

## **Tom Alesia**

*Baseball Like It Ought to Be: How a Shoe Salesman's Madison Mallards and His Renegade Staff Ignited a Summer Collegiate Baseball Revolution.*

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Host: Stu Levitan

*Stu Levitan: Hello again friends, and welcome to Madison BookBeat, the radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm this week's host, Stu Levitan. My guest today is the award-winning journalist Tom Alesia, here to talk about his new book, Baseball Like It Ought to Be, with the lengthy but informative subtitle, How a Shoe Salesman's Madison Mallards and His Renegade Staff Ignited a Summer Collegiate Baseball Revolution.*

*It's the inside story of how Madison, which no longer has a hometown college baseball team, is the home of the college baseball franchise with the greatest attendance in the sport's history, which helped both revitalize the North Side and spur substantial growth in the sport. And that team, which counts as alumni 25 who played major league ball, including a couple of very big stars, was also the cornerstone of Big Top Events, responsible for the creation of the champion women's softball team, the Madison Nightmares, and the renovation of historic Breese Stevens Field, the creation of the Madison Forward Football Club, and the scheduling of concerts and community events there. The national pastime, indeed.*

*Local newspaper readers will remember Tom Alicia's byline covering arts and entertainment for the Capitol Times and the Wisconsin State Journal from 1993 to 2010, during which time he won the National Music Journalism Award. Since leaving daily journalism, he's done some freelancing, worked at area public schools, and published three previous books, including a very popular one on Hall of Fame shortstop Dave Bancroft. It is a pleasure to welcome to Madison Book Beat, Tom Alicia.*

Tom Alesia: Thank you, Stu. That was nicely done.

*Well, thanks. We like to show respect for our authors. So let us start with some basics. What is summer collegiate baseball, and what was its state in the early 1990s, specifically right before 1994?*

Before 1994, it was a handful of places that were doing it as a nonprofit business. I mean, these were teams that it was very casual in terms of how it was run. It was very traditional. It was led by two groups, the Cape Cod League, and of all places, the Alaska Summer League. That is where Aaron Judge spent one summer, he was in Alaska playing summer baseball. Now, these teams were not-for-profit. They were specifically designed to show off the players to the scouts.

*And then a guy with a fairly good sports pedigree named Dick Raddatz Jr. decides to create a brand new league, the Northwoods League. Who is Dick Raddatz Jr., and what was the Northwoods League all about?*

Dick Raddatz Jr. is the son of Dick Raddatz, a Boston Red Sox relief pitcher, star relief pitcher. The monster. Yes, the monster.

*He hated that nickname.*

And I don't blame him. It sounds like he was a much nicer guy than that. He is best known for really having Mickey Mantle's number. I mean, he had struck out Mickey Mantle a number of times in the times that they faced each other.

Raddatz was one of four people who developed the Northwoods League. And they came along and they wanted to do one thing, make money. I mean, let's do it non-profit. Raddatz had seen, even as far back as six, seven years before, he saw the University of Miami drawing incredible crowds to see college baseball during the regular college baseball season, which, again, doesn't extend very far into summer. He thought, what about summer? Summer and doing it for profit. These are players you don't pay. These are places that won't have the risk. These are places that won't have the overview of the major leagues looking down like minor league teams do and instructing them on, well, we need this, we need that. Four, that allows you then to have a lot more fun.

*Speaking of fun, I noticed there's a great statistic in your book that of the country's 12 most drunken cities, seven have Northwoods League franchises.*

Isn't that amazing? And that's how you make a lot of money. And you can't, at the Mallards, you know, even the Duck Pond, or the Duck Blind, you know, which is an all-you-can-drink area that fits up to 1,000 people, they're still making money on that. It's still doing well.

*Now, what's amazing about that, for people who haven't been out there, the Duck Blind is an area in right field with cargo containers that have...*

Yeah, oh, brilliantly done, very economical and ecological. Very good. And for 40 bucks or something like 40 bucks, you get the ballgame and you can eat and drink as much beer as you want.

