

Ready to be World Serious

He's in charge of Grand Junction's great tournament

Editor's note: In the Colorado Classics series, The Denver Post takes a weekly look at individuals who made their mark on the Colorado sports landscape and what they are doing now.

Jamie Hamilton has taken the torch and is running with it.

As chairman of the National Junior College Baseball World Series organizing committee, he doesn't plan to fall in his task. There's a grand history to protect, a week-long event that allows Grand Junction to be major league in its own way.

The Juco World Series this week is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and 40th in Grand Junction.

While Omaha and the College World Series has its powers such as Texas, Miami and Stanford, producing numerous future major-leaguers, Grand Junction's tournament legacy has some big names as well. The teams might not be as well known as those in Omaha, but the players who have come



COLORADO CLASSICS

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through Grand Junction can hold their own with anyone.

The alumni include pitchers Curt Schilling, Eric Gagne, David Wells, former Rockies stalwart Kevin Ritz, Jesse Crain from Fairview High School and Barry Lersch out of Denver.

There have been prominent position players as well, with Hall of Famer Kirby Puckett, Otis Nixon and Kal Daniels, who played for the Denver Zephyrs before going to the Cincinnati Reds, on the alumni list. Puckett and Daniels were on the Golden Anniversary team announced this year.

Colorado's two-year schools have been represented over the years with Lamar Community College, Trinidad State Junior College and Mesa State (before it became a four-year school in 1976). No Colorado team has won the championship.

The first Juco World Series was played in Miami, Okla., in 1958. The following year, it moved to Grand Junction, and the story goes that a no-player team from Paris, Texas, loaded into two cars and drove all night to play its first game. It won the tournament.

Hamilton took the reins of Grand Junction's World Series four years ago. He wasn't a newcomer to the tournament, having worked as a right-hand man for Sam Suplizio, who directed the tournament for many years.

Suplizio, who died last year, and a dedicated group of longtime Grand Junction faithful had built a strong foundation that kept the tournament in high standing. Dale Hollingsworth, a Grand Junction businessman, and Bus Bergman, a longtime coach at Mesa State, have to be mentioned anytime Grand Junction's credentials to play host to the Juco World Series are discussed.

"We lost a lot of history with the passing of Sam Suplizio," Hamilton said. "He left a very good machine in place, and we've tried to maintain the quality of the event. Sam promoted baseball ev-



Christopher Tomlinson | Special to The Denver Post

THEN AND NOW |

Junior College World Series chairman Jamie Hamilton looks right at home at Suplizio Field in Grand Junction, above, the site of the series taking place this week. But he looks equally at home in the uniform of the Denver Zephyrs, with whom he worked as an infield instructor for the Milwaukee Brewers.



Courtesy Jamie Hamilton

erywhere he went."

Hamilton also is celebrating his 50th year. He was born in Grand Junction, but moved to Avada with his family when he was a year old. He played baseball at Regis High School and at Mesa Junior College for Bergman.

While at Mesa, Hamilton played second base and made the all-Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference team.

He played professionally with the California Angels organization, reaching Double-A.

"I couldn't hit the curveball, and in 1981 I decided it was time to sell insurance," Hamilton said.

He remained in the game, coaching baseball at Mesa for four years and moved into the professional ranks as an infield instructor with the Chicago Cubs and Milwaukee Brewers.

While with the Brewers, he visited Mile High Stadium in 1987 to work with the Zephyrs, Milwaukee's Triple-A affiliate.

"Terry Bevington was Denver's manager, and Gary Sheffield was one of the team's better players," Hamilton said. Hamilton has become a fixture in Grand Junction. Besides his work with the Juco World Series, he is the athletic director at Mesa State.

But holding up the legacy of the baseball tournament is his passion.

"We basically scraped together every penny over the years to get money to improve our ballpark," Hamilton said. "We finally got it done, and it was voted the best amateur ballpark in the country several years ago. We feel it's certainly of Triple-A quality by professional baseball standards."

The tournament is always first-rate right from the beginning. An impressive list of guest speakers have been featured at the annual kickoff banquet: George Steinbrenner, Willie Mays, Whitey Herzog, Joe Torre, Phil Mottor, George Brett, Whitey Ford, Lefty Gomez and baseball commissioner Bud Selig, to name a few.

Hamilton will be tired when the tournament ends Saturday at Sam Suplizio Field. But he knows that once again a little bit of the national pastime will have come to Grand Junction.

"Our whole community gets behind this tournament," Hamilton said. "It's the biggest event of the year, and it's all about getting people in the seats for the games. A \$25 ticket is good for all the games. It's a lot of work, but it keeps me young and keeps me going."

That's big league.

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