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ALERT **TOP STORY**

LOCAL SPORTS

MLB greats return to Region for Still Got Game baseball clinic

Noah Bortle

Jul 25, 2023



Jim Thome, Kenny Lofton, Tim Byrdak, LaTroy Hawkins, Michael Bowden and Marcus Nettles pose with participants at the Still Got Game Foundation's baseball clinic at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

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GARY — Growing up, LaTroy Hawkins and Kenny Lofton had a laundry list of athletes to look up to in the Region. On Tuesday at the U.S. Steel Yard, the Gary and East Chicago natives brought a host of other former major leaguers to serve as an inspiration for the next generation.

"Gary and baseball have given me pretty much everything I have," Hawkins said. "To be in a position where I can give back to the youth in the city I grew up in is — I think my grandma would be pretty proud of me."



Gary native and former MLB pitcher LaTroy Hawkins helps with fielding ground balls at the Still Got Game Foundation clinic at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

The list of ex-MLB talent didn't stop at Hawkins and Lofton. The pair parlayed their 38 years in baseball's top league into convincing other local former players into coming out to coach on Tuesday.

Hall of Famer Jim Thome, a Winfield, Ill., native and former teammate of both Hawkins and Lofton, called the decision to come out and help coach a "no-brainer."

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Baseball Hall of Famer Jim Thome gives hitting advice at the Still Got Game Foundation clinic at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

"It's great for me to be around the kids and see Kenny Lofton again, who was a great teammate and a great friend, and run into LaTroy," Thome said. "This is what it's about. Giving back to the kids, giving back to the community and just being around to show them we care about them and we want to help out."

Lofton and Hawkins were among the Still Got Game Foundation's inaugural board members when it launched in 2019. The foundation's goal is "to bring together former professional athletes and like-minded charitable individuals to exchange ideas, provide resources, volunteer, and develop and promote programming that supports social change for a more just, sustainable, and educated world," according to its website.



Former professional baseball players, Jim Thome, Kenny Lofton, Tim Byrdak, LaTroy Hawkins, Michael Bowden and Marcus Nettles answer questions from the Still Got Game Foundation baseball clinic attendees at U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

"When I started it, I thought that even though we're not playing, we've still got game to give back to underserved communities and underserved kids to show them that we got their back," Lofton said.

On Tuesday, the Still Got Game Foundation coordinated with the Cal Ripken, Sr. Foundation to host a free baseball clinic for local 8 to 14 year olds.

More than 175 children from Indiana Harbor Little League, Gary Youth Baseball and Union League Club of Chicago made up the players getting instruction from the former major leaguers and volunteers.

The kids rotated between hitting, pitching, infield and outfield drills, in addition to a fast-paced version of baseball called Quickball. After the on-field instruction, the former pros held a question-and-answer session, followed by a free lunch.



Former Gary RailCat and Major League Baseball player Tim Byrdak shows children pitching mechanics at the Still Got Game Foundation baseball clinic at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

Former MLBers Michael Bowden, hailing from Winfield, Ill., and Tim Byrdak, an Oak Lawn, Ill., native, were joined by longtime pro baseball player and Chicago native Marcus Nettles to help tutor the Little Leaguers.

"I feel like every opportunity [the kids] have to be around something positive and off the street is something that's good," Nettles said. "It's something that's great for them. It's so close to home, it's kids from the area and they can see a familiar face.

"Especially when you have guys like Tim, Kenny Lofton, Jim Thome, Troy, they're hometown guys. It means a lot."

Hawkins has one more stop in the Region this week. On Friday, he'll be inducted into the **Gary Sports Hall of Fame**.

"Lloyd McClendon, Wallace Johnson, Ron Kittle. Those are the guys I looked up to," Hawkins said. "A lot of people in the city that were big-time athletes back in the day pushed to get some funding and start something special. It's pretty cool they thought enough of me to induct me into that Hall of Fame.'

Hawkins is realistic. He knows that Tuesday's clinic isn't going to produce 175-plus professional baseball and softball players. However, he does know the power that baseball can have, and he hopes that he can impart that on those who attended, the same way Gary greats who came before him did for him.



