

ROBERTSON

From Page 1D

this guy.' I just kind of stay out of that," Robertson said. "I dabble a little bit in all of those areas, but if I'm not fully committed to them, I don't really have a place to say something.

"The only time I get really convicted about a player is when I've had my eyes on him and I know what he can do."

Robertson, 37, played parts of nine seasons in the major leagues, appearing in the World Series in 2006, when he started Game 3 for the Detroit Tigers against St. Louis. He previously pitched at Maize High and for Wichita State, where he was Hooper's teammate.

He was still in the prime of his playing career when he became part owner of the Wingnuts before their inaugural 2008 season. The team was then mostly owned by Chicago-based businessman Horn Chen, but he was bought out by local owners a year later and Robertson took a larger share when a group of five was eventually consolidated to three.

Robertson is at Lawrence-Dumont Stadium for nearly every Wingnuts home game, but that wasn't a possibility when he played. He was ingrained in the business aspect of baseball as a players-union representative for the Tigers, so team ownership wasn't a stretch. Participating from afar, though, wasn't always easy.

His initial role was to help build the Wingnuts' roster, suggesting players from the Tigers organization or elsewhere who had been released. Robertson didn't know if ownership was a long-term plan, though, because he was 30 when the Wingnuts were formed and he had various ideas for life after his playing career.

There are connections in the Tigers' front office, including with David Chadd, a Wichita native and Detroit's vice president of amateur scouting. They've had conversations about a role for Robertson in player development or coaching.

"I thought (ownership) was going to help me in a lot of different areas," Robertson said. "I made a trip this spring to Florida and I talked to Dave Dombrowski, who's the general manager of the Tigers, and I've had David

Chadd up here, too. They know my interest of maybe getting back into ball and seeing how it fits with my family.

"This experience that I've had, and now that I'm an ex-player I'm here a lot more often so it's not like it's just the financials put in front of me. There's a lot more to it. It's expanded my horizons. When I got involved as an owner, it's not like I knew what I was doing. We trusted how this team would be run from a front-office standpoint."

The Wingnuts became a Robertson-influenced group from the beginning. Josh Robertson was retained as general manager from the Wranglers, a Double-A team that left for Springdale, Ark., in 2008, and he hired brother Luke Robertson as pitching coach. After those two were involved, Nate Robertson decided to jump in as part owner.

That role meant Nate was immediately the boss of Josh, who is about three years older, and Luke, who is about two years younger. They have a business relationship that is trumped by about three decades of nothing more than a familial bond.

"When we're here, it's 10 percent business and 90 percent family," Josh Robertson said. "When he wants to talk about the team or talk about a promotion, then I think that's where the 10 percent comes in. But the majority of it, I'm big brother and he's little brother. We say I love you and give each other hugs, and he pretty much lets me do what they hired me to do."

Luke was briefly Nate's superior when Nate was working his way back into affiliated baseball and he pitched two games for the Wingnuts in 2012. As the youngest of the three — another brother, Matt, is 26 — Luke wasn't necessarily comfortable tinkering with the approach of a former big leaguer with whom he once shared a house.

"I wasn't his boss at all. Ever," Luke Robertson said. "I don't think there was ever any mistaking that on my part or his. It was fun to be able to watch him pitch again. It had been a long time, other than on TV, that I had been able to physically watch him pitch. Nate listened to anything I had to say, and whether he used it or not was up to him."

Before he settled into being a full-time owner, Robertson

first had to be at peace with ending his playing career. He pitched for five organizations between 2011 and last year, reinventing himself as a left-handed matchup reliever, but was never promoted from Triple-A to the major leagues.

Robertson accomplished plenty in his nine seasons, though. He experienced the highs-and-lows of the Tigers, who lost 119 games in 2003, Robertson's first season in Detroit, before reaching the World Series three years later. He won 13 games that season, a team-best 12 in 2004, and 57 for his career despite four elbow surgeries.

In 2008, Robertson signed a three-year deal with Detroit for \$21.5 million, and he made about \$25 million during his career according to baseball-reference.com. He tried for a 10-year pension that would have paid him \$100,000 a year, but he settled for the \$43,000 every ex-player receives.

The transition from playing has been smooth. Robertson finds a competitive outlet through the Wingnuts and gets to be home. He lives in Maize with his wife, Kristin, and two young children.

He's not done playing, either — Robertson will likely pitch in the NBC World Series for a Wichita alumni team.

"I could have had a job last year, but I knew that when I signed with the Tigers, an organization I had been with (previously) for a long time, if I didn't get it back then I was going to shut it down," Robertson said. "You get kind of tired of getting into a new organization, trying to start relationships with new people. Getting into that comfortable place, it's very difficult to do."

Robertson instead will build relationships with the Wingnuts. His friendships with Ruud and Austerman have grown, and they frequently have lunch together. They talk business, but Robertson also gets in a few playful shots about the 70-year-old Ruud's age.

Ruud, who owns several local businesses, has seen Robertson's business acumen improve, as well as his desire to learn more. Robertson has experiences and baseball knowledge not shared by the other owners.

"His pro career is over and he's coming back into our world," Ruud said. "It's fun to watch him develop. He wants to get involved in things. He's brought a lot of new, fresh ideas back from his experiences in the majors and the

minors. He's going to be a huge, huge asset before it's all said and done."

The three Wingnuts owners are active in lobbying City Hall for a new stadium, frequently presenting facts and figures that can help their case. Robertson often leads that charge, now a businessman with baseball in his blood.

"I'm the baseball guy that's trying to learn from both of them," Robertson said. "I'm trying to pick their brains on the off-the-field stuff that this whole thing revolves around. It's kind of fun to sit around and listen to them talk. I've been introduced to countless people through those guys and the City of Wichita — businessmen, affluent people here who make things go."

"It's been fun for me. I'm learning as I go."



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