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Drama and Pride in the Gateway City

John Harry Stahl

Bill Nowlin

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Drama and Pride in the Gateway City
Memorable Teams in Baseball History
Drama and Pride in the Gateway City
The 1964 St. Louis Cardinals

Edited by John Harry Stahl and Bill Nowlin
Associate Editors: Tom Heinlein, Russell Lake, and Leonard Levin

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Although the St. Louis Cardinals have had much success in the past one hundred years, including eleven World Series titles, by 1964 they had gone seventeen years without a pennant and had rarely contended in the interval. Three-time champions in the 1940s, the Cards had slowly faded from relevance in the early 1950s and largely sat on the sidelines during what would become a fabled era for the National League.

Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, integrating the Major Leagues and dramatically changing what was still the National Pastime. Soon there were five black players, then ten, then twenty, including many of the greatest players ever to play the game, men such as Willie Mays, Henry Aaron, and Roy Campanella. All of them, or nearly so, played in the National League, for teams like the Dodgers, the Giants, and the Braves. During this historic period, the Cardinals
and their fans watched their team wither away, while the integrated teams won pennant after pennant.

The story began to change in 1953, when August A. Busch Jr. bought the team and famously asked where all the black players were. Under the leadership of men like Bing Devine and Johnny Keane, the Cardinals began signing and acquiring talented players regardless of color, and slowly, sometimes very slowly, they began their rise.

The team Bing Devine built was a well-integrated team, and its black players were some of its most proud and memorable leaders: Bill White, who would one day run the entire National League; Curt Flood, who would challenge baseball’s very structure in 1970; Lou Brock, whose June acquisition sparked the club’s turnaround; and, most especially, Bob Gibson, whose demeanor and pride helped define the team right until the final game.

If the 1964 Cardinals were not an all-time great team, they were a fascinating team and a great story. Assumed dead in midseason (forcing Busch to fire Devine and almost fire Keane), the team roared back into the race and won a dramatic pennant race on the final day. All of the men come alive again on these pages—Tim McCarver, Ken Boyer, Mike Shannon, Branch Rickey, Bob Uecker—men whose names are still famous today in St. Louis and everywhere baseball is played.

If you are lucky enough to remember this proud team and its dramatic rush to glory, or if you wish to discover it for the first time, you will enjoy the stories in these pages.
St. Louis

CARDINALS

1964 Yearbook

50c
Chapter 1. Dave Bakenhaster

Joe Schuster

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During spring training before the 1964 baseball season, a photographer for the Newspaper Enterprise Association took a picture of St. Louis Cardinals rookie pitcher Dave Bakenhaster side by side with coach Red Schoendienst. The light-hearted photo shows the two laughing, Schoendienst pointing to Bakenhaster’s name on the back of the rookie’s jersey. When the photographer put the picture on the news wires with a caption proclaiming that, despite the eleven letters in the pitcher’s name, Schoendienst maintained his record of having the “longest name on a Cardinals’ jersey,” it appeared in a number of newspapers across the country from early March into early April.¹

Bakenhaster had every reason to be in good spirits that spring. The previous summer, after a spectacular high school career in which he had thrown nine no-hitters, the Cardinals had given him an estimated $40,000 signing bonus, outbidding most of the other Major League teams for the rights to what one sportswriter called “the much-sought-after . . . whip-armed . . . pitcher.”² Bakenhaster was one of two first-year “bonus babies” the Cardinals had that year (the other was infielder Ed Spiezio). The rules at the time required that St. Louis keep at least one of them with the big-league club and gave the team the option to designate the other as a member of the twenty-five-man roster but assign him to a Minor League team. The Cardinals elected to take Bakenhaster north with them when they broke camp.

As it would turn out, that photograph was one of the few bright moments in Bakenhaster’s Major League career. Between Opening Day that season and late July, he appeared in only two games for a total of three innings; his line for his meager appearances showed 9 hits, 6 runs (2 earned), 1 walk, and no strikeouts. On July 23, the day after Bakenhaster’s second and last appearance, the Cardinals sent him out, assigning him to Winnipeg in the Class A Northern League. While he persevered in the Minor Leagues until 1970, he never got back to the Major Leagues.³

David Lee Bakenhaster was born as the youngest of eight children to Monford and Lara Bak-
enhaster on March 5, 1945, in Columbus, Ohio. The family worked as crop farmers in the Dublin, Ohio, area, just outside Columbus; the land they worked at one point eventually became Don Scott Airfield, now operated by the Ohio State University. According to a story published at the time of his signing in 1963, his parents died in 1953, and sometime after that his brother Paul became his legal guardian. Bakenhaster began dreaming of playing Major League ball as early as nine, and the first scouts started paying attention to him when he was thirteen.

Bakenhaster was a talented athlete at Dublin High School (later renamed Dublin Coffman), lettering in basketball and baseball in all four years. He twice earned all-county honors in basketball, but it was in baseball that he truly excelled. His catcher in high school, Craig Duffey, recalled Bakenhaster as having a superior fastball that had good movement on it. “I can remember catching games in which he was so fast, the opposing batters’ knees would be shaking,” Duffey said. He remembered that Bakenhaster once struck out all twenty-one batters he faced in a game against Columbus Academy in his junior year, the almost-perfect game marred by a passed ball on a third strike allowing the batter to reach first. In four seasons as a pitcher at the school, Bakenhaster accumulated a 41-5 record; among his nine no-hitters were two perfect games. During his high school career, he averaged fifteen strikeouts a game. In each of his four seasons, he was named to the all-county baseball team; three times he was all-district and twice all-state.

