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Headline: MANAGEMENT MATERIAL - Hall of Famer Ryne Sandberg brings his work ethic to Peoria, and to the managerial game

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The steel door swings open and Ryne Sandberg steps into the dimly lit, wood-paneled Leinie's Lodge, tucked inside Fox Cities Stadium down a short hallway from the visiting Peoria Chiefs clubhouse.

It is Opening Day 2007 and Sandberg, the Hall of Fame second baseman, has brought his team north, way north, into Appleton, Wis., for the Chiefs - his Chiefs - to open the season with the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers.

Since Sandberg is a rarity, a Hall of Famer going back to not just manage, but manage in the Class A Midwest League, a crowd of media types packs into the stadium bar to hear from the former Chicago Cubs infielder before the Chiefs beat the Timber Rattlers 9-5.

The irony is, as a player, Sandberg was not perceived to be media friendly, never going out of his way for the limelight. But there he was, stationed at a table in front of six television cameras, twice as many reporters, and a few passers-by answering the same questions he already answered two days earlier, asked by just as many Peoria reporters.

They are the same questions that will be asked as Sandberg makes his rounds through the Midwest League. The most basic one of all: Why?

Sowing the seeds

After his second retirement, in 1997, Sandberg never envisioned being back in the game full-time, not even working in spring training as he did for the past eight years as a special instructor.

"I never thought in 100 years that I'd take on a manager's job at any level," Sandberg said. "I never really saw myself as a spring training instructor either just because of the time that I put in and the grind starting at 18 years old. When I was wearing the uniform as a player, when I was done, I thought that would be it."

But in the spring of 1998, just after retirement, Sandberg was back.

"Boom, there I was hitting fungoes and helping out with batting practice," he said. "It just kind of happened and I have (the game) in my blood."

Through the years, Sandberg did more and more each spring - to the point former Cubs manager Dusty Baker let Sandberg coach first base during spring-training games and run some pregame meetings with the staff and players.

"That got the juices flowing a little bit," Sandberg said.

So much so, that when Baker was fired at the end of last season, Sandberg showed interest in the job and interviewed with Cubs general manager Jim Hendry. But the lack of experience was a drawback, and Lou Piniella got the job instead.

As Piniella filled out his staff, openings were created at higher levels throughout the Cubs' minor-league organizations. Jody Davis was promoted to high-A Daytona in the trickle-up, and that left the Chiefs' position vacant. That it was Peoria, in the heart of Cubs' country, was a coincidence.

"It was strictly the job that was open," Hendry said. "We didn't orchestrate it for Ryne to end up in Peoria."

Hendry offered the job to Sandberg in late November. It took two days for Sandberg to decide.

"This job came my way and was thrown out there as a possibility," Sandberg said. "I thought about it and looked at it as an opportunity. Why are they offering this to me? Maybe this is what I need to do."

Although two other Hall of Fame players, Mike Schmidt and Gary Carter, made the jump to minor-league managing in recent years (with mixed results), Sandberg didn't consult with either in making the decision.

"I did talk to Gary at the Hall of Fame inductions the past two years, but that was when I had no intentions of doing this," Sandberg said. "He mentioned he was managing and I just asked him how he liked it."

Sandberg did talk it over with his wife, Margaret, and their children.

"The timing was perfect. They were maybe more excited than I was initially," Sandberg said.

On Nov. 29, the Cubs announced their minor-league coaching assignments. All except for Peoria's manager.

"We had an idea that (Sandberg as manager) could be possible but it could be a long shot," Chiefs president Rocky Vonachen said. "When they named all the other coaches and managers but left our manager open, we weren't quite sure. We were just kind of hoping that it would happen."

The Cubs made Sandberg's assignment official Dec. 5.

"I think when you look at him you know why he's a Hall of Famer," Cubs director of player development Oneri Fleita said. "He's got a great routine, he's passionate about what he does and he has a great respect for the game. Hopefully our players will gravitate to that, and that respect for the game."

Learning curve

The light towers of HoHoKam Park, the Cubs' spring training facility in Mesa, Ariz., can be seen in the distance. But Fitch Park is far from the big leagues.

In late March, only uniforms connected the Cubs minor-leaguers working at Fitch with the big club down the street.

In that regard, Sandberg looked at home with the red "23" on the back, below the Hall of Fame name. Sandberg even looked at home pushing a shopping cart filled with the tools of batting practice - dozens of baseballs, two buckets and a weighted bat - through Fitch Park back to the clubhouse.

Taking care of those little details were just some of Sandberg's chores in spring training. There also were things to learn about actually running a team.

"I had one-on-ones with (the other coaches and managers) and took little crumbs and put things into play right away in coaching third base, my positioning out there, how to look at a lineup and how to work with the pitchers, all those things," Sandberg said. "It was like going back to school, being a minor-leaguer all over again learning the game from a different vantage point.

"I went in trying to learn something every day so I could do the job."

There also was the matter of trying to find his own managerial style, both on and off the field.

"We want (minor-league managers) to have their own personality," Fleita said. "When you get to the big leagues, you don't know you are going to play for."

Sandberg's easy-going personality has come through so far.

"He's really easy to talk to and relaxed," Chiefs outfielder D.J. Lewis said. "He wears Vans (shoes) when he's not on the field."

Sandberg attributes his ability to relate to the players to raising his family. His youngest child is 22, and the oldest is 28.

"Going through that experience in raising five kids, I have a way to relate to these kids as individuals," Sandberg said. "It's been fun dropping some of the lingo on these guys, surprising them with what I know about some of their sayings and music."

There's also no fear on Sandberg's part about expecting his players to play like him.

"I do ask them to come to the ballpark every day looking to work hard, looking to learn and improve every day," Sandberg said. "That message got me to where I am now, but I'm not asking them to play like I did, especially later on in my career. I was a minor-leaguer. I made 35-40 errors in a season at shortstop. I hit .260."

It's a situation to which former Chiefs manager Davis can relate. Last year was his first year managing in the minors.

"He knows the game too well to not have what it takes," Davis said of his former teammate. "But there's things that will come up now that he didn't get to go through this spring, like having a pitching staff."

There's also the media responsibility that comes with being a manager.

As a player, Sandberg met with the media perfunctorily. Sandberg dismissed the notion that his reticence with the media as a player was because of his shyness.

"I didn't even think I was that shy with the media, really," Sandberg said. "I was all business and didn't like the media getting in the way of what I had to do on the field."

Sandberg understands media relations are part of the new job description. He even taped a piece with former Chiefs owner Pete Vonachen for WTVP-TV's fund drive. That's not something most minor-league managers bother with in the offseason.

"That's Ryne," Rocky Vonachen said. "When he decides he's going to do something, he'll do it."

A lot of the attention is coming simply because of Peoria's proximity to Chicago. All of this might not be happening to this extent if he were managing in Boise or Daytona. If anything, Sandberg said, Peoria is a plus both for him and the players.

"In some ways, maybe I missed the crowds a little bit," Sandberg said. "Hopefully, we'll get some good crowds. That's great for the young players and will really raise their game and get them used to playing in that atmosphere."

Everything Sandberg, one of a handful of ex-Cubs who have rejoined the organization in bigger capacities, does in Peoria is done with an eye to Chicago.

"Wrigley Field is a special place, and the Cubs uniform is a special uniform," Sandberg said. "All of us are striving to raise that standard of the Cubs to a different level, really to where it should be.

"I'd like to see the Cubs raise their standards in what they do on the field. And for me, it starts at this level."

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