Former MLB pitcher Michael Bowden shows Still Got Game Foundation clinic participants how to grip pitches at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times

"That's one thing about sports — especially baseball," Hawkins said, "I think if everybody played baseball, there wouldn't be any racism. In our fraternity of major league ballplayers or minor league ballplayers, we support each other. It doesn't make a difference where you're from or what color you are. You can see what a diverse group we had here today. It doesn't matter, we support each other."

PHOTOS: Ex-MLB stars host free baseball clinic in Gary



Jim Thome, Kenny Lofton, Tim Lincecum, LaTroy Hawkins, Michael Bowden and Marcus Nettles pose with participants and volunteers at the Still Got Game Foundation's baseball clinic at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times



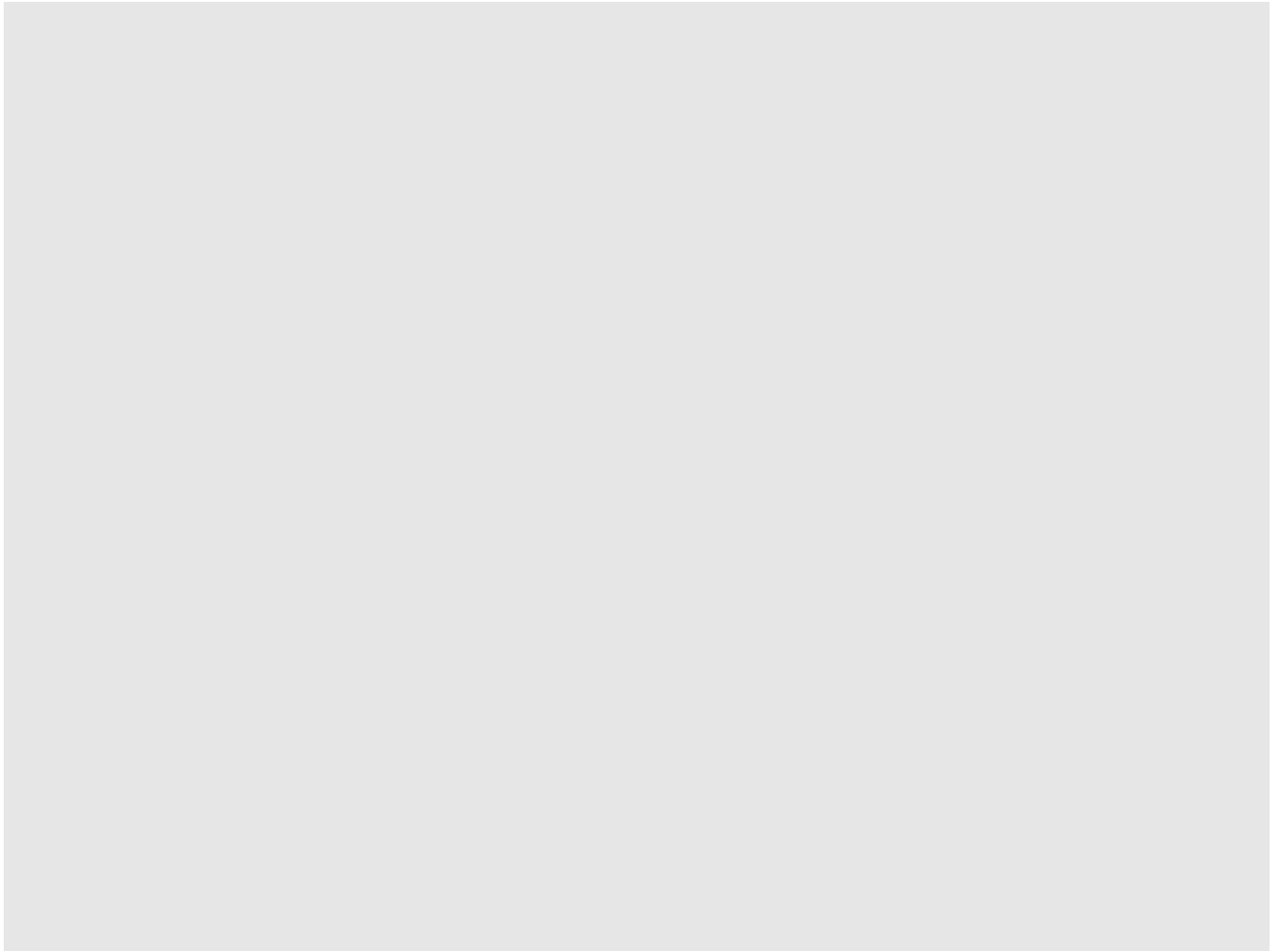
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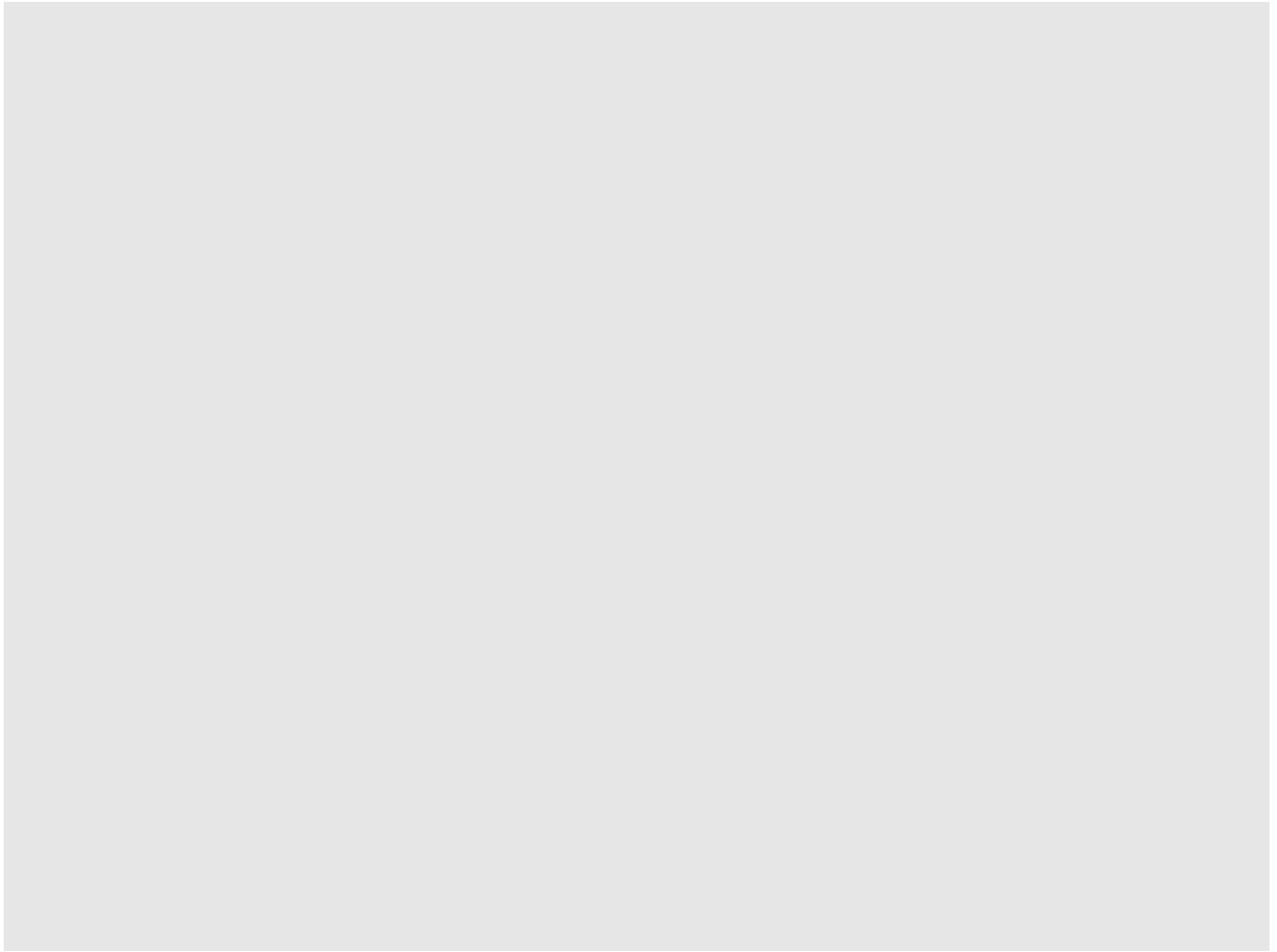
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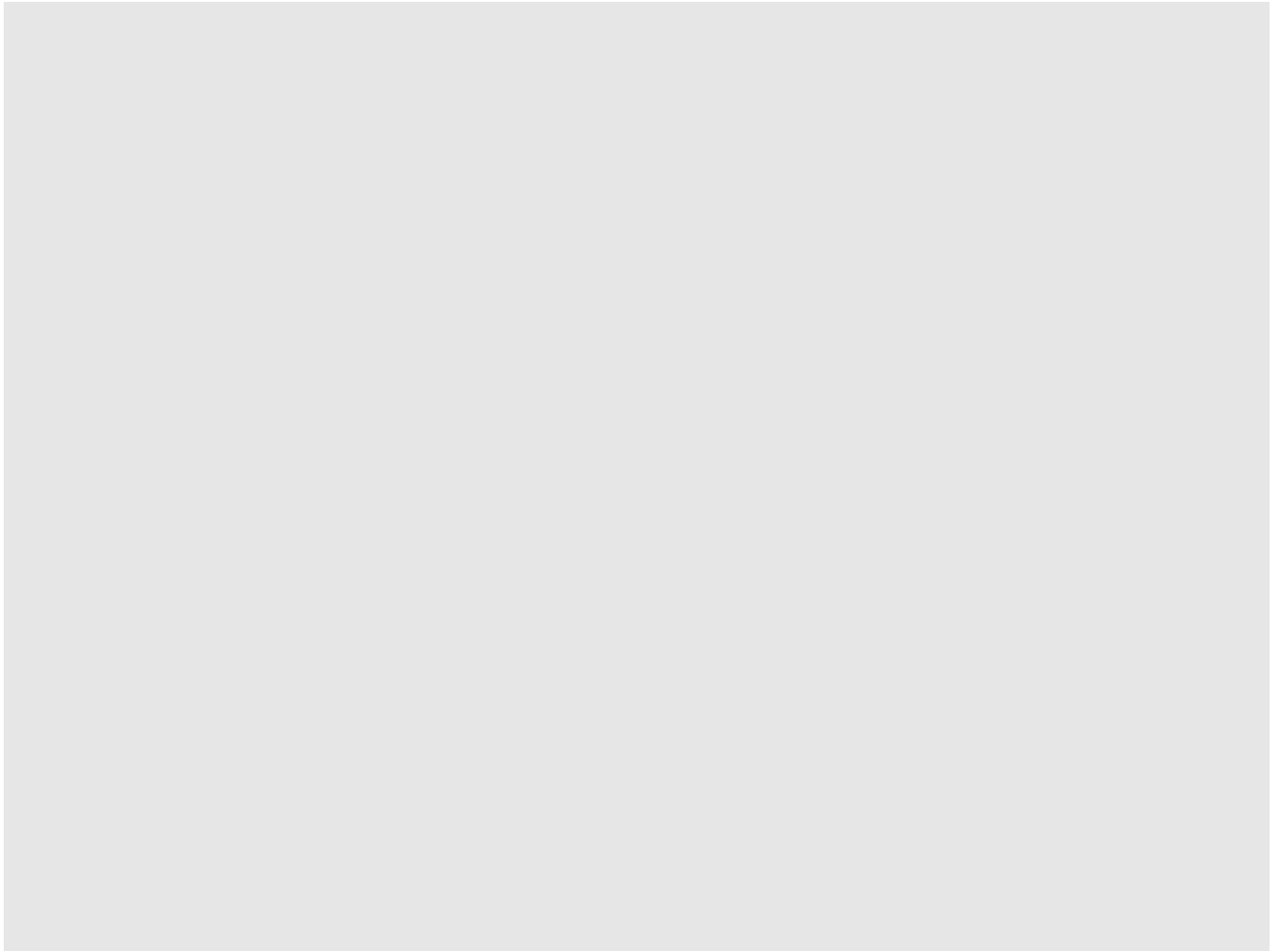
A photo of Tim Byrdak hangs at the U.S. Steel Yard in Gary where Byrdak played for the Gary SouthShore RailCats. Byrdak helped coach at the Still Got Game Foundation clinic on Tuesday.