If scouts were already paying attention, Bakenhaster’s senior year cemented his reputation as a legitimate professional prospect. That year, when his team reeled off twenty-one consecutive victories to earn a spot in the Class A state finals, he went 17-0, including a four-hit victory in the regional championship and a no-hitter in the semifinals. Although his coach asked him to start the state championship game the day after his semifinal gem, Bakenhaster’s brother/guardian worried that taxing his arm might hurt his professional chances, so Bakenhaster skipped the game; his team lost. Five days after his graduation, Cardinals scout Mo Mozzali signed him to a contract. Bakenhaster split his first professional season between Brunswick (Georgia) of the Georgia-Florida League and Winnipeg (Manitoba) of the Northern League, finishing with a combined 6-6 record, striking out 65 and walking 49 with a 4.44 earned run average in seventy-seven innings.

In 1964, though bonus-baby Bakenhaster began the season with the Cardinals, most observers expected that he would not do much. A preseason evaluation by Baseball Digest evaluated him this way: “Has good fastball and had a good curve at times, but has a tendency to throw too many curves. Wild at times. May have a chance.” And Bakenhaster indeed did little, having to wait more than two months before he saw action in a regular-season game. In that Major League debut, on June 20, 1964, Bakenhaster pitched the last two innings in a home game against the San Francisco Giants. His debut was a portent of the bad luck that followed him for most of his professional career. Entering the game with San Francisco leading 10-1, Bakenhaster allowed a lead-off double to Harvey Kuenn. He retired the next two hitters before Cardinals shortstop Jerry Buchek made an error on a ground ball by Willie Mays. Bakenhaster then allowed three consecutive singles, scoring three unearned runs. In the top of the ninth the Giants scored a fourth unearned run before Bakenhaster closed out the inning.

More than a month later, on July 22, Bakenhaster appeared in his second and last Major League game, pitching the ninth inning of another blowout loss, this one 13-2 to the Pittsburgh Pirates. He allowed a double by Willie Stargell and a two-run home run by Bill Mazeroski to start the inning before retiring the side. The next day
the team reassigned him to Winnipeg, recalling Spiezio to the Major League roster to protect both players from the waiver draft.

Back in Class A, Bakenhaster struggled; in his first two weeks after being sent down, he had an 0-2 record with a league-worst ERA of 13.75. He finished the year 1-5, with a 5.36 ERA, 28 strikeouts, and 25 walks in forty-two innings pitched.

Sports columnist Fred Collins of the Winnipeg Free Press called Bakenhaster “a symbol, the innocent victim of baseball’s biggest headache, the bonus system.” Collins went on to defend Bakenhaster, despite his poor showing: “The crime of it is that David Lee is not a bad pitcher. No one will ever know now but it’s a good bet that, had he been allowed to develop in the minors, Bakenhaster wouldn’t have the headaches he must be having these nights.”

After Bakenhaster’s season in Winnipeg ended in September, the Cardinals announced they were recalling him again, but it was only a technicality, since he never actually rejoined the team. Instead, he returned home, where he married Kim Ann Hilling on September 16, 1964. (They divorced in 1968.)

Bakenhaster earned one more bonus from the Cardinals that season: after the team won the World Series in seven games from the New York Yankees, the players voted Bakenhaster a one-fourth share of the player’s pool; it amounted to $2,155.54.

Bakenhaster spent five more seasons in the Minor Leagues, all in the Cardinals organization, although he lost one year to military service, 1968, serving as a member of the military police in Uijongbu, Korea. Any prospects he may have had to advance as a professional were probably hurt that year, as he suffered a rotator cuff injury shortly after his discharge. His best year as a professional was 1966, when he helped lead St. Petersburg to the Florida State League’s best record under future Hall of Fame manager Sparky Anderson; he finished the season 16-6 with a 1.90 ERA and 160 strikeouts. One of the highlights of that year was a marathon 170-pitch complete-game 16–9 victory over Tampa in May. In that game—during which Bakenhaster reportedly lost fourteen pounds over the three hours—he struck out thirteen, nailing down the team’s twentieth consecutive win at that point.

After he stopped playing following the 1970 season, the Cardinals offered to make him their Major League bullpen coach; he accepted, but a week later changed his mind, citing “personal reasons.” The team replaced Bakenhaster with Lee Thomas, who subsequently became the Cardinals’ director of player development and later the Philadelphia Phillies’ general manager.

After leaving baseball, Bakenhaster worked for thirty-four years in a warehouse operated by Exel Logistics, serving the Nabisco Brands Food Company in Columbus, Ohio. In 1975 he married the former Carolyn Harr. In 2002 he was elected to the inaugural class for the Dublin Coffman High School Athletic Hall of Fame.

Some years after leaving the game, Bakenhaster told a writer, “I never achieved what I really set out to do. My abilities were not as good as I thought they were. I felt sorry for myself when I first got out. But when I got my head screwed on right, I was okay.”