

# Beating the Bushes



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## San Diego Ted Williams Chapter Preserves Ray Nemeč Collection

By Tom Larwin and Carlos Bauer

**R**ay Nemeč was a premier minor league baseball researcher. He passed away in April 2015 at the age of 85. Four years later, in April 2019, SABR's San Diego Ted Williams (SDTW) Chapter acquired remaining research assets from Nemeč's archive. Transportation was needed from Naperville, Illinois, to San Diego and was financially supported by the SDTW Chapter, the two of us, and SABR friends, Mark Macrae and Marlene Vogelsang.

Here is a summary of what we have preserved:

- **Player Career Records.** The collection contains about 25,000 career records compiled by him (with additions by other researchers). These career records are all typewritten on 8½ by 11 sheets.

Status: These records have all been digitized but will need to be indexed. Expected completion: 2020.

- **Official League Averages (Minor Leagues).** Nemeč's collection of Official League Averages surpasses that of Bill Weiss, primarily because he started earlier, and spent time looking for stats that fell into the hands of other researchers. We currently have digitized files of official statistics for 1,178 minor league seasons, from 1926-2009 and covering 152 leagues. The Nemeč files include official league averages from 1931-2008 and will add to those already on-hand.

Status: An inventory of Nemeč files is underway to separate out duplicative league-seasons. Once complete, the new files will be digitized and added to the overall collection. Estimated completion: end of 2019.

- **Unpublished League Averages.** At present there are files for over 500 league-seasons that have been inventoried and digitized. The numbers of files by decade are: 1870s (7), 1880s (73), 1890s (133), 1900s (135),

1910s (128), and 1920s (62).

Status: An inventory of these files is underway to separate out duplicative league-seasons. Once complete, the new files will be digitized and added to the overall collection. Estimated completion: end of 2019.

- **Box Score Books.** These are scrapbooks that contain Heilbroner game-by-game box score and game accounts that were clipped from newspapers. Because the Official Averages in the *Guides* typically only included players who appeared in more than 10 games or pitched more than 45 innings, Heilbroner was forced to subscribe to newspapers all over the country where minor league baseball was played. At their office, they would cut out each game story and corresponding box score and paste them in scrapbooks. While not very conducive to digitizing, they represent a unique research resource. There are 315 books (i.e., 315 league-seasons) that are from 66 leagues and 17 seasons (predominately, 1934-1947).

Status: While the books are available for personal research purposes, practicalities limit use to on-site in San Diego. A long-range objective is to digitize each of the books.

If you have any questions about these archives please feel free to contact Tom Larwin (619.251.0419, Lar.11@cox.net). Once the digitization process is complete for the league averages, information will be published in the newsletter on how to acquire a copy.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Ray Nemeč here is some background:

- He bought his first *Reach Guide* in 1939, and in 1941 began compiling statistics for minor league teams in lower classifications. By 1950 he had established contacts with other researchers around the country, notably including: Lee Allen, Bob Davids, Paul Frisz, Willie George, Bob McConnell, and Karl Wingler.

- Nemeč was one of SABR's founders as he was among the 16 individuals who participated in SABR's first meeting on August 10, 1971.

- He was the first chairman of SABR's Minor Leagues Research Committee.
- His primary research emphasis was to compile statistics for long-ago minor leagues, especially ones that had not published their own year-end records. Nemec undertook such efforts as the 1915 Bi-State League (Illinois–Wisconsin) and the 1885 Western League, and it just kept going. He focused on leagues from the Midwest, allowing him to travel to libraries of nearly every town that had a minor league team in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin.
- He supplied minor league data to *The Sporting News* for many versions of the book *Daguerreotypes of Great Stars of Baseball*.
- In 1978 SABR published *Minor League Stars* containing statistical records for dozens of former heroes, many of them little known even within SABR. In a way, Nemec had been working on the book for more than 30 years. Two other volumes followed, and SABR had firmly established the importance of the minor leagues to the history of baseball.
- Nemec was honored by SABR in 2012 when he received the Henry Chadwick Award.

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## BASEBALL RESEARCHER, ART CANTU

By Francis E. Hamilton

**A**s a nine year old boy in Pico Rivera, CA, Art Cantu obtained a copy of the *Los Angeles Dodgers 1964 Yearbook* listing all of the players baseball statistics. The yearbook aroused the boy's interest in statistics to the extent that he obtained a copy of the *1964 Baseball Almanac* which listed the career playing statistics of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb. His grandparents who lived in Compton, California, were interested in a young Brooklyn Dodgers player, Compton's own Duke Snider. Art, with his grandparents, attended a demonstration of Duke's batting skills at a local field.

