He specifically remembered Joe McLean, who was a lawyer in town, and his family and they had taken Modie in and he remembered them amazingly.”

Risher suffered an eye injury as a kid but managed to carve out some great years in the sport, but was nearly blind by the time Mah spoke to him.

“He said, you’ve made my day, you’ve made my year kind of thing,” said Mah. “And I thought, this is amazing, if I can do that kind of thing and bring that kind of pleasure to someone just by talking to them about or chronicling the past, this is the kind of thing I want to do.”

Now with phonebooks online it has become a much more simple process to track down these names from the past and during the last 15 years, Mah has communicated with hundreds of players, getting their stories and using them to document the sport’s history on his website.

He basically started from scratch, digging through old newspapers, finding reports and box scores and people began sending in photographs and programs. When he put the website up it had about the equivalent of six pages, today there are thousands, touching every nook and cranny of American’s past time’s impact up north. Taking time out only to write a book, *Black Baseball Players in Canada: A Biographical Dictionary, 1881-1960*, with another historian, Barry Swanton.

“I’ve met some of the most wonderful people doing the research who have been so cooperative. These are their treasured mementos that they’ve had,” said Mah, who appreciates the level of trust of sending their prized scrapbooks filled with their family’s history through the mail.

It’s hardly a finished work though. He is planning to update the site and give it a more modern feel, complete with working databases and there is that pesky 1909 project he has on the go, which admittedly he says

some think is a little nuts.

“Talk about obscure,” he laughs. “You think this is crazy, this is obscure, no one’s going to read this but I have two letters from, it must be the great-grandchildren of people who played, and were very interested in their great-grandparents playing that year and they couldn’t find any statistics.

“I think in the long run, it’s really worthwhile that people can look back.” And look back they can.

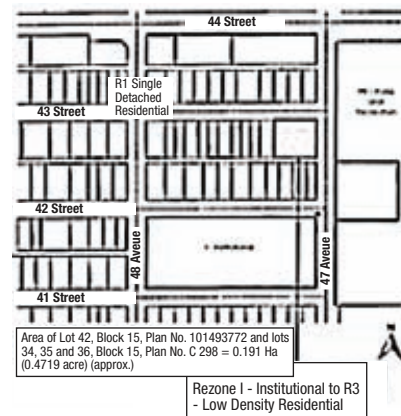


Lloydminster native Jay-Del Mah will be inducted into the Saskatchewan Baseball Hall of Fame this weekend.



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**MAP 1**



**PUBLIC NOTICE** is given that the Council of the City of Lloydminster, pursuant to the Planning and Development Act, intends to pass the following bylaw to amend Zoning Bylaw No.12-2001, as hereinafter provided.

The Zoning map being Schedule “D” to Bylaw 12-2001 is to be amended to incorporate the following changes:

1. It is proposed to rezone the subject area as shown in the sketch map containing 0.191 ha (0.4719 acres) of Lot 42, Block 15, Plan 101493772 and Lots 33, 34, 35, 36, Block 15 Plan C298 (4709-43 Street, Larsen Grove), below from:

**I – Institutional to R3 – Low Density Residential**

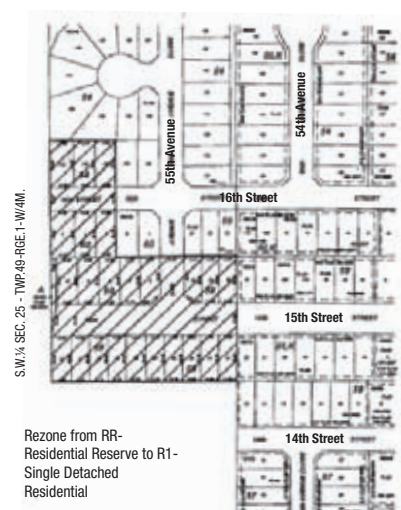
The purpose of this proposed amendment is to allow for the development of Low Density Residential.

2. It is proposed to rezone the subject area as shown in the sketch map containing 1.766 ha (4.36 Acres) in part of Block A, Plan 102-0744 in the S.W. ¼ Sec. 25, Twp. 49, Rge. 1, W4M, as shown on the sketch map below from:

**RR – Residential Reserve to R1 – Single Detached Residential**

The purpose of this proposed amendment is to allow the development of twenty four (24) Single Detached Residential lots.

**MAP 2**



The proposed Bylaws may be inspected by any interested person on any office day between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Any person or group of persons or person acting on his or her behalf who wishes to make presentation either verbally or in writing concerning these Bylaws may do so at a Public Hearing to be held on Monday, August 23rd, 2010, in the Council Chambers, 4420 – 50th Avenue (City Hall) at 8:00 p.m.

Tom Lysyk, City Clerk