*Now, when the Cleveland Indians had 10-cent beer night in the 1970s, it was chaotic. Yeah, I know, in 1972, the Cleveland Indians did it, and 10-cent beer night did not go well. It was chaos. It was even worse than disco night there in Chicago. How have the Mallards been able to maintain order and a family atmosphere with free beer, with all you can drink?*

You know, it's one of the things that's always astonished me, both for a good portion of the time that the Mallards were in, I was with the State Journal, and then even afterwards, you never hear of a problem in the Duck Blind. You may hear a little neighborhood grousing. Fireworks sometimes. Well, the fireworks, but also, yeah, you know, that the Mallards have really responded well to community complaints. And if the Duck Blind was getting out of hand, they correctly added the amount of security that is needed. Certainly in the earlier years, it was a lot looser, a lot wilder. Now it has, if you can actually see this for a place that

has up to 1,000 people drinking as much as you can possibly want, a little decorum. It's sad, but true. It's decorum in Wisconsin, it's relative.

*So you mentioned that they're not paying these players. Is that so they can maintain their college eligibility?*

Yeah, and you know, it's obviously in the next year or two, what will happen with the NIL? Can that extend beyond? Can you start to pay a player? I hope not, because that should be, you should be paid when you're playing for the college team, not outside of it. But right now, it appears that it will continue in the format that it is, which is the players will not be paid for playing.

*Just going back to Dick Rants for just a moment, just talk a bit about his sports pedigree.*

We mentioned his father, but he obviously had involvement in sports administration prior to the Northwoods League. From a young age, too, with the Los Angeles Dodgers in their spring training site in Florida. He was only 23 or 24, and he was in charge of that. He also worked for the Florida State League. He went in and was a general manager of the, I want to say that it was the Class A team at the time of the Red Sox, and something he had said negative about the Red Sox management after being very successful there for several years did not sit well, and that led to his departure from that. He did some other things, including working with the Michigan Special Olympics. But all through it, in the back of his mind was this idea, hey, he's a Michigan native, and he thought, how about this summer league? This can work. There's a lot of places without baseball, Madison being ground zero. But take a look at the other towns. The one key time before Madison was they got St. Cloud, because what was happening before that St. Cloud, Minnesota, which is still a team in the league, still doing really well, and actually their best record in the Northwoods League as the playoffs have begun. But St. Cloud, one person said, do you wanna go with independent league baseball, where you pay the players who are not minor league players, but still have an ounce of hope to keep going? Or do you want this college league where you're getting players who play college during the spring and early summer, and these guys who you've never heard of? And the St. Cloud City Council said, we're gonna go with the younger guys. And what a tremendous victory that was for the Northwoods League.

*Three years later, 2001 comes along. And we get a team in Madison. Now, talk a bit about what the state of baseball was in Madison in the late 1990s. We've got the Northwoods League existing for five or six years before it comes to Madison. What's baseball like in Madison during those years?*

Well, you have Madison chose the independent baseball route. The independent baseball route, again, being that, of course, it's for profit, and you are paying your players, and some have, most of them have minor experience, and some wanna still try to take one more chance at getting back into the minor leagues and eventually the major leagues. It was the Madison Black Wolf. They did their best. There is a general manager who, president, general manager of the team for five years, who passed away in 2013. But before that, he said, you know, we did everything we can to make that work, you know? And he said that if he thought too much about the Mallard success, which is enormous success, financially,

popularity, and even on the field, there's hundreds of players who have been drafted. But he said if he thinks about it too much, it gets to him. He starts to cry. And he continued on, and I'm sorry, I'm forgetting his first name right now, and I don't want to get it wrong. He then went back in to be the general manager of a very successful minor league team. And he said that, you know, I didn't, he was successful beforehand, he was successful after. He said, I didn't lose it during the time with Madison. Madison didn't hug the Madison Black Wolf, didn't come to be, you know, the excitement of anything anywhere near what the Madison Mallards have done.

*Was it because perhaps people remembered how exciting the Madison Muskies were and life with Leon Varjan and Ed Janus and the Black Wolf kind of paled in comparison?*

You know, I often, when I looked at the Madison Muskies, and when they first started, their first two or three years, attendance was pretty good, about 2,000 or so. But it did tail off, especially by the time they left in 1993. And if they were still successful, another team would have ended up going to, I believe it was Grand Rapids, which was building a stadium. Now you're also at a situation where you're at the Warner Park field, which would eventually become the duck pond with the Madison Mallards. It wasn't a great place. And it really wasn't a great place when the Madison Black Wolf played there for five years. And they wanted, the owners of the Black Wolf wanted to move, and they had a spot on Fish Hatchery, off Fish Hatchery in Fitchburg with a drawing of it. And eventually the price tag was enormous.