These documents and the demonstration piqued his interest and led him to a remarkable hobby of documenting and tabulating both Major and Minor league historical baseball statistics.

Art had another hobby of collecting old records which he would later put on CD's. Despite the time consuming dual interests, he is primarily known as an outstanding

baseball researcher.

As time went by, Art understood that there was a mountain of baseball statistics available for his use. After seeing an ad in the *Sporting News*, Art purchased his first *Official Baseball Guide*. It was a *1968 Sporting News Guide*. He searched through many references for available baseball statistical data such as Los Angeles publications and advertising in many baseball journals. While employed, he used his earnings to purchase old Baseball Guides in earnest.

Many baseball enthusiasts knew that Goodwin "Goody" Goldfadden had a treasure trove of sports memorabilia in his shop on Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood. Goodwin had bought and sold many Baseball Guides for many years and was capable of selling virtually a whole set of Baseball Guides. Goody could supply pristine copies for collections or copies with some flaws but with the statistical information intact for a much reduced price. Most researchers were looking for the latter. Art Cantu had opportunities from many sources to enhance his guide collection to make it complete.

About 1981 Art began typing his enormous listing of all baseball players known in his reference materials to include the 1900 to 1984 seasons. The list gave the player's name, league played and batting average or pitching wins and losses. Names were alphabetical within a given season. There were a few names that were added out of order due to late information and were noted. The list included both Major and Minor League players. Just as a reminder this was all done in the dawn of personal computers-typewriters were king.

As work progressed Art joined the Society of American Baseball Research (SABR). His contacts were expanded to include highly regarded west coast researchers such as Bob Hoie and mid-America's foremost researcher, Ray Nemec. Art became acquainted with Cliff Kachline of the Baseball Hall of Fame. In Art's four years of concentrated work and updates, the listing now stands with about 425,000 stints. Remarkable!

Art visited the Baseball Hall of Fame several times and obtained copies of other reference material. He also visited Ray Nemec in his Naperville, Illinois home and obtained additional baseball data from Ray's sizeable collection. He utilized the Reserve lists for clues on player first names or initials. Also, sporting newspapers often have weekly notes during the baseball season published at the end of the weekly box scores that give first names or nicknames. A rare source was the *Jacobs Notebooks* for which Art holds forty years of data. They are coded data and very difficult to interpret. The only known researcher other than Art who has met the challenge to extract knowledge from them, sans researchers at the Hall of Fame, is Marc Okkonen. It

remains to be determined the ultimate accuracy of the Jacobs Notebooks. During the period prior to Art's published lists, researchers had no comprehensive method to follow a player's career and identifying all the stints that should be included.

After Art's great listing, appreciated by baseball researchers, he concentrated on other intense baseball projects. In the late 1980's and into the twenty-first century, Art immersed himself in the compilation of many Major and Minor League careers in "Register" style. He compiled the careers of about 12,000 players. He was aided by many famous researchers of the time, like Bob Hoie, Vern Luse, Ray Nemece, John Pardon, Bob Davids, Bob McConnell and other original members of SABR. They were continually supplying each other with rare statistical compilations. During this time he catalogued a list of Major and Minor League managers with data supplied by researchers Lloyd Johnson and Miles Wolff's *Minor League Encyclopedia*.

