



Salvi likes ‘spick and span’ ballparks – and his RailCats, Boomers have cleaned up in the standings

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Thursday, March 6th, 2014*

You won't catch Pat Salvi wearing white gloves, checking for dust and dirt on the railings of his two ballparks, Boomers Stadium and The Steel Yard.

But with his bare hands, Salvi -- owner of the Schaumburg Boomers and Gary South-Shore RailCats baseball teams -- still has the same firm philosophy that glove-garbed William Wrigley, Jr. espoused in his freshly-expanded Wrigley Field 85 years ago. The first of three Wrigleys to own the Cubs micro-inspected for grime, believing ballpark cleanliness was next to godliness.



The Schaumburg Boomers staff includes (from left) Todd Fulk, business manager; Dan Tomaszewski, creative marketing manager; Mike Jacklich, box office manager/account executive; Sara Romano, community relations manager/account executive; Andy Viano, general manager; Pat Salvi, owner; Jeff Ney (blue shirt between Pat and Kate), assistant general manager; Kate Kleiva, client service manager/account executive; Mike Tlusty, operations manager; Ed McCaskey, director of marketing & media/account executive; Mike Kline, promotions manager/account executive, and Nick Hanson, intern.

“Overall I like it to be clean,” said Salvi, the only multiple pro sports franchise owner in Chicago this side of Jerry Reinsdorf. “Really immaculately clean from the time you park ‘till the time you’re in the stadium. Bathrooms have to be spick and span.

“(Check to see) things are working: You can get towels out of the towel dispenser. The sinks work. Concession lines – a pet peeve of mine is when people have to wait too long to get a hot dog or a beer. We try to instill in our food and beverage people that they efficiently move the lines along.”

Salvi stops at including a throwback feature of both Wrigley Field and Notre Dame Stadium, where he’s spent a number of football Saturdays in law school and as a loyal alum: troughs in the men’s rooms.

Attired in a sharp blue suit, Salvi spoke from a tidy spot at Boomers Stadium on a sunny day that provided a break from the endless winter. In the suite behind first base, he was joined by Boomers general manager Andy Viano and two pieces of important hardware. The championship cup for the Boomers’ winning of the independent Frontier League was the bigger of the two. Accompanying the cup was a plaque honoring the Boomers as the league’s organization of the year.

Salvi is getting used to such keepsakes by now. Six weeks earlier, he and the Boomers garnered two awards at the Pitch and Hit Club’s 68th annual banquet at the Carlisle in west suburban Lombard. Salvi accepted the Chicago Baseball Organization of the Year Award. Viano also had a turn at the podium, earning the Chicago Minor League Executive of the Year Award.

The awards are another indication of how the famed personal-injury litigator who heads up the Salvi Schostok & Pritchard law firm in Chicago and Waukegan has put his longtime personal sports philosophies into practice.

He teams with wife Lindy to run Salvi Sports. Beginning with his purchase of the RailCats in 2008 and adding the start-up Boomers in 2011, along with college-league North Shore Navigators and Martha’s Vineyard Sharks, Salvi rates baseball-team ownership as much



Andy Viano (left) and Pat Salvi hold the Boomers' Frontier League organization of the year plaque. In front is the league's championship trophy.

fun as work, now that he's learned to balance team oversight with delegation of tasks to his staff.

"I've gotten better the last several years at enjoying being an owner instead of being an anxiety creator," Salvi said. "I've learned the business. I didn't know anything about it (starting out). I've learned when to kind of get involved. I've learned what things to watch. I've learned what kind of people to hire. I try to help in large decisions, (relations with) large sponsors, big-ticket items like lease issues and big rule changes in the league."

That championship season

Salvi and his staffs have enjoyed consistent success. The RailCats won the American Association championship in 2013, after being a consistent winner in two independent baseball leagues since the franchise was founded in 2002. The neophyte Boomers are attempting to catch up, and are doing well in the effort.

The Boomers' championship is even more astounding considering the circumstances of the birth of the franchise. They replaced a previous independent team, the Flyers, at the 15-year-old municipally-run stadium on the southwest edge of Schaumburg. The Flyers, who once had Sox legend Ron Kittle as manager and semi-tragic ex-Cubs outfielder Brant Brown on the roster, disbanded after leaving a trail of unpaid bills and overdue stadium rent. Salvi's management team and the Boomers' sudden success is consigning that stain to some bad memories.