*One baseball publication described Warner Park, you quote this in the book, as, quote, an undistinguished civic facility that has no charm, several drawbacks, and no compelling reason to draw fans. Things would soon change.*

*We're talking with Tom Alesia. His new book is Baseball Like It Ought to Be, the inside story of the amazing Madison Mallards. So we get to late 2000, and Dick Raddatz announces that Madison is going to get a team in the Northwoods League, college summer baseball. Now, the University of Wisconsin had ended its baseball program after the 1991 season. So I imagine that getting a new college franchise must have been big news at the time, right?*

Barely. You know, when you say that, Dick Raddatz announced it. That's very amusing to me because he never did. There was, wow, did it land with the most quiet announcement that they've had. When they said that they would have a press conference, and they did. They had a press conference at Warner Park that was, you know, I think it was still so painful to some of them that I think that they didn't want to talk about it. One of the few things that they did not was, and, you know, it was lightly attended. It struck me as, you know, maybe one or two press outlets came. It was amazing to see the announcement of Steve Schmidt as owner and that the team would be called the Mallards was a paragraph inside sports briefs inside a sports section of the Capital Times. I mean, you can't hide it any more than that. There was no excitement whatsoever for this team when they arrived in 2001.

*And how did they turn it around so quickly? Now, the first season starts, the first games are a couple hundred. By the end of the season, they've got maybe 2,000. And then the next year and every year since, they've led the league in total attendance. How did they turn it around so quickly?*

Yeah, I think you got to remember that first year. And the last game of the season was a chance that thinking, okay, we can draw. And they drew 2,300 people or something in the last game in 2001, their very first season. Before that, in June and July, there was fear because there were 200 people in the crowd. There were, and who knows how many of them got in for free.

Steve Schmidt is a salesman, and he was definitely getting tickets to people and making sure that somebody would come out there, try our product. And along with it at that same time is Vern Stedman, 23 years old, fresh out of St. Cloud State University. He had some experience working in summer baseball with the St. Cloud team, so he knew the ropes. And then that first year comes along, and towards the end of the season, you have a proof that you can draw a big crowd if you are relentless enough.

And if there are two people who are more relentless than Steve Schmidt and Vern Stedman, the drawn audience, especially in 2002, 2003, 2004, and everybody they can find to go with them, show them to me. Because these two are salesmen. These two are marketers. These two, Vern would sleep in the offices if need be, and he had to do that on a few occasions. And Steve Schmidt was the perfect owner at that time for this team, because Steve Schmidt didn't care if he made money because he was already making a ton of money at the shoebox. The shoebox was his income. So he would take money in those early years, and it would go right back into the Mallards, and just as importantly, it would go right back into furnishing what he called the duck pond, and the field became better and better and better. That's a lot of money from him. City money came in, but there is still a significant, in the millions, of Steve Schmidt's money that makes the duck pond experience that you see today happen. As part of the deal, the city required him to invest \$10,000. Total after 25 years is about how much has he invested? It was \$10,000 in the first year. He gave \$50,000, or he invested \$50,000 in 2001 to improve it.

It's also important to note that he wanted it painted from every inch of that place and not just the playing field or anything that the fans would see as he wanted that place to light up like a carnival runway, you know, and it did. It may have been garish, but it was different, and he wanted fun, and Vern comes along with that.

And then you have some very creative people:

- You have a public address announcer, Rich Reynolds, who is extremely funny and has a free reign on what he can do.
- You have an intern in 2004, Connor, who then becomes the team's COO eventually in a few years, and he had some great ideas.

Those early years were really wild. No idea was tossed out very easily.

*You talk about some city investment. There's actually a mini-scandal about improvements to Warner Park in 1965 when the city council appropriated \$93,000 for lights and grandstand improvements at Warner Park to benefit the Madison Mustangs, which was a semi-pro football team. And it turned out that four very influential aldermen who voted for spending city money on improving the field for the Madison Mustangs were on the board of directors of the Madison Mustangs. And in the simpler times of the 1960s, people said, okay, fine, no problem.*

The Mallards did, in 2008, want to flip the stadium. And when I say that, they, of course, they wanted to vote themselves to the north side, which can't be underestimated, and that is 100% Steve Schmidt's devotion to it. But they wanted to try to save what they believed at the time, the duck pond, because they were being so successful by 2008, that what they wanted to do was have the home plate be where center field is, and you're literally turning the stadium around and to a degree rebuilding it. This is not a construction or a remodeling project. This is redoing it.