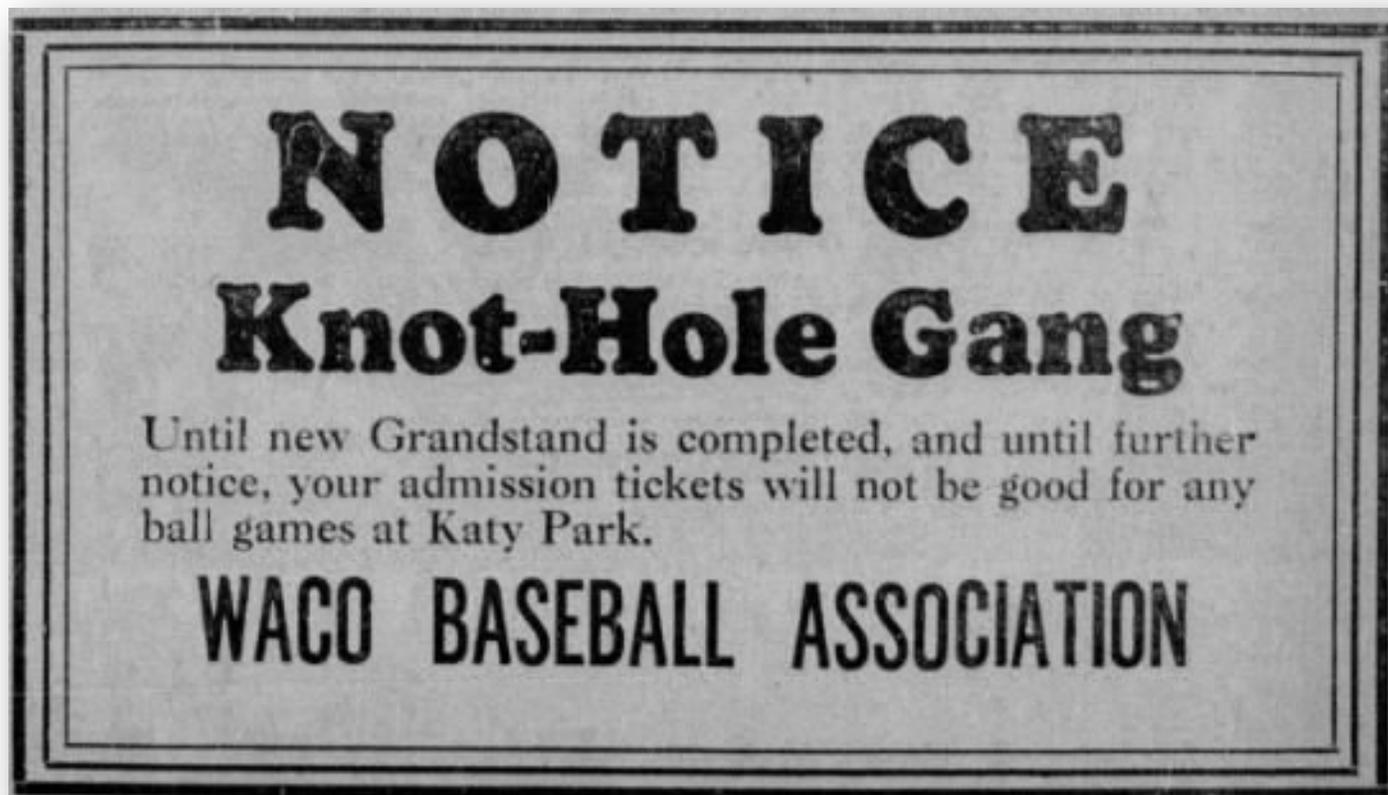
Art did not use personal computers until the advent of flat screens and started to use one in 2006. About that time another large database of statistics was planned by the leadership of SABR and started implementation. The catalysts from SABR were Executive Director John Zajc, and Research Manager Rod Nelson, who discovered a very excellent database from researcher Ed Washuta that

gave them a "running start" for their new Project. Art joined the team of researchers on that Project. After an initial planning stage this Project was managed by an excellent organizer and computer savvy individual. Ted Turocy. Ted and about ten other SABR members embarked on the task of documenting all of the known statistical data in the world of Minor League Baseball. The enormous datasets of statistics were compiled with the aid of Excel Workbooks. Art, now employing his computer, compiled about 450 league seasons of player statistics.

Art and the late Joe Wayman, collaborated to compile the 1879 National Association statistics from the rare DeWitt guides and published them in a *SABR Research Journal*.

Although Art's plan of distributing his vast storehouse of baseball data, manuals and guides upon his passing is not formulated, he wishes to contact a baseball researcher who would like to follow in his footsteps and is truly interested in using his data to further their own research. Following his footsteps would be extremely difficult, but his vast collection would be the envy of any researcher.

Art Cantu's devotion to documenting baseball statistics is, indeed, extraordinary. His willingness to share the data with others has helped many other SABR members in their individual research projects. Art deserves a great deal of respect and appreciation for his contribution to an important aspect of baseball history.



*The Waco News-Tribune Jun 30, 1926*

## Beebe and Rudolph Battle for 19 Innings

By Brian M. Frank

*This article originally appeared on The Herd Chronicles, a website dedicated to preserving the history of Buffalo Bisons baseball.*

One of the greatest pitchers' duels in Bisons history, and certainly the longest, occurred on June 11, 1912, when Buffalo's new veteran ace, Fred Beebe, and a young phenom for Toronto, Dick Rudolph, battled on the Buffalo Baseball Park mound for 19 long innings. Beebe joined the Bisons in 1912 at 32-years-old, already having pitched in seven major-league seasons, including a pair of 15-win seasons. Meanwhile, Toronto's young ace, Dick Rudolph, was just 24-years-old and began pitching in the International League at the tender age of 19. Entering the 1912 season, he'd already won 95 games with the Maple Leafs, including two 23-win seasons.