Gary and Schaumburg are radically different local baseball markets. They're tied together, though, by the passion and vision of Salvi, who is exactly where he wants to be as an owner.

He grew up in northwest suburban Lake Zurich when the surroundings were rural and the Salvi family had to go to Barrington for grocery shopping and movies. After he established his law firm 30 years ago, the Salvis moved to Lake Forest, where Pat and Lindy raised five sons. More recently empty-nesters, the Salvis moved to Chicago 3 1/2 years ago, where he is equidistant to his two teams.

"No. 1, I'm a huge sports fan," said Salvi. "Always a big baseball fan. I always had a desire to own a minor-league franchise. I was always interested not only in the playing of the game, but also the business of sports fascinated me. There are legal issues in baseball and sports like you're going to have in any business.

"Getting into the sports business for me was an escape from the legal practice, the grind of litigation. There are very exhilarating aspects of it. You help clients. You're involved in important cases. You learn new things with every case. Like any job, there's the day-to-day mundane aspect we experience in any case."

Finally cinching his entrance into ownership was his meeting with the owner of Kansas City's T-Bones team.

"He said the RailCats were for sale," Salvi recalled. "The team was available due to the owner's divorce. He was from Ft. Wayne. I would drive by the (Steel Yard) all the time.

Although the city of Gary was experiencing tough economic times, the stadium was in a good location for me. Close to Chicago, close to Notre Dame. It had a great fan base, and historically had done well.”

Affiliated vs. independent – a difference?

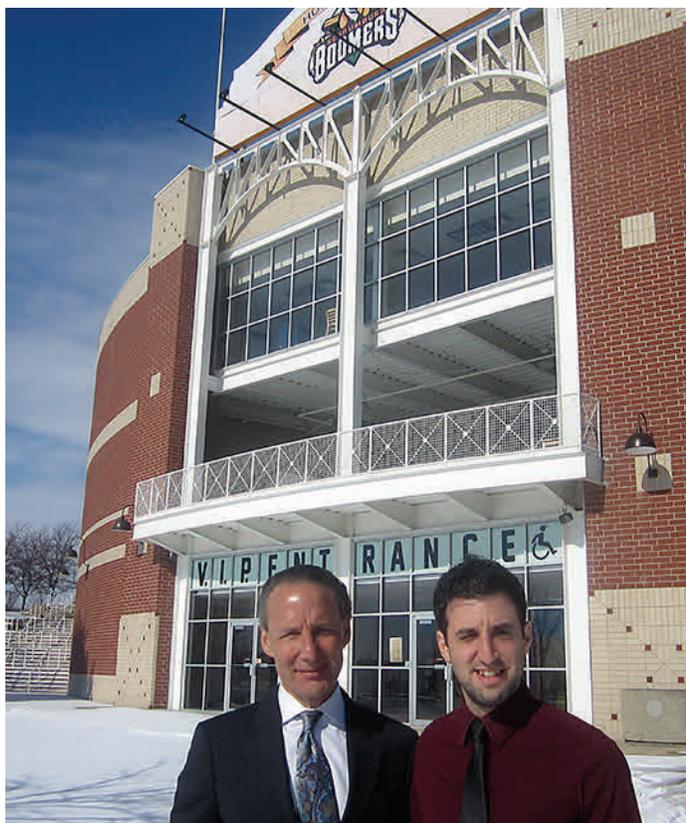
Salvi saw no real difference in public perception of “affiliated” minor-league teams, who have a working agreement with big-league organizations to host and develop their players, and independent franchises that have boomed in the past 20 years often with spanking-new stadiums. Although the Class-A Midwest League South Bend Silver Hawks were for sale a few years back in a market Salvi certainly understood, he was not interested. The Midwest League Kane County Cougars have been under the same ownership since the franchise was moved to Geneva from Wisconsin in 1991.

“My opinion, the affiliated teams are overpriced, if you multiply the amount of money they make or lose,” Salvi said. “Plus it’s a tough (ownership) club to break into. Nor have I ever been hung up on affiliated vs. independent, as if affiliated has a better panache than independent.

“I learned early on that the majority of fans are not aware of the difference. People who know the baseball business are. Fans who attend our games don’t really care.”

The only difference in the ballclub financial operation is the independent-team owner picks up the cost of salaries for players, the manager and coaches. In contrast, the parent big-league club pays its prospects and field staff on an “affiliated” franchise. Owners like Salvi have cost control via a salary cap: \$115,000 in the American Association and \$75,000 in the Frontier League. Players are paid \$800 up to \$5,000 a month. Most are paid between \$1,000 and \$3,000 a month. Remember, the independent leagues play only from May until early September, so the payout is for just one-third of a year.

