

ROBERT PROVOST

Nominated as: Administrator

Nominator: John Jannazo

References: Matt Bissen & Brian O'Connell

Nominee reviewed by Trustee: Bill Devine (HoF 2014)

Trustee comment: I have been involved with Roy Hobbs Baseball since 1994, and I know from experience how time consuming it can be from an organizational perspective. Bob started the OMBL from scratch in 2002. He did all of the grunt work in order to put a league together so that guys didn't have to travel 90 miles each way to play. He was told it was impossible to break softball's hold on the local community.

He made it work, and the OMBL has been going strong for 20 years. Oh, and by the way Bob did all of this in his spare time! His real job was an active fighter pilot in the United States Air Force.

Some interesting facts about this league.

1. They redraft the teams every season, and they play 2 seasons per year. This insures competitiveness and keeps 1 team from dominating, which can discourage participation. This is a very hard concept to sell to competitors. Bob has done a great job giving opportunities to everyone who wants to play. Easy to plan. Hard to sell. This shows excellent leadership and communication skill.
2. The OMBL has never lost a game due to umpires being unavailable. This indicates some serious organization between the league and the umpires. And he took time at this year's opening day to honor the Chief Umpire for his work.
3. This league encompasses 3 military bases. Players come and go on a regular basis. Keeping it running for 20 years is an accomplishment in and of itself.
4. Bob has brought teams to the World Series since 2007. Seems to always be there for his players. Keeps everyone involved and helps any player at all times.
5. Is a pretty fair player himself.

This guy is the glue that started and has kept the league together for 20 years. Very impressive ... as is the fact that he gives his grown sons a new baseball every Christmas, and holiday visits to his home include time for catch.

And, for a guy who would forgo much-needed sleep to play catch, says Matt Bissen, he walks the talk in his lifestyle, said John Janazzo: "In his work, in his faith, Bob walks the talk every day. The manager of his business, one of the best dive shops in the Florida Panhandle, is a disabled Marine Corp veteran. Bob is a decorated retired USAF officer and fighter pilot, with numerous awards, decorations and medals recognizing his combat and peacetime contributions to our Nation's security. ... It is not unusual to see the back of his SUV filled with gifts for kids he does not even know, supporting the local charities toy drives without fail. His dive shop offers his many military customers a discount on all his retail gear and SCUBA qualification classes."

Achievements:

Nominator comment: I wish I had a long list of Bob's baseball awards and honors. But he is a humble man, and as long as I have known him (2002) I have never heard him 'brag' on any personal accomplishment, other than his career in the United States Air Force, his faith, and raising both his son's to be fine citizens and one a medical doctor.

I do know from his Air Force days, as a fellow officer and fighter pilot, he was a decorated combat pilot, with a chest full of medals.

His military decorations include Meritorious Service Medals, Commendations Medals, Overseas Combat Ribbons, Air Medals and more. But you would have to ask him, most likely twice, to recount the medals and the reasons for the award.

His service record is a matter of fact, but of course is protected by the privacy act—or I would provide you a copy of it.

As for the OMBL, the league gives out awards for the top hitter/pitcher each year. While Bob is consistently one of the better players/hitters in the league, he has not made the very top of the list. I can attest he is always one of the best players on any team he winds up with, and he has done well when playing in the RHWS—with more than one team. He does have one championship in the RHWS, as a player and manager of our 2006 OMBL team and multiple 'medal' weeks over the past 20 years.

Nominator/Reference comments

Nominator and references responded to questions. What follows are their responses to the questions or their letter of reference. (Some of this material has been edited for redundancy.)

1. Please tell us how this individual and his character affect the game of baseball and his baseball colleagues on and off the field, and why. Use CONCRETE examples. *

JOHN JANAZZO: Quite simply, without Bob Provost, there would be no men's baseball to be played in Okaloosa County! Robert (Bob or his Air Force nickname "Slammer") Provost has dedicated much of the past 20 years of his life to creating, operating, and sustaining Okaloosa Men's Baseball League (OMBL). Founded by Bob in 2002, the OMBL has held a complete spring/summer and fall season every year since – this summer is the league's 20th summer season. And, this fall will be their 40th season of Roy Hobbs baseball! The league was Bob's brainchild, the league was born behind his drive and determination, and it has been sustained through the pure grit and relentless drive to provide our area of Florida a high-quality men's baseball organization.

Over the course of the past 20 years, literally 1000s of ballplayers have taken the field under the OMBL banner. I have read many of the Roy Hobbs Hall of Fame write-ups each year in the World Series program, and Bob's contribution to men's baseball ranks right there with the very best of them. On the field, his contributions span every facet of the game. As a player, he competes at a high level with everything he has, battling any injuries and surgeries to return every season. As a coach he shares his passion and knowledge of the game with everyone.