The 19-inning marathon didn't look like it was going to turn out to be a pitchers' duel in the early going. The Bisons opened the scoring in their first at-bat. Milt Stock led off the bottom of the first by hitting a routine ground-er, but third baseman Bill Bradley fired the ball over first baseman Tim Jordan's head, and Buffalo's "diminutive shortstop raced to the midway cushion." After Frank Truesdale struck out, Fred Beck lined the ball into center field for a single "which allowed Stock to tap the plate with the first tally of the game." Buffalo got its second run of the inning when Jimmy Murray grounded into a fielder's choice, stole second, and came home when Swat McCabe "poked the pill to right for a long single."

Toronto didn't waste any time getting on the scoreboard either. They cut the Bisons lead in half in the second inning when Bill Bradley "leaned on a straight pitch and planted the ball in a garden adjoining the left field wall" for a solo home run.

The Herd increased their lead in the third on an unusual home run by Fred Beck. Beck hit a ball that went under the outfield scoreboard. Today, the play would be ruled a ground-rule double, but in 1912 Beck circled the bases for an inside-the-park home run. Birney P. Lynch recounted the unusual play rather colorfully in the *Buffalo Courier*, writing that Beck "grabbed a big hickory and strode to the plate with fire in his eye. Waiting until Rudolph had cast a couple of splitters past him, the sensational all-around player drew back his war club and smote. The ball sailed past (left fielder Bill) O'Hara and trickled through a hole under the scoreboard in left field while Beck sprinted

around the circuit." The *Buffalo Express* added that "O'Hara clawed like a weasel on all fours, but the sphere remained out of reach until Beck was rounding third for home, when O'Hara plugged it toward the infield, but twenty seconds late."

The Leafs scratched out a pair of runs off Beebe in the fourth to tie the score. With one out, Al Shaw drew a walk to start the rally. He moved to second on a passed ball and scored on Tim Jordan's single to right. Jordan then "stole second in a cloud of dust and gum shoed to third on a passed ball." Beebe struck out Bill Bradley, who'd homered earlier in the game, and seemingly escaped the inning, when he induced Amby McConnell to hit a ground ball to shortstop. However, Frank Truesdale "allowed the ball to slide through his fingers" and Jordan crossed the plate with the tying run.

After Toronto's pair of runs in the fourth, both teams failed to bring another run home for the next 14 innings. The *Buffalo Courier* wrote "From that eventful period until the nineteenth, the players took their places at the bat, went through the motions of swatting and were turned back with the monotonous regularity of a passing parade." Beebe "had the Leafs eating from the hollow of his hand" and Rudolph "also twirled the battle off his life."

Both teams had chances to win the game in extra innings, but Beebe and Rudolph were able to escape jams when necessary to keep the opponents from crossing the plate. Buffalo had a runner at third base four different times from the 10th to the 19th innings, bringing hope to the crowd that victory was near, but each time "Rudolph tightened up and hopes were shattered."

Both pitchers also had tremendous support from the fielders behind them. The play of Toronto center fielder Al Shaw and Buffalo shortstop Milt Stock and first baseman Fred Beck stood out. The *Buffalo Enquirer* wrote that "Shaw of Toronto was a demon in the field, having seven put-outs to his credit, most of them being of the hair raising kind." In the 13th inning, Shaw's catch of Beebe's "bid for a homer... brought the heart throbs to the Herd and fans alike." The *Enquirer* wrote of Buffalo's shortstop: "Stock's fielding was a revelation, several of his stops and throws bordering on the phenomenal." Among other great plays he made, Stock gunned down Tim Jordan at the plate in the 14th inning. The *Buffalo Express* gushed over Buffalo's first baseman's fielding, writing that "Beck took them with one or both hands, over the runner's head or on the ground."

The tension in the ballpark continued to rise as the game wore on. Birney P. Lynch wrote: "It was a hard game for either pitcher to lose and it became apparent as the in-

nings slid past that only the fortunes of baseball would render a decision.”

Bisons center fielder Jimmy Murray made a tremendous play in the 18th to help keep the Maple Leafs from scoring. Murray threw out Bill O’Hara at third base, when he tried to stretch a double into a triple with one out. The *Buffalo Commercial* reported: “the throw from the center field fence by which Jimmy Murray retired O’Hara that time was the great, big, shining feature of the latter part of the game. O’Hara rounding second, saw where Murray was with the ball and he figured on a relay. Murray threw straight into (third baseman Art) Bues’s mitt, and that throw was all that saved the game from ending then and there in Toronto’s favor.” O’Hara was incensed at being called out, and was ejected from the game for arguing.