Salvi’s general managers don’t have to fight to get the talent squeezed into the salary caps. They have far many more would-be ballplayers than spots on the 23-man rosters.



It's a fortunate sunny day amid a wild winter with Pat Salvi (left) and Andy Viano thinking summer in front of Boomer Stadium's front entrance.

“It’s not difficult at all to field rosters,” said Viano. “It might be surprising, but I don’t think it’s tough at all. Look at the Frontier League’s tryout camp – a pay-to-try-out situation. About 400 people, of which 20 will get drafted and 8 to 10 will stick with a roster. Every day we’re inundated with e-mails and phone calls, FAX’s, messages. They say, ‘I just got released from this team.’ ‘I just graduated college.’ That’s why independent baseball is so successful.”

Salvi knows he could have invested in a slew of other businesses guaranteed to be more profitable than baseball. Like Reinsdorf, he won’t tolerate losses, will accept break-even and aims for a profit.

“Everything for us, we have to be break-even or better,” Viano said. “Pat’s goal is not to get rich off these profits. What’s nice for me as a manager is I can re-invest that profit back into the franchise. The goal isn’t to run as cheaply as possible with as much profit as possible. Let’s be (at least) a break-even franchise and win organization of the year award.”

Renowned Chicago sports name on staff

Salvi has learned his modest-sized staffs are one key to a successful franchise. To jumpstart the Boomers, he moved Viano over from Gary. Also coming over was media relations/ marketing man Ed McCaskey, who has enabled his family to equal the Veeck family’s feat of four consecutive generations working for Chicago teams. McCaskey’s great-grandfather was George “Papa Bear” Halas. Grandfather and grandmother were Ed and Virginia McCaskey, the latter now the NFL’s most revered woman in her 30-year Bears ownership succeeding Halas, her father. The younger Ed McCaskey’s father is Pat McCaskey, who served a number of roles for the Bears and now is the team’s historian among other duties.

“Andy’s with me entire ownership career,” Salvi said. “Andy would agree I’ve gotten better at not micromanaging the franchise.”

He’s pulled in the other direction, though.

“Absolutely,” said Salvi. “That’s my nature. I’m a litigator, I’m a trial lawyer. I sort of have to be the person in charge, fixing everything, developing everything, putting on the presentation. But I’ve learned to back off. We have regularly-scheduled meetings, usually once every two weeks. We go through the financials, cash flow, issues that come up with the league, the staff. Like any good business, I’ve learned you have to hire good people and let them do their job.”

Salvi the owner doesn’t quite have a full-time second job after the law. Let’s say he’s doing considerable moonlighting.

“It is a substantial amount of time,” he said. “I certainly meet or exceed the IRS minimum as a passive investment. I’m still a full-time trial lawyer. It’s still a labor of love.”

Another vital factor for success is an equitable lease from the municipalities that run the stadiums.

“Do they pay for utilities and major repairs?” asked Salvi. “That can make the difference between profit and loss. Ideally, the landlord – the municipality – pays for substantial upkeep and repairs.”

Salvi feels fortunate in the forging the key relationships in each of his cities with the mayors – Karen Freeman-Wilson of Gary and Al Larson of Schaumburg. Wilson has her hands full after 2 ½ years in office, but is a big RailCats supporter. Larson, mayor since 1987, is synonymous with Schaumburg, and its growth and maturity as a village.

“She’s a former Harvard Law grad,” Salvi said of Freeman-Wilson. “Over time she’ll make a difference (in Gary).”

“Al Larson is a pleasure. He’s a great baseball fan. He has an appreciation for the fact the franchise does well here, that it thrives here.

“If a municipality is just trying to extract a pound of flesh (to look good or not show it’s kowtowing to the owner), that’s a big mistake. A village or city with a minor-league franchise, although it doesn’t want to throw good money after bad, it has to view the team as a quality-of-life issue like a library or a park, rather than a cash cow.”

Salvi and his staffs use different approaches for the different markets they serve.

Booster of Gary and Steel Yard

“I’ve used this example many times,” he said. “People in the Chicago area used to travel to Chicago Stadium and (now) the United Center in an area they wouldn’t wander around after the game. They’d get back to their cars and go home. That’s really what happens with the RailCats.

