

Lunetta: Fanning's Legacy Is Immense

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By Scott Kindberg, Post-Journal

Dan Lunetta was at an air show in Lakeland, Fla., with his son, Sammy, on Saturday when he noticed he had a voice mail message on his cellphone.

The caller ID indicated that it was from Lunetta's longtime friend and lifelong baseball man, Jim Fanning.

"I thought that was a nice surprise," said Lunetta on Sunday afternoon. "I thought maybe he was going over to Dunedin to see the Blue Jays extended (spring training) group."



Jim Fanning managed the Montreal Expos in the early 1980s.

AP photo

Sadly, that wasn't the case.

When Lunetta, a Jamestown native, played back the message, it was from Fanning's wife, Maria, informing him that her husband had passed away. He was 87.

"I was devastated," said Lunetta, whose relationship with Fanning, the former Montreal Expos executive, dates back to the late 1970s. "I called her right away. ... It was a very difficult conversation."

The passing of someone of that character was a loss not only to Lunetta, the director of minor league operations for the Detroit Tigers, but also for many in our area who developed a relationship with Fanning when he was the farm director for the Expos when it had an affiliate in Jamestown.

"His nickname was 'Gentleman Jim,'" Lunetta said, "and it was so appropriate, because in my 35 years in baseball I don't believe there has ever been a finer human being, a finer gentleman than Jim Fanning.

"Our game is going to miss people like (him). They're irreplaceable."

Fanning was Montreal's general manager when the team entered the major leagues in 1968 and spent 25 years with the franchise that moved to Washington in 2005 and became the Nationals.

As a field manager in the strike-shortened 1981 season, he directed Montreal to the playoffs. After beating Philadelphia, the Expos lost to Los Angeles in the National League Championships Series.

Russell E. Diethrick Jr.'s relationship with Fanning dates back nearly 40 years when the Expos first made Jamestown a Montreal affiliate housed in the New York-Pennsylvania League.

"He was never aloof," Diethrick said. "He was always very personable and he would spend time with you. He was the one who taught me what minor league baseball was all about and the kind of game it was. He was very pleased with what we had in Jamestown, the facility, everything."

Diethrick recalled a meeting that the local baseball people had with Fanning in the late 1970s at the old Ironstone Restaurant in Jamestown. Among those in attendance was Lunetta, who apparently made an immediate impression on the Montreal executive.

According to Diethrick, the conversation went something like this:

Fanning: "Is (Lunetta) the groundskeeper."

Diethrick: "Yes."

Fanning: "Get him out of there."

By the next season, 1980, Lunetta was the general manager of the Jamestown team, beginning more than three decades of professional baseball service, including a long stint with Montreal.

"Russ Diethrick gave me my first job in baseball and Jim gave me my first job working for a professional organization," Lunetta said. "I couldn't have been more blessed to have my first pro employment working under Jim Fanning. He was one of those individuals who I learned so much from just by observing him, by how he handled himself, how he went about his business, how he went about making decisions and how he went about treating people.

"I learned quickly in my career that I wanted to be like Jim Fanning."

Fanning was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 2000 and served as a team ambassador for the Toronto Blue Jays.

"He was very beloved in Montreal and (throughout) Canada," Lunetta said. "In fact, he became a Canadian citizen in 2012. He spent basically his entire life in Canada."

In Lunetta's eyes, though, Fanning could have made anywhere his home, because of the relationships he built through more than 60 years in baseball.

One special one was with Lunetta, who he considered a like a son.

"(Maria Fanning) told me that he always referred to me as one of his kids," Lunetta said. "When she told me that, I couldn't have been more proud to know that's how he felt. It was very special and it put a huge smile on my face."

Putting a smile on people's faces was one of Fanning's many gifts, along with his loyalty to those who worked for and with him.

"There's an old saying, 'Who would you want to have in a foxhole with you?'" Diethrick said. "Jim Fanning would be one of my first choices."