After 18 innings, Fred Beebe finally showed signs of tiring in the 19th. Tim Jordan led off the inning by hitting a ball that Bisons left fielder Grover Gilmore made a “circus catch” on, relieving the fans “of their anxiety for the moment. But not for long.” The next batter, Bill Bradley, hit the ball to deep left-center field and ended up with a triple. Buffalo brought the infield in with a runner at third and one down. The *Buffalo Commercial* reported: “McConnell hit the second ball pitched toward (first baseman) Beck, who was playing 30 feet nearer the base than he would have played if Bradley had not been on third base. The ball traveled at a wicked pace when it went by Beck, who made a great stab to (try to) get it.” Bradley crossed the plate with what proved to be the winning run, and McConnell ended up at third with the second triple of the inning. Beebe retired the next two batters on a strikeout and a pop-foul to escape any further damage.

The Bisons put a runner in scoring position in the 19th, but “Rudolph held like a stone wall to the end.” With two down, Truesdale reached on a ball too hot for third baseman Bradley to handle. Up stepped Bisons first baseman Fred Beck, who already had five hits in the game, including the under-the-scoreboard home run way back in the third inning. After Truesdale stole second, Beck hit a shot up

the middle, but Rudolph fielded it and “raced to first base, ending the game.”



*Fred Beebe, May 8, 1914, Buffalo Enquirer.*



*Toronto hurler Dick Rudolph, Public Domain.*

The newspapers reported that the 19-inning game was the longest in the history of the International League. The game took three hours and 40 minutes, which was considered a long game by the standards of the day. The teams were supposed to play a doubleheader, but the first game took so long that the second game was postponed.

Both starting pitchers were phenomenal. Rudolph allowed three runs on 15 hits and three walks, while striking out nine Buffalo batters. Beebe gave up four runs on 13 hits and four walks, while striking out five in his 19 innings of work. The *Buffalo Commercial* aptly remarked on Beebe that “He lost the greatest game in the history of the league, but he went down with colors flying.”

Despite the fact the Herd lost, Buffalo baseball fans left satisfied. The *Buffalo Enquirer* wrote: “The 8,000 fans who witnessed yesterday’s sensational nineteen inning clash between the Herd and the Leafs will have an interesting tale to unfold for posterity. It was by far the most brilliant game of baseball ever seen in these parts and one that has seldom been equaled in the history of the greatest of all sports... the Bisons, in defeat, never endeared themselves more to the hearts of Buffalo fandom.” The *Enquirer* also reported that although 8,000 fans were in attendance, “ten times that many regret their absence.” The *Buffalo Evening News* added: “There was something sensational doing almost every minute in that baseball battle and no one who saw it will ever forget it.”

Beebe and Rudolph left their marks on their respective team’s histories during their long careers. Beebe went on to win 76 games for Buffalo over a four year period. His two best years with the Bisons were 1914, when he went 22-10, and 1915, when he threw a no-hitter and went an incredible 27-7 with a 3.35 ERA. Rudolph finished the 1912 season with a 25-10 record and a 2.83 ERA, giving him 120 wins in his Leafs career, including three 20-win seasons. He then went on to star in the major leagues for the Boston Braves, winning 121 games in 13 major-league seasons. The pinnacle of his career came with the 1914

(Continued from page 5)

Braves, when he went 26-10 with a 2.35 ERA. The Miracle Braves, managed by former Bisons skipper George Stallings, won the National League pennant by 10½ games after being in last place on July 4. Rudolph hurled complete game wins in Games 1 and 4 of the 1914 World Series, allowing only one earned run in 18 innings, as the Braves swept Connie Mack's Philadelphia

A's.

The afternoon of June 11, 1912, was a day that still stands out in the long, storied careers of the two hurlers. The *Buffalo Commercial* commented that "For a number of reasons, it was one of the most remarkable games in the history of the league." The incredible 19-inning battle in which both pitchers went the distance remains one of the more unique games in Bisons and International League history.

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**WALTER VAN GROFSKI: MINOR LEAGUE  
JOURNEYMAN**  
by Bill Lamb

**A**n excellent receiver but a weak batsman, catcher Walter Van Grofski personified a now-vanished species: the career minor league ballplayer. Apart from a handful of spring training exhibition games, Van Grofski never came close to playing in a big leagues contest. In fact, he was not a serious major leagues prospect, only once rising as high as Class AA competition. For the most part, his near-20 years as a minor leaguer were spent at the lower levels, at times as a player-manager. With stops at no fewer than 17 venues, Van Grofski led a nomadic professional existence. But when he finally called it quits following the 1951 season, his life was transformed. He returned to the town of his birth, raised a family, and spent the remaining decades of his working life employed by a manufacturing plant situated within walking distance of his house. In April 2000, the old ballplayer's death at age 88 brought to a close a modest but interesting and productive life. That life story ensues.