I want to make special mention of this year's OMBL Opening Day. It really tells the Bob Provost Baseball story in one excellent vignette. As a player myself, who for work has moved and played in multiple leagues, in several states and recently returned to NW Florida, I can attest, no other league I have seen--goes the extra mile to recognize Opening Day. This year, as OMBL does every year, every player in the league was present, standing on the field, respectfully honoring our Flag and the Air Force Color Guard as the National Anthem played.

After the National Anthem and the Colors were retired, Bob recognized the OMBL Chief Umpire, retiring after 19 years of service to the league. In the 19 years with John Bernhardt as the OMBL Chief Umpire, there was not one game without umpires. Bob went the extra mile, to recognize Bernhardt for his service, with a special plaque, a speech, many handshakes and backslaps for one of the iconic members of the OMBL family. That's Bob Provost: Service to others, recognition to others, and making the game of baseball special for all.

MATT BIEN: I met Bob in May of 1998 at St Michaels Church in Olympia, Wash. I had just turned 29 and was introduced to Bob, an Air Force pilot who was assigned to work closely with an Army detachment out of Ft. Lewis Wash. Bob and I started a conversation away from the wives, and we both listed the most important things we like to do away from work and after Sunday Mass. Number two on that list was Baseball. I believe food, sleep, hunting or fishing was interchangeable, but we would make exceptions to play catch or take some batting practice!

I met this guy who slept as little as I did, loved a game as much as I did and would make time after everything else to grill out and play catch. At that time, most guys our age would sit down and tell stories about days gone by, mull over about the glory they once had as they wiped out a box of beer.

NOT Bob Provost. We played catch for hours talking about when we would get the opportunity to play ball again. Bob would brainstorm about joining a league or finding some guys that were involved in a league. All conversation was regarding the future, never the past. In 2000 or so he left to move back to Florida with the Air Force. His vision followed and led Bob to his league which started in the early 2000's.

BRIAN O'CONNELL: Okaloosa County in Florida is home to 3 major military bases, two of which are Air Force and the other is Army. Service members assigned to these bases have been very involved in the nation's War on Terror for the past 20 years. Coincidentally, the OMBL was created by Bob Provost at the same time the nation began the long War on Terror.

When Bob started the league in 2002, he was an active-duty Air Force fighter pilot. He understood the stressors that long and repeated deployments put on service members, and he emphasized to local military members that the OMBL was there for them. Over the years, perhaps 1,000+ active duty and reserve military members have played

in the OMBL, sometimes having to leave at mid-season to deploy overseas. To Bob and all of the other ball players, this fact of military life created no problem. Bob insisted on providing opportunity for military members to play, regardless of their potential to leave mid-season. With Bob's encouragement and guidance, OMBL players have always welcomed military members on their teams, and the league is, and has always been, stronger for it.

One year early in the league's existence, in fact, Bob himself deployed to a combat zone for an extended period of time. Knowing that this was a possibility, Bob had previously set up a strong league board to ensure the league would be well run in his absence. Thanks to his mentorship, the season went off without a hitch.

2. What qualities and/or accomplishments make this individual special ... that they STAND APART from their peers and should be recognized through induction to the Roy Hobbs Baseball Hall of Fame? Use CONCRETE examples.

JANAZZO: Bob founded the league while still on active duty as a fighter pilot with the 33rd Fighter Wing, stationed at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Despite multiple overseas combat deployments, a jarring divorce, and even during the entire COVID19 pandemic, the OMBL has played ball under Bob's leadership. And the OMBL is one of the most unique leagues anywhere in the USA. As one of the original members of the OMBL in 2002 and having to move in 2011 for work to Virginia and Ohio, returning in 2018—and playing in 6 other men's leagues—I can attest the OMBL is without peer at promoting the spirit of the game and the well-being of the players.

Every year, the league re-drafts every team. The league is re-balanced and new players added equitably across the draft. When the ump yells our favorite mantra 'Play Ball!' before the first pitch of the new season, every team has an equal chance to bring home the championship hardware. And in the history of the OMBL, not a single potential player has been turned down to join the league, no matter what their ability with a bat and glove. This also includes special needs players. The game is on for one and all under Bob's determined leadership!

BISEN: Bob is a cut above. I have been on the ball field when he dislocated his left shoulder, not once, but twice. It could have been three, but I cannot get past the first two consecutive years. The first-year Bob sat in the ER in Ft Myers for +/- 7 hours. He gets back to the house and he opens a beer and starts doing the schedule/lineup for the next day's game. Like, "oh a little ice and I'm good." I thought, "Bob, you just fully dislocated your left shoulder, it took the ER Doc to relax you medicinally to get the shoulder back in." So, I asked sarcastically, where he is batting himself. He said, "9th, anywhere else would be a little aggressive." To which I replied, "Oh yeah, nothing about this conversation is aggressive. How about a left-handed high-five then?"