Noah Bortle, The Times



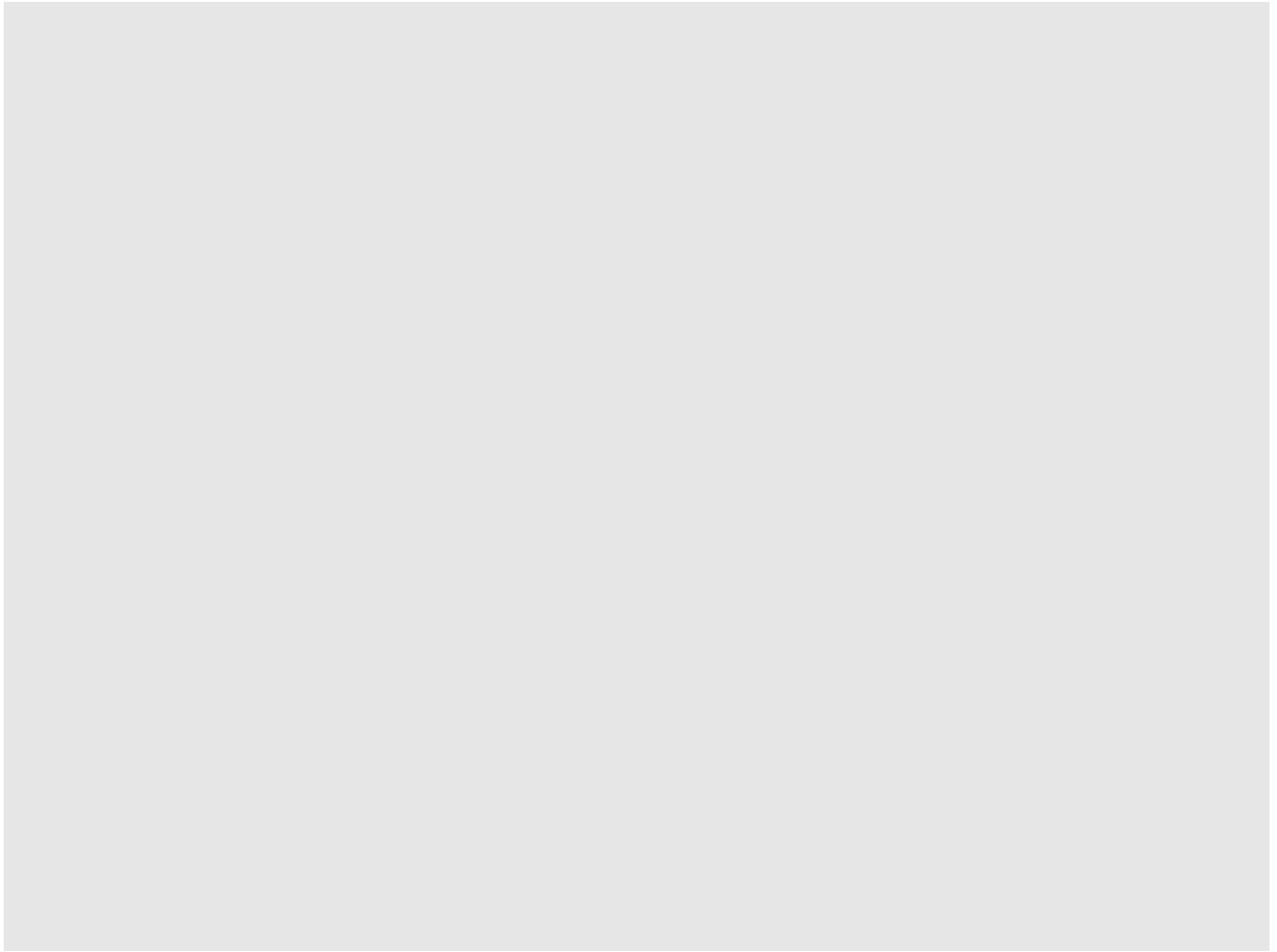
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