Walter Frank Van Grofski was born on December 13, 1911 in Bloomfield, New Jersey. He was the eighth of nine children born to carpenter Thomas Van Grofski (1871-1919) and his wife, the former Mary Yasko (1873-1946). The elder Van Grofskis were late-19<sup>th</sup> century Polish-Catholic immigrants who met, married, and began their family in Pennsylvania. Some 15 years prior to Walter's birth, the family relocated to Bloomfield, setting up their household in the ethnic enclave inelegantly known as Polack Hill. A stronghold for recent arrivals, the Hill was a close-knit community locally renowned for ethnic allegiance, devotion to St. Valentine parish, and athletic prowess. Among Walter's neighborhood friends and contemporaries were future New York Yankees Hank Borowy and Don Savage (originally Saiewicz), and some years later, Denver Broncos quarterback Frank Tripucka.

With his father prematurely deceased, 15-year-old Walter dropped out of Bloomfield Tech after his freshman year to contribute to the support of his large family. In his free

time "Beaky," as he was known locally for his prominent proboscis, excelled at sport. Good-sized at 6-feet, 170 pounds, he was a standout on amateur football and basketball clubs. But where he really excelled was on the diamond. A right-handed batting and throwing backstop, Van Grofski made a name for himself as a teenager playing for the Bloomfield Bears, Conger Eeels, St. Valentine A.C., and other fast area semipro and amateur nines.

At age 19, Walter Van Grofski entered the professional ranks, signing with the Clarksburg (West Virginia) Colonels of the Class C Middle Atlantic League. Before the 1931 season was out, he was promoted to the York (Pennsylvania) White Roses of the Class B New York-Penn League. Walt returned to York for the 1932 and 1933 seasons, his longest tenure with any one minor league club. Although his .258 batting average (with only 20 extra-base hits) was substandard during the offense-happy 1933 season, his defensive skills plus a strong throwing arm captured the attention of the Pittsburgh Pirates. That November, the Pirates purchased Van Grofski's contract, with club officials asserting that their new acquisition showed "excellent promise."

Unhappily, Van was not given much chance to fulfill that promise. Early in spring camp, the Pirates optioned him to the Little Rock Travelers of the Class A Southern Association. Travelers manager Emmet McCann pronounced himself pleased to have him. "Walter Van Grofski has the makings of a real catcher," McCann informed the local press. "He is fast on the money out of the box on bunts and has a good stance at the plate. I look for Van to improve greatly." But Van Grofski saw little action in the early going, with ex-major leaguer Benny Bengough handling the catching duties. Walter only saw time as a fill-in at third base and in the outfield. Still, Little Rock sportswriter Ben Epstein was impressed, informing readers that "Van Grofski performed better than expected as a substitute and hit as well as any man on the club. He is truly the handy man of the Travelers. Van Grofski seems to possess a great arm and I would like to see him behind the plate." Epstein soon got his wish. After 15 games, Little Rock released Bengough and installed Van Grofski in

the catcher's spot. Misfortune followed. During an early-June game against the Knoxville Smokies, a foul tip tore the fingernail off the third finger on Van's throwing hand. Thereafter, infection set in, eventually leading to the amputation of the fingertip.

Somewhat remarkably, Van Grofski was back in action within weeks, and despite a meager .222 BA, re-invited to the Pittsburgh Pirates spring training camp the next year. History promptly repeated itself. After a brief stint in camp, Van Grofski was again optioned out by the Pirates, this time to the Des Moines Demons of the Class A Western League. Then, a preseason foul-tip hand injury suffered during a Demons intra-squad game put Van Grofski on the shelf. Weeks later, the Pirates (who still retained his contract rights) directed Des Moines to release the sidelined catcher outright. By June 1, however, Van Grofski was again in Western League livery, signed by a circuit rival, the Omaha Packers. Neither party would attain much satisfaction in the remainder of the campaign. Financially failing in Omaha, the franchise was transferred to Council Bluffs, Iowa, in late-June, and disbanded altogether on August 7. Meanwhile, now-free agent Walter Van Grofski and his .214 BA in 56 games had to find a place with a new ball club.