And it's a shame that because of the economic problems of the time, and the city was supportive, but it just became to where their help with it was not going to be as significant. And even the Mallards, I think, had to realize this is not the time to be spending enormous, enormous amounts of money to flip the stadium. So they did do a remodel, but they did a dramatic remodel to where they knew where you can put up more seats, and that tends to be along the first base line. So they built a creative, they had a lot of room, which is also very important.

*You say there's a unique and very personal reason for Steve Schmidt's attention and commitment to the north side.*

You know, he talks about it all the time. From the first thing, one of the first things that upset him about 2001, when he came into the offices, you know, February 2001, the drawings from the Black Wolf of a new stadium in suburban Madison, likely Fitchburg, but they would have gone anywhere, were still on the table, literally, not on the table in terms of an idea. There was a table there, and there's a drawing of a new stadium, and he didn't want that. He really had a devotion to the north side and there are two reasons for that.

One truly is someone who had been involved in Madison and liked the people who were there, liked the fact, remembered when the companies were extremely thriving in Madison's north side. And from home plate, when you look out to the right about three quarters of a mile, a half mile, you will see what at one time was the sanatorium. And that is where Steve Schmidt's mom spent the first five years of Steve's life. So the place that basically saved his mom's life is on the north side. He had never told that story before in public. And it's a very emotional part of it because Steve as a youth remembers going there and no communication with his mom aside from through the window waving. And then when she started to get better and she eventually lived until her early 90s, same with his father, you know, the family was very tight. It certainly was a terrific union.

But it's remarkable to me. Steve Schmidt was one of the most fascinating people that I've gotten to spend a lot of time with. And one of the things that the book, if I have a favorite

chapter, there's no doubt it's chapter three. It's Steve Schmidt, how he went from a high school, a very good high school athlete at Wisconsin Heights High School in their first year to an MATC basketball player. They didn't have a baseball team at the time to saying to his dad who had a shoe store in Black Earth.

Yeah. Can I come there? I think I would like to work there. And then he built it into this iconic, incredibly crowded business. When I was doing the book, researching the book, I just drove there on a Saturday curious, you know, oh, it's not going to be as crowded as I remember it pre-online or even beforehand. Oh, it was jammed. I mean, it was packed. It's still is thriving. And almost 100 percent of that reason is Steve Schmidt's relentless sales and drive to develop such a successful business.

Well, on the point of Steve Schmidt and the shoebox at the time. So Dick Raddatz creates the league and then a couple of years later, we're going to open a Madison franchise. And he intends to be the owner or the co-owner. And at some point in late 2000, out of the blue, he calls Steve Schmidt to ask if he wants to buy in. This is just a couple of months after Steve Schmidt let us say inadvertently got 26 badger athletes into trouble because he offered them unannounced discounts on shoes. They accepted. And the NCAA didn't accept the explanation that, hey, I offer lots of people unannounced discounts. And they suspended 26 badger athletes, including a couple of stars for a couple of games. And if I recall correctly, at that particular point in time, Steve Schmidt was not the most popular person in the Wisconsin sports community because he had inadvertently set in motion this setback for the badger football team. So why did Dick Raddatz call him at that moment out of the blue and invite him into the Mallards family?

You know, Steve was always a baseball fan. With Black Wolf, he went back to the Muskies. You know, there was even a team for one time between the two, the Madison Hatters. He maintained his baseball interest. He is a fanatical fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. Also during that time, he was going through a divorce, four daughters, a difficult personal time. Not the kind of time when you're running a business.

And I've done a lot of interviews with people from out of town about this book. And I always try to explain the shoebox to them. So hold it. They'll tell me, so it's a shoe store, 30, 40 minutes from Madison, and it's doing better than giant chains are doing? And I'll be like, yes. It's one of those amazing things.

