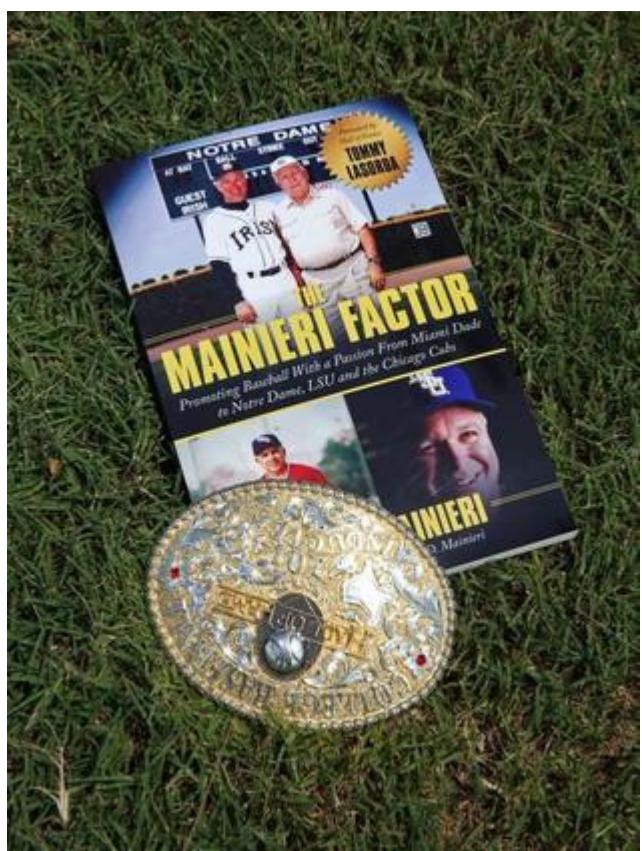


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Miami Dade College baseball coach from 1964 championship season is honored

BY WALTER VILLA
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Remembering good times: Coach Demie Mainieri and team captain Steve Polisar pose at the Miami Dade College North Campus field highlighting the 1964 college national champions. Above is the inductee award and his book.

Left-hander Steve Carlton, who went on to a Hall of Fame baseball career pitching primarily for the St. Louis Cardinals and Philadelphia Phillies, wasn't good enough in 1964 to make the Miami-Dade Community College North rotation.

Right-hander Don Sutton, who would become a Hall of Fame pitcher playing mostly for the Los Angeles Dodgers, couldn't beat Dade North when he faced them in that year's playoffs.

Given those facts, it's no wonder Dade North won the Junior College World Series that year, the only national title in the impressive history of the since-disbanded Falcons baseball program. (The Dade North program was absorbed into Miami Dade College's baseball team.)

"This is the 50th anniversary of that accomplishment, and it was a truly special team," said Steve Polisar, who was Dade North's shortstop and team captain in '64. "We had a great coach in Demie Mainieri and a tough group of blue-collar-type players."

Polisar said that team — which had 37 players on the roster, 34 of them from South Florida — had swagger.

"When we walked on the field, we had that New York Yankees mentality," he said. "We felt that we were the best — you had to beat us."

A DIFFERENT ERA

Dade North won its lone title almost three decades before the Marlins and Florida Panthers played their first games, 24 years before the Heat was born and close to two decades before the University of Miami would win its first national championships in baseball and football.

The Miami Dolphins didn't exist yet, and neither did Florida International University or any other Miami Dade College branch other than the North Campus.

Last month in Lubbock, Texas, Mainieri, 85, was inducted into the National College Baseball Hall of Fame.

He started the program at Dade North in 1961, and ran it for 30 years, helping to send 35 of his former players to the Major Leagues, including future stars Bucky Dent, Mike Piazza and Mickey Rivers.

Mainieri retired from Dade North in 1990. Eight years later, Miami Dade College consolidated its three athletic programs — North, South and Downtown — into one, headquartered at the Kendall Campus and called the Sharks. Dade South won MDC's only other national championship in 1981. This past spring, MDC finished second.