As he had the previous two years, Van Grofski spent the off-season playing winter ball in Puerto Rico. He then returned to the New York-Penn League, joining the Scranton Miners. The engagement did not last long. Despite starting the season hitting at an uncharacteristically brisk .328 pace, Scranton attempted to sell Van Grofski to the Savannah Indians of the Class B South Atlantic League. But the catcher refused to report, threatening instead to go home to New Jersey. He did, however, accept his subsequent transfer to a nearby NY-P League competitor, the Allentown Brooks – with whom he had a memorable on-field brawl with Hazelton Mountaineers ace Hugh Mulcahy. After collecting three base-hits off the big right-hander, Van Grofski took umbrage at a Mulcahy fastball fired at his head, charged the mound, and punched the pitcher in the jaw. As he later explained to Elmira sportswriter Harry O'Donnell, Mulcahy "was throwing at my head, so I had to do something." Awarded the decision in the ensuing fist fight by most observers, Van Grofski also drew a \$25 fine from league president Perry Farrell. Ultimately, Van completed the 1936 season with a .304 batting in 81 games combined, a professional best.

His surprisingly good stick work and Allenton's affiliation with the Brooklyn Dodgers earned Van Grofski a final invite to a major league spring training camp. The rea-

sons why Brooklyn brought Van in are unclear. Perhaps his Allentown hitting surge and acknowledged defensive skills persuaded club brass that Van Grofski had finally developed into a big leagues prospect. More likely, his presence was merely intended to lighten the early spring training burden on Babe Phelps and the other Dodgers regular season receivers. Or perhaps Brooklyn thought, or was told, that the now 25-year-old had potential as a manager. Whatever the case, the chance afforded Van Grofski yielded "one of the biggest thrills" of his professional career: catching a last out foul pop-up hit by Yankees legend Lou Gehrig to preserve an exhibition game

triumph for Brooklyn. Still, despite showing "the best throwing arm at Dodgers camp," Van was among the ten recruits optioned to the Elmira Colonels of the New York-Penn League when spring training ended.

Van Grofski's stay in Elmira was brief. In late-May, he was released to the Winston-Salem Twins, the cellar-dwellers of the Class B Piedmont League. The Twins were pitiful, at one point the holders of a god-awful 5-44 (.102) record. But placement in Winston-Salem afforded Van Grofski a chance to play every day and he responded with a respectable .251 batting average, with 29 extra-base hits in 109 games. More important, he received his first opportunity to manage, taking over as the club's fourth skipper midway in the campaign and bringing the Twins home with a 35-105 (.250) record, an improvement of sorts. The real highlight of the season, however, occurred off the field: Van's engagement to Bloomfield sweetheart Tillie (Matilde) Wesolowski. The couple wed the following year and, in time, the birth of son Thomas (born 1944) and daughter Mary Ellen (1947) completed the family.

Van returned as Winston-Salem player-manager for the 1938 season. But early season disagreements with club owner-general manager Alvin Crowder led to his ouster in mid-May. Within days, Van Grofski was playing close to home, signing with the Trenton Senators of the Class A Eastern League. But a .198 batting average in 39 games-played earned Van his release in mid-August. He finished his 1938 odyssey with the Dayton Ducks of the Class C Middle Atlantic League, but did not hit there, either (.167 in 17 games) and was given his walking papers at season's end. With catching apparently at a premium in 1939, Van Grofski got another shot in the Eastern League, this time with the Williamsport Grays but was released in May. By mid-season, however, he was behind the plate for yet another EL club, the Hartford Bees. But again, Van failed to hit: a .198 BA with only five extra-base hits in 70 games. (Continued on page 8)



Hartford released him during the winter.

Back home in Bloomfield, Van Groski found work as an electrician and played on weekends for the Brooklyn Bushwicks, a locally-celebrated semipro club, during 1940-1941. He re-entered Organized Baseball at the lowest level in April 1942, signing as player-manager for the newly-formed Wellsville (Pennsylvania) Yankees, the New York Yankees' affiliate in the Class D PONY League. By almost any measure, the season was Van Groski's most successful in professional baseball. In 121 games, he batted .298 with a league-record 40 doubles, set another league record for single-season putouts by a catcher (816), and was chosen as the circuit's all-star catcher in a poll of PONY League sportswriters. Perhaps more important to Van's future, under his guidance the Yankees posted a winning (65-60, .520), but lost a one-game playoff to the Hornell Pirates for the fourth-place PONY League post-season berth.

Although his age (31) and marital status made him an unlikely target of military conscription, Van Groski joined the US Army in March 1943. Like many other professional ballplayers, Van served his country on the diamond rather than the battlefield, serving as player-manager for the crack 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division nine. Honorably discharged that October, he was thereafter signed by the WWII-depleted Newark Bears of the Class AA International League, achieving the highest-level affiliation of his pro career. While Polack Hill friends Hank Borowy and Don Savage sported the pinstripes of the 1944-1945 New York Yankees (whom the Bears served as lead farm club), Van Groski turned in first-rate service for Newark. "A wise head behind the bat, (Van Groski) has helped the young Bears pitchers" become the best staff in the International League, declared Syracuse sportswriter Jack Durkin. The following season, Van even chipped in with the bat, hitting a solid .290 in 76 games and helping the Bears capture the IL post-season championship in a sev-

en-game series triumph over the Montreal Royals.