So Dick Raddatz comes along, and Dick Raddatz knew one thing, and that is local ownership helped. And he went looking for somebody in Madison. He claims not to have remembered how he got Steve Schmidt's name, but certainly, I think if you ask enough people, somebody would have said to him, Steve Schmidt, try Steve Schmidt. And Steve said yes right away. It wasn't a huge investment at the time, which is very odd, because now these teams are worth, to come in, we're talking over a million dollars. You're paying a significant franchise fee to the Northwoods League. But again, the risk was little.

Steve also was one of the eight owners of the Madison Kodiaks, the minor league hockey team the year before, that in one year lost a million dollars pretty quickly, pretty easily. But

it's his involvement with the Madison Kodiaks that makes him aware of the Quad City Mallards. And in terms of where the name came, it would make perfect sense for a team that's in Warner Park adjacent to water to be called Mallards. You've got Madison Mallards, you've got the alliteration, you've got the actual ducks right there. But the team is actually named after a team in the Quad Cities. Well, in a hockey team.

*And the fact that he's so glommed onto the Quad City Mallards gives us a clue into what his thinking was for what he wanted the Madison Mallards to be, doesn't it?*

That Quad City Mallards team brought in, and when he told the story, I thought, I live just about a half mile from the Alliance Center grounds. So I did see some Kodiaks games, two or three games probably that season. And I believe I was there the night, because I remember exactly a group of fans from the other team, and this is what fascinated Steve Schmidt. They couldn't ignite excitement from their own fans, but a team from Davenport, Iowa comes in, the Quad City Mallards, and their fans just love. They're loud, they're having fun, and it's not even a home game for them. They came all the way in buses. So there were a couple hundred fans from the other team, and that is, he was just fascinated watching that excitement, and that's the kind of excitement he wanted to create with the Mallards.

It took time, and it was scary in that first couple months, and even with the success of the last game in 2001, there was no guarantee that this could continue. After two years, you finally started to see things really rolling. People, obviously word of mouth, probably as much as anything, had to have helped. There's no social media, you know. Even the publicity that the team got was so-so, you know. I mean, I read every single article from several years before to present day of how the team was covered, and yeah, articles came later, but there was very little in those initial years. So the people who went there had to have a good time, and they did.

We're talking with Tom Alesia. His book is *Baseball Like It Ought to Be, How a Shoe Salesman's Madison Mallards and His Renegade Staff Ignited a Summer Collegiate Baseball Revolution*.

I did not write that subtitle.

*It's a very long subtitle.*

I didn't write the title either. You know what? In our contract with August Publications that I signed, it's a Minneapolis publisher, and they did a nice job in terms of editing, and the publisher had a good background, an excellent background, in knowing about baseball. The contract, I wish I could read it specifically because it says I will receive, as the writer, have final input. But if I had read a little better, a little more clearly, it says then the publisher will have final input. So, no, I don't have final input. I have the second to last input. And I wanted the title *Duck Pond Baseball*. In fact, the title *Duck Pond Miracle* was the working title all the way through. *Baseball Like It Ought to Be*, which is something that was said, it had been used by the St. Louis Cardinals in 1996. Obviously, Steve Schmidt probably had

remembered that or it was in the back of his mind. So it had been described. It works well. The subtitle got way out of hand. It's a long but informative.

*So let's talk about some of the promotions that they've had out at the Duck Pond. Some of the big ones are bobbleheads, including an actual bobblehead airlift.*

Yes, the bobblehead airlift. That was 2008. Might have been a little earlier than that. They had, you know, a couple thousand bobbleheads coming from Los Angeles by truck. And that truck broke down in North Platte, Nebraska. They learned about it that morning. They then, later in the day, somebody said, what about a private plane? And the Mallards said, let's do it. And they got a private plane to fly from North Platte to the Dane County Airport, which is right by Warner Park. Vern Stendman, the team president, then grabs as many interns and workers that he could find. They raced to the airport. They got several thousand of the bobbleheads, and they passed them out just a couple innings after they said there may not be bobbleheads.

Do you have bobbleheads?