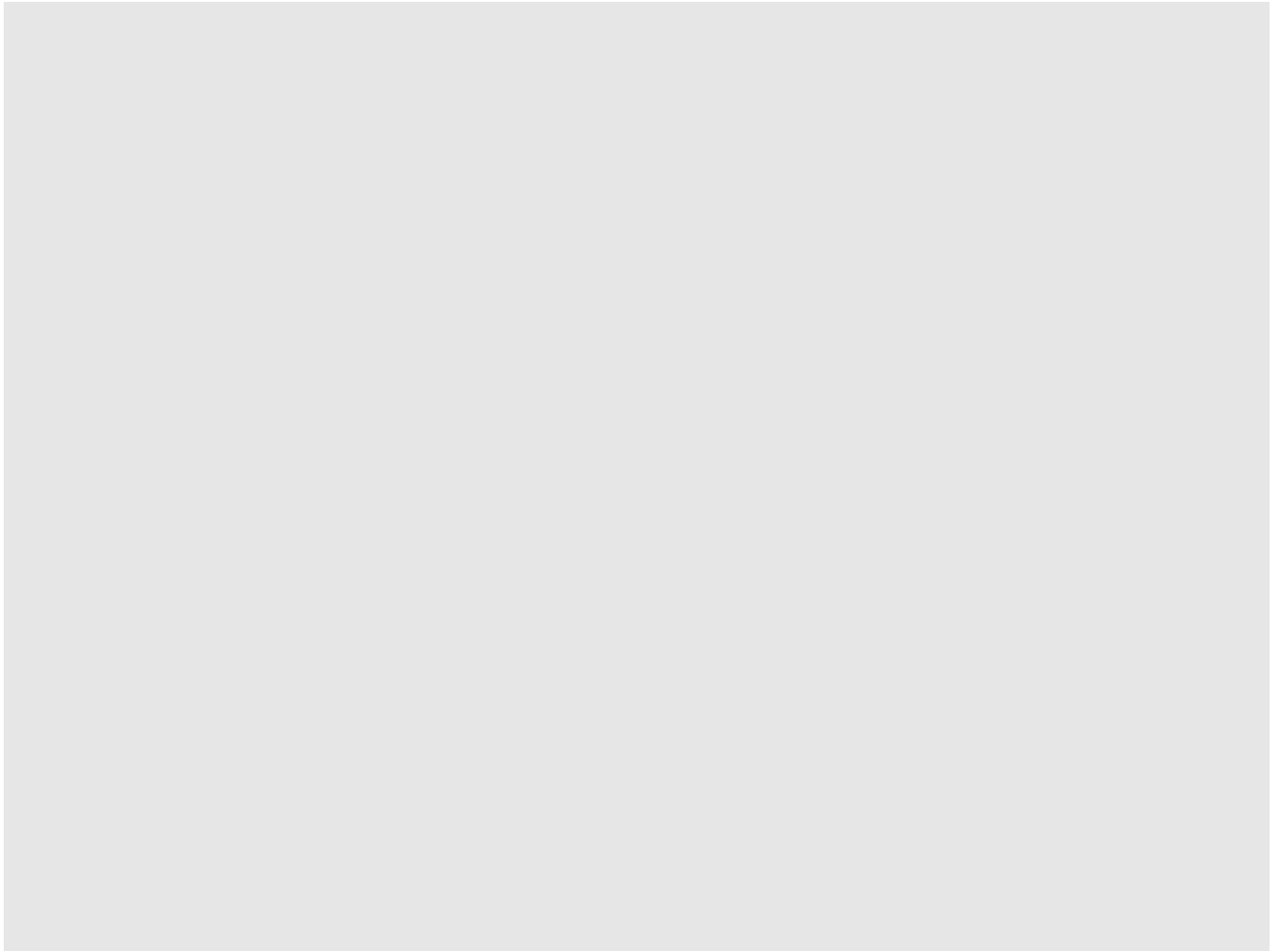
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