“Fans are from Valparaiso, Merrillville, Crown Point, Munster, Chesterton, and drive into Gary, watch the game and leave. The U.S. Steel Yard has had a virtually immaculate record for safety. There’s never been even a minor crime that’s occurred before, during or after a game. The police and city are very proud of it. It’s well-lit. Gary -- although any town has a certain criminal element -- I never thought it’s unsafe. It’s just very poor.

“The brand fortunately is such where people know it’s safe and fun. It’s the only pro franchise in Northwest Indiana.”



Pat Salvi speaks at the Pitch and Hit Club's Banquet, where his Schaumburg Boomers won the Chicago baseball organization of the year award.

Salvi jokingly reminded Viano he has ideal demographics in the Schaumburg market.

“A nice, lovely location, but the competition is more challenging,” Salvi said. Viano then listed movies, retail, video games, Santa’s Village, restaurants with recreation sidelines and all the other choices a prosperous suburban location offers.

Almost left unsaid was the Boomers’ competition with the Kane County Cougars, now the Cubs’ Midwest League affiliate, about 10 miles to the southwest as the crow flies. The Boomers have the independent-league baseball market to themselves in such large communities as Schaumburg, Arlington Heights and Palatine. But go west and south, into the Fox Valley and western DuPage County, and the established Cougars, who commonly drew more than 400,000 fans a season, are a big factor.

At least Salvi has an inside-out look into Cougars operations. Jeff Ney, his Boomers assistant general manager, worked for nearly two decades with the Cougars, including a stint as co-assistant GM with Curtis Haig.

“It’s no secret, in the corporate group (sales) area in particular, there’s a battle down in Naperville, Elgin, the areas that fall in between us,” said Viano.

Admirer of Cougars, ownership

“It’s not like we have a board downstairs tossing darts at the Cougars,” said Salvi. “I admire the franchise. I’ve talked to the owners. We’re inspired by successful franchises, not green with envy. We aspire to what they do well and try to do better.”

The second year of the Cougars’ Cubs affiliation is not as big a factor as you might figure, Salvi added.

“There is a relatively handful of people who are real baseball fanatics who want to see a possible future Cub rather than a Schaumburg Boomer,” he said. “To the overwhelming majority of fans, that’s not a factor.”

In the end, the bottom line is the bottom line. Who can deliver the best entertainment and food for the most reasonable price is the winner. All the affiliated and independent teams within a tank of gas of Chicago’s big-league teams have benefited by the latter featuring \$50 bleacher tickets and \$7.50 cups of beer (\$1.50 more than a six pack in the grocery store). Once again, Salvi gives his staff a lot of leeway to set the price, affecting attendance and the boss’ balance sheet.

“We’re given a good deal of rope when we’re making those kinds of decisions,” Viano said of a franchise so young they haven’t had a chance to raise prices yet. All Boomers fixed seats are \$10, while lawn seats are \$7, if purchased in advance. A \$1 surcharge is added to day-of-game purchases.

“\$10 to sit in the first row,” Viano said. “We’re \$2 less than going to a Cougars game, \$2 less than a movie.” Meanwhile, the Boomers ticket buyer can pay \$7.75 for a 20-ounce beer *and* a hot dog. An added incentive is free parking across the street from Boomer Stadium.

Salvi is flexible on his own health-conscious dietary habits during the season. But like his insistence on cleanliness, he also believes the treats should be served with the utmost in customer service.

“I enjoy hot dogs, brats, cheeseburgers, French fries, nachos, a good beer,” said Salvi. “I think the key is fresh buns and good quality. Also the attitude of our staff, the food and beverage people. You want them to be very positive, very customer-friendly, and try to have a culture where the fans are treated as gold.”

He aspires to eat the same food and quaff the same drinks in the same modestly-sized ballparks for the remainder of his ownership days. Salvi does not aspire, like South Bend owner Andrew Berlin (also a minority Sox investor), to own a big-league franchise.

“I know Andy Berlin,” he said. “He was a very hospitable host to us at a Silver Hawks game -- a terrific owner in a very short period of time. A great passion. A wonderful business person. God bless him, that’s what he wants to do.

“I’m a trial lawyer, that’s my passion, and my family. The Boomers and the RailCats bring me great joy. (Major League Baseball is) a multi-billion dollar industry fraught with all sorts of issues. Right now I prefer to be just a fan of the Bears, the Bulls, the White Sox, etc.”