One year Bob as a Manager was on the field, making the lineup as the manager would regularly do on Thursday morning at the Roy Hobbs tourney. We had made the "A" bracket solidly. We were on deck to play a team that was seeded to play two brackets above where we were destined to play. Bob talked to each player individually where they each would want to play. 1st, 2nd, & 3rd options. Moreover, he did this at the beginning of the tournament. What was inspiring was Bob was concerned about all of the ball player's experience. It was the reason we were all there, because of the love of the game. Bob lives, the Roy Hobbs Saying, "you don't stop playing because you get old, you get old because you stop playing."

O'CONNELL: Bob's vision for a local men's league started in 2001. I was there to personally see it all begin. He formed 2 teams that integrated with the Pensacola men's league (about 90 miles away) during their Fall 2001 season. At his own expense, he had signs made up, and placed them throughout Okaloosa County to publicize men's baseball. He ran the initial sign-ups, he created the first two teams, he coordinated with the Pensacola league for scheduling, he ordered uniforms and baseballs, he coordinated with a very dubious local recreation department to schedule practice fields... In short, he did it all.

At the spring 2002 season, Bob created the Okaloosa men's baseball league to provide adult players with a local option. Again, he did it all. The spring of 2002 season had 4 teams. Now, the league needed uniforms, more baseballs, umpires, ballfields and very importantly, bylaws to make sure the league would be fair and viable for all players. Bob single-handedly wrote up the bylaws, which with very few changes, are still the by-laws today. These

by-laws are the centerpiece. In addition to ensuring draft rules and scheduling procedures, these rules guarantee each player would receive equal opportunity to play baseball. In addition, every over age 30 player is guaranteed an equal opportunity to play in each game.

3. From your list of character qualities and/or your line of reasoning in support of your candidate, if you could pick only 2, which would they be and why? These should be compelling, and your stories should demonstrate how your candidate is EXCEPTIONAL.

JANAZZO: At the top of the list is Bob's passion for the game. There has not been any event, in the world, in the nation, in his community, in his family life, no crisis, which has prevented Bob from leading the OMBL. Deployments to combat zones, family heartaches, natural disasters (which the Florida Gulf Coast has plenty!), and even world-wide pandemics—real men's baseball is being played in Okaloosa County—because of Bob Provost. He simply makes baseball happen for Okaloosa County.

Close behind is the spirit and sportsmanship in which the OMBL is run. There are many leagues around the nation, good leagues, well run leagues. But there is only one I know where a single man's vision and relentless passion for the game enables the league to play, year in and year out. Every season, every player no matter what ability level, has a chance to be part of a championship team! Five, six, sometimes seven teams, 15 players per team, 20 years, 40 seasons—literally 1000s of men in and around Okaloosa County, Florida have Bob Provost to thank for their chance to continue playing the game we love-and bring home the ultimate prize (at least for men's baseball!) the Championship!

BISEN: My 1st trip to Roy Hobbs in Fort Meyers. I didn't have a smart phone. I hadn't played organized Baseball in 18 years. Needless to say I was rusty. Bob, booked all events ahead of time. He explained the housing situation for all the ball players that were new to Ft Myers, practices times, player expectations, coaches meetings, rules and regulations. Most of all, Bob explained what it was going to be like stepping onto the Minnesota Twins baseball fields & complexes.

Bob explained the umpires, what to expect and how professional they are. He explained how to handle the opponents, the seeding expectations and the kind of pitching we would see. Good hitting teams! Outfielders that you cannot stretch a gap single into a double like you can at home. He explained that we will see teams that will play better than us significantly.

Bob Provost planted a seed, not only with me but with all who shared a dugout with him. Bob has a great sense of humor: Bob was back in my hometown in Minnesota hunting. We were in my garage cleaning up deer that we harvested. Bob noticed my broken bat collection. I told Bob I have kept all my broken bats. He looked at me, like that is a lot of bats. I told him that it is a lot of bats, if were not for you, I would have not had the opportunity to swing at one pitch. Bob said you need to barrel up the ball and do something other than make firewood. I told him am sending an invoice over for \$4575.00 for the broken bats. (Still Counting!)

O'CONNELL: Bob Provost's passion for the game of baseball and his equal passion to ensure opportunity for adults to play the game for as long as they would like, has been the hallmark of the OMBL. Thousands of players have participated over the past 20 years, and each one owes a tremendous debt to Bob Provost. I was part of the original team that played in Pensacola in 2001. I was also part of the original league in 2002. I can attest to the energetic and unfailing devotion Bob Provost has for both the game and its players.

In Okaloosa County, municipal recreation professionals told Bob the league wouldn't succeed; others had tried and failed. People told him that softball was king; baseball could never compete to get the players the league would need. Bob heard it all and wasn't deterred. His passion for the game, his energy and his dedication to the players created and has sustained the Okaloosa Men's Baseball League for 20 years.