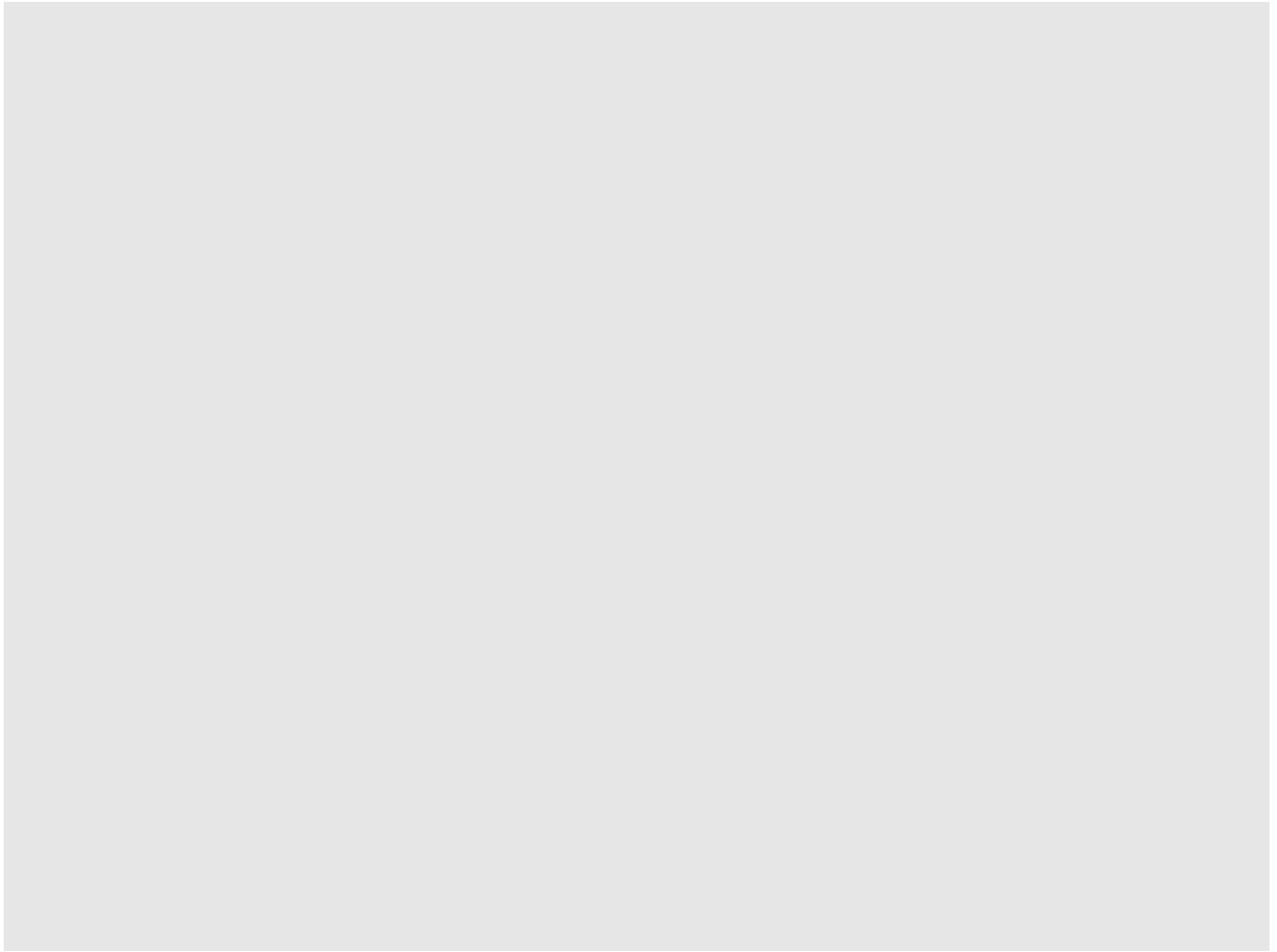
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