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Gary Donofrio visits about his time as a Liberal Bee Jay in 1978 and 1979 with KSCB's Brock Kappelmann. Donofrio played on the 1979 national championship team and later became Rookie of the Year in the National League with the Houston Astros. Donofrio visited Liberal Wednesday and stopped by Scantlin's Furniture to visit Bob Judd who served on the Bee Jay board when Donofrio played and for media interviews. Daily Leader photo/Earl Watt

By EARL WATT

- Daily Leader

Former Major League baseball player Gary Donofrio played on three championship teams at three different points in his baseball career.

The first was the 1979 NBC World Series championship as a Liberal Bee Jay.

In 1981, he played for the Houston Astros when they won their first title.

As an ex-Major Leaguer, Donofrio played in the Stan Musul League and won the national championship in 1989.

But it was the 1979 championship, and the expectations in Liberal, that developed his drive for success.

“It was an honor to play here,” he said during a visit to Liberal Wednesday. “There was a passion for winning here. To be a part of the national championship is one of my greatest achievements.”

Donofrio recalled winning the title but also coming close in 1978.

“We should have won the year before,” he said. “We got beat in the ninth inning. But winning the championship in 1979 gave me the passion at Oral Roberts University and as a professional.”

For Donofrio, it was an honor just to get the chance to be a Bee Jay. The team was well-known for its baseball success and the program’s commitment to winning.

“You can say that this program was the Yankees of Kansas,” Donofrio said. “Winning was expected. Winning starts with a good organization, and you were expected to perform. The people who were here before you were successful, and they passed the baton.”

Like many young players, Donofrio wanted to become a professional, and Liberal was a way to get there.

“They treated us like pros here,” Donofrio said. “We were playing against the best competition, and we were motivated. These were like all star games.”

Donofrio played shortstop for Bee Jay Manager and ex-major leaguer Bob Cerv during the championship season of 1979.

“It was a tremendous privilege and honor to play for him,” he said. “When someone wants you to change your swing a little, you have to have the respect for that person to do it, and with Bob Cerv, you listened.”

Donofrio listened, and he went from batting in the .200s to hitting .450 in the NBC World Series.

“(Cerv) had confidence in us and high expectations,” Donofrio said. “He would not settle for losing.”

Since retiring from professional baseball in 1985, Donofrio has worked in the insurance industry helping businesses with risk management for the past 26 years.

While his dream of becoming a professional baseball player, and a champion, was realized, he said it was important to prepare for life after athletics.

“You need to take advantage of your college education,” he said. “You need to be able to network with people. I didn’t realize how important that was. You need to work with people in the business world.”

Even though he has put his glove on the shelf, he still follows his former teams, and he was watching the progress of the Bee Jays this season as they won the 2010 national championship.

“I take a tremendous sense of pride in this team winning,” he said. “It’s like a feather in your cap when they win.”

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