Yes, I have several. You know, my bobblehead, the one set of my favorite, I have a Steve Schmidt bobblehead, which I love. They did that without telling him one time. I have a Pete Alonso . Who's on the cover? Pete Alonso , for people who are not baseball fans, is a superstar for the New York Mets, and he's the ballplayer who broke the Milwaukee Brewers' hearts last year by the home run to beat the Brewers in the playoff series. And one of the beautiful things about that, too, was after that game, after he hit that home run and he was interviewed afterwards, a Madison reporter asked, mentioned the Mallards. And Pete Alonso had a really good season, and he connected with Donnie Scott, who was in his second year of coaching, managing the Madison Mallards. He's still the manager of the Mallards. And he had a good relationship with them. He had a really good season. He had a .260 at University of Florida, and things were fine. His team didn't advance beyond the regional, so they didn't go to the College World Series. So he arrived in Madison a little sooner. But it worked out extremely well for him. And this happens for a few players sometimes. They get more opportunities, a lot of at-bats, and chances to play, and that's what happened with Alonso . Donnie Scott is also a former major leaguer, a minor league coach for a number of years with the Cincinnati Reds, and he knew his baseball, so he could work with Alonso , too. And Alonso gives him very specific credit. After he hit that home run in Milwaukee, Alonso went on, instead of just saying, yes, oh, I had a great time in Madison. No, he went on to describe how it was a terrific experience and very important in his improvement as a player.

*Well, let's talk a bit about how players get to their teams. How does the recruitment and retention of players in the summer collegiate baseball league work?*

Yeah, it's, you know, get your contacts. You know, I mean, you have to have contacts with the college coaches and get to know who will stay. Now, you're also up against, for the very, very best players, the Cape Cod League. And the Cape Cod League is still extremely well established as a place where scouts are going to see you. And that is generally the year after

Alonso went there. Several of the other major leaguers from the Mallards, or people who became major leaguers from the Mallards, did go to the Cape Cod League. So they will be battling, you know, for the best players. But they're also looking for somebody who's had a good freshman year or maybe didn't have as much playing time as a freshman, but they knew that the next year was going to be really good. And that's the kind of player they wanted. That's the kind of player who wasn't burned out from a college season.

You also need a lot of players. You need to sign a lot of players because pitching is going to be something that's a problem.

*When the Mallards started, a couple years after the Mallards started, there were 40 collegiate summer baseball teams. By 2025, there are 80 leagues encompassing 600 teams.*

At least. They come and go.

*First of all, can you attribute any of that success, any of that growth to the summer collegiate baseball industry, to the success of the Madison Mallards?*

100%. Especially with the ones on a nonprofit or on a for-profit level. Because you look at the Mallards and suddenly you're seeing, whoa, hey, you can make money off this. And you know what? You don't pay the players. And you know what? You don't even have to deal with a major league team that's looking down on you and saying, well, here's who you're going to play because this was one of our higher draft choices. Or no, that promotion's a little too sketchy for us. No. Wow. You've got a field and a chance to do it. Now, not every team and every place does it, but the Savannah Bananas, that started as a summer college team. They didn't start as a summer college team developing players to try to be in the major league draft and continue in their thing. There's a team called the Portland Pickles in Oregon. They're doing tremendously well with drawing 3,000, 4,000 a night. And that's making money. When I say that, they're filling a small stadium. The Mallards, fortunately, have a larger duck pond is 6,700.

*Have Stenman and Schmidt been wrong about some of the promotions? Not all their promotional activities were winners. Talk about some of the promotions that didn't work, including the worst idea they ever had, little person wrestling.*

Yeah. And that was, you know, Vern talked about that one. And Vern, and I, you know, he wanted his staff to know that their ideas were appreciated. So he tended not to want to say at that time, you know, strike it down or no, I don't like that idea. He kept it on their list as a way to encourage, you know, a staff member who had that idea. Well, he was also, now they continued, they at one time then owned the Wisconsin Rapids team, the Green Bay team, and the Kenosha team. The sales from those are where they've financially done extremely well. But at that time, the schedule comes around, Vern is juggling a lot at that time, and on that schedule is a little person wrestling organization from the Milwaukee area. They started drinking from the time they got there. They made it through the early part of the game, and afterwards they set up a wrestling rink, and it was very ugly. They were profane. It was a bloody experience. And to be honest, the Mallards were humiliated by it.

And it's just something that they cringe about, that that went on. They did try to stop it, but they did not receive complaints. And to be honest, that's making it sound like the fans did a tsk-tsk, like, what is this? No, there were a good handful of fans really enjoying the mayhem there too. So not everybody, yes, it was their worst. They're pretty embarrassed about it. And they're far more clever than that.