Last week, Mainieri, who lives in Fort Lauderdale, visited Dade North and had his photo taken on the now-vacant field that still bears his name.

But the trip down memory lane didn't make him feel good.

"I'm very upset," he said. "I got into coaching to help young people. But [the vacant field] is not serving the needs of the community."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Mainieri's parents immigrated from Italy and met in New Jersey, where they married. Mainieri said his father arrived alone in the United States as a teenager with just 18 cents in his pocket.

The youngest of the couple's 11 children, Mainieri played football and baseball, graduated from West Virginia University and received his master's and doctorate degrees at Columbia. He was hired for a teaching job in Miami and was hired as an assistant baseball coach at Dade North in August 1960.

But Jack Netcher, who was to have been the program's first head coach, was promoted to dean of administration, leaving the baseball job for Mainieri, who had to scramble to find players.

The team didn't have a field yet — they used the one at Miami Central High School — but finished 14-8 that first year.

By 1964, Mainieri had hired an assistant, Barry Meyers, from Michigan State, and they had recruited some outstanding players.

One of them was Carlton, who had starred at North Miami High. Carlton pitched for Dade North in the preseason, during the fall of 1963. But Dade North already had an

accomplished left-hander named Gerry Greenside. In high school, he had beaten Hialeah's Charlie Hough, who went on to the Major Leagues and started the first game in Florida Marlins history.

"Miami was a hotbed of talent back then," said Polisar, now an attorney in Miami Beach. "When Greenside beat Hough, there were 3,500 fans there at Flamingo Park."

Seeing the competition at Dade North, Carlton opted to sign with the St. Louis Cardinals, who had offered him a \$5,000 bonus.

Amazingly, Carlton made the Major Leagues one year later, in 1965. He won his first World Series in '67, and played in the first of 10 All-Star Games in '68. In 1972, Carlton won the National League's Cy Young Award, finishing 27-10 for the Phillies. (That year, the Phillies won only 67 games — total.)

"Had Carlton stayed with us, maybe we would have gone undefeated," Mainieri joked.

THE PLAYOFF RUN

Even without Carlton, Dade North did quite well in '64, winning the Southern Conference. Next up was the state finals in Pensacola, where they faced Sutton and his Gulf Coast Community College team.

"We had heard he was pretty good — he was 8-0," Polisar said of Sutton, who went on to win 324 Major League games and still ranks seventh in MLB history in strikeouts. "Sutton was throwing 95-mph fastballs and curves off the table."

"But we beat him 3-2. And as we got on the bus to leave Pensacola, Sutton was there shaking our hands, saying: 'You guys are the best ball club I've ever faced.'"

Two years later, Sutton was in the Major Leagues.

Meanwhile, the Dade North express kept moving, ultimately to Grand Junction, Colo., for the Junior College World Series.

But while the team members had style and swagger, they weren't exactly traveling first class. In fact, they got to Colorado on a 1949 Greyhound bus with a busted bathroom.

Once they arrived, they kept on winning — except for a 3-2 loss to Mesa (Arizona). The same teams met again in the championship game of the double-elimination tournament. Mesa was leading in the fifth inning when Mainieri decided to remove Greenside and put in Oscar Zamora, a right-hander.

Zamora arrived on the mound angry.

"He had smoke coming out of his eyes like a bull," said Polisar, explaining that Zamora had wanted to start the championship game. "Oscar didn't talk to anyone. He just mowed them down, and we won 19-6. It was a show of force by our team."

Zamora, now 69, was the only player on that Dade North team to make the Major Leagues, playing parts of four seasons with the Chicago Cubs and Houston Astros.

Dade North would have bigger stars later, and four other Falcons teams went on to the World Series. But only the 1964 team, which finished 39-8, won a national title.

"We were destined to win," Polisar said. "When we came back to Miami, we were the toast of the town. We gave Miami baseball a lot of credibility back then."

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