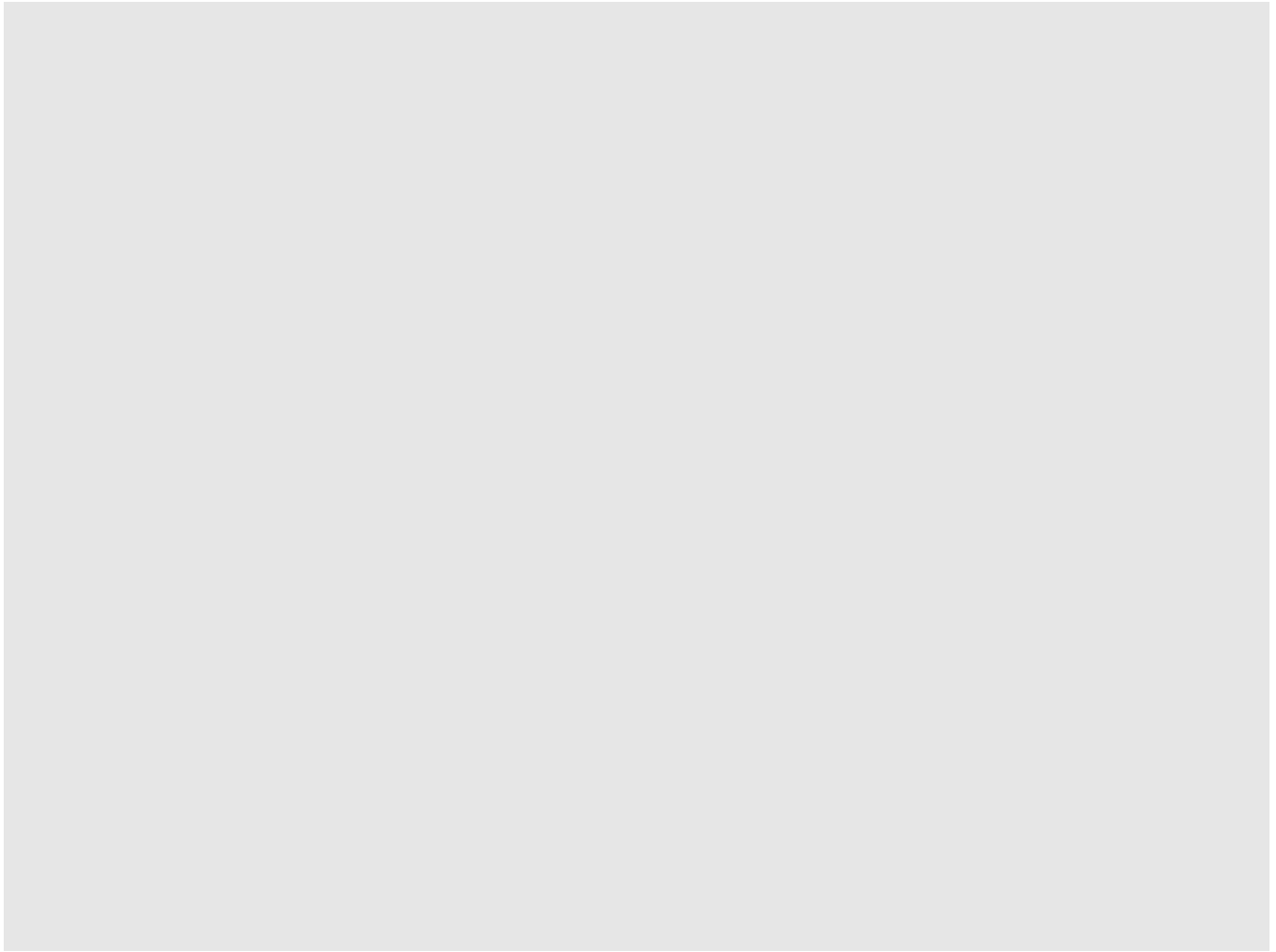
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By Noah Bortle

Sports Editor