*It's still more fun than having Gorman Thomas there.*

Gorman Thomas, yes. But you read the book to learn the Gorman Thomas story. Grumpy Gorman. It was Grumpy Gorman that night.

*One of the promotional ties that the Mallards ended was with the Chick-fil-A restaurant chain because the Chick-fil-A restaurant chain aggressively funds anti-LGBTQ groups. How would that decision have been made? Would Vern Stedman have made that on his own? Would that have gone up a decision-making tree? No, Vern was definitely at the forefront of making that decision. And the disappointment from fans and the expressed part of it. Now, this is, again, where Steve Schmidt can come in because, you know, Northwoods teams and collegiate teams need money, and that's a big sponsor. That's a sponsor with deep pockets. And yet Vern Stedman can say, all right, we've had complaints from fans, you know, and that's not what we were. We just thought, you know, this is a restaurant and people think of it that way, not, hey, you're affiliating yourself with the philosophy of this giant fast food company. Now you have Steve Schmidt who's going to say, you do what you need to do. You know, all right, we'll take that hit and lose that money. That's a significant chunk of money, you know, a good sponsor at that time, too, that they had just gotten.*

And, you know, they managed to – one of the brilliant things is they have so many – they have a lot of very significant sponsors now, but you could – you appeal to some of the hardest partiers in Madison, and yet at the same time you could probably say it's one of the most family-friendly places in Madison. They are serving families, and they're serving a place that is, you know, would be one of the largest bars in Madison, if not the largest bar in Madison. You're getting everything, and sponsors do want that. But at the time of Chick-fil-A, very proud of the Mallards for that, you know. And the rainbow flag is still flying beneath the United States flag at the American flag at the duck pond.

*I was – I think I was chairman of the Landmarks Commission when Vern Stedman came in with Big Top Sports for the permission to do what they did at Bree Stevens Field. We've just got about two minutes left. Talk a bit about what the success of the Mallards has meant for the north side and what the amazing success of Breese Stevens Field in terms of Madison Forward Football Club and the concerts has meant for the Tenney Lappin neighborhood and how that all started from just a college baseball team.*

Yeah, it extends to Breese Stevens. Would Breese Stevens have existed without, in its form now, which the city and I think everybody, the residents absolutely love, would that have happened if the Madison Mallards had not had the enormous success that they had had before that? Probably not. Would somebody else have stepped in? Well, you know what?

One of the things was these guys are pretty good at what they do. That's Verne, that's his staff, that's Steve Schmidt.

Again, being behind it instead of saying, I'm going to take my profits or you know what? I'm going to sell this team because this team is worth a lot to some owner from another state. And no. And then I am from the very first time Steve Schmidt was going to go down with that ship no matter what staying on the north side, even though that park was not worth anything in 2001, 2001, 2002. I mean, he's got to keep rolling. Now it has a giant video board that would be the envy of any team that's not a major league team. There's not a minor league team in the country that wouldn't mind loving have a giant screen in left field that they have right now. You know, that was paid 100% by Steve Schmidt.

So, you know, that needs to really be, I'm very passionate about that because you know what? I went in not knowing Steve well and learning that, you know, he definitely made a fan of him out of me and really earned my respect for what he's done for the city and for this team. And for the north side and Tim Lappin and also direct contributions to charity like the River Pantry, which is based on the north side.

*I'm afraid that is all the time we have today with Tom Alesia. Again, the book is Baseball Like It Ought to Be, How a Shoe Salesman's Madison Mallards and His Renegade Staff Ignited a Summer Collegiate Baseball Revolution. You can just think of it as Duck Pond Miracle. It is from the good people at August Publications.*

*I get to host again next week when my very special guests will be our dear friends Bobbie and Bill Malone live in the studio to discuss their new book, a biography of the playful cowboy band Riders in the Sky. Of course, Bobbie and Bill will be live in the studio on Wednesday with Back to the Country.*

*Until then, on behalf of News and Public Affairs Director Nate Carlin, Engineer Andrew Thomas and the entire Book Beat Collective, I'm Stu Levitan. Thank you for joining us. And now, as Ben Sidran plays us out with a little bit of Little Sherry, please stay tuned for Alex Wadding White and All Around Jazz. You're listening to WORT, 89.9 FM, Madison. Listener sponsored community radio since 1975.*