With the end of World War II restoring high-quality rosters to the game, there was no chance that the marginally-talented Walter Van Groski would be retained by a Class AA ball club like the Newark Bears. But appreciative of the services that Van had rendered during the war years, the Yankees installed him as player-manager of their affiliate in the Class B Interstate League, the Sunbury (Pennsylvania) Yankees. Regrettably for Van, his batting returned to previous form (.173 BA in 103 games), while the club's parent organization sent him "little talent of any description." Still, Sunbury managed a tolerable 67-73 season record. Van was not so fortunate in 1947. With Sunbury headed for a last-place finish and in the midst of a 13-game losing streak, Van Groski resigned his manager's position in "the best interests of the club" in mid-July. He then went home to Bloomfield to resume life in the regular workday world. The following year, he played weekend semipro ball for a New Jersey team called the Madison Colonels.

Walter Van Groski's farewell tour in Organized Baseball began in 1949 when he was hired to manage the Lexington Athletics of the Class D North Carolina State League, a low-level affiliate of the Philadelphia Athletics. After the Lexington club posted a 60-64 (.484) mark, Van Groski was transferred to the Portsmouth (Ohio) A's of the Class D Ohio-Indiana League and led the club through a dismal 46-89 (.341) campaign in 1950. Cast adrift by Philadelphia, Van was re-engaged by the New York Yankees to once again guide their PONY League affiliate in Wellsville, now called the Rockets. But not even the lineup presence of George Herman "Babe" Ruth, a young catcher from The Bronx, could elevate the 1951 season for the club skipper. Appearing in only 19 games himself for a sixth-place (53-73, .421) Wellsville club, Van Groski went 11-for-38 (.289) with the final home run (of 14 total) of his pro career. Over the ensuing winter, the St. Louis Browns as-



*Asheville Citizen-Times Apr 22, 1926*

sumed sponsorship of the Rockets, and among its first moves was appointment of Gene Crumling as new Wells-ville manager. With that, Walter Van Grofski's time in Organized Baseball came to an end.

Never an exceptional talent, Van Grofski had been an honest, hard-working journeyman minor league ball player. According to the stats provided by Baseball-Reference, he batted .230, with only 272 extra-base hits, in over 1,000 games played in Class AA to Class D leagues. His forte, difficult to gauge statistically for a minor leaguer of his era, had been defense. He called a good game, was agile behind the plate, and exhibited a strong throwing arm. Had it been otherwise, his professional playing career would not have spanned more than two decades. Van's record as a minor leagues manager, while well below the .500 mark, was probably about on par with the playing talent that he was supplied with.

With his days as a baseball nomad behind him, Van Grofski took a position as an electrician with the Walter Kidde Company, the fire safety equipment manufacturer whose Bloomfield plant was not much more than a long fly ball away from the family home. He also became a regular attendee at the annual sports banquet held by the St. Valentine Athletic Club and enjoyed watching the games of his son Tom, a baseball/football standout at

Seton Hall Prep and the University of Delaware. In 1981, Walter Van Grofski joined a host of friends from the old neighborhood (including Hank Borowy and Don Savage) as a member of the Bloomfield Athletic Hall of Fame. Van retired from Walter Kidde after 25 years service and eventually relocated to the South Jersey resort town of Ocean City. He died at home on April 11, 2000, age 88. Following a Requiem Mass at St. Augustine Church in Ocean City, his remains were returned to Bloomfield and interred in Mt. Olivet Cemetery. Survivors included Tillie, his wife of 62 years, son Thomas, daughter Mary Ellen Perillo, two grandchildren, and his sisters Nettie Mulvihill and Alice Glouczynski.

#### SOURCES

Sources for the biographical information recited herein include a 1946 questionnaire completed by our subject for the American Baseball Bureau; US Census data and Van Grofski family info accessed via Ancestry.com, and certain of the newspaper articles cited below, particularly the obituary published in the *Atlantic City* (New Jersey) *Press*, April 13, 2000. Unless otherwise noted, stats have been taken from Baseball-Reference.

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## Bonneville Park-Salt Lake City

By Ron Selter

**T**his ballpark was used by the Salt Lake Bees of the PCL for 11 seasons: 1915-25. The PCL team that opened the 1914 season in Sacramento, was moved to San Francisco by the league on September 6, 1914. After the season, the league then sold the franchise to a Salt Lake City group. The now Salt Lake City team set out to build a new ballpark for the 1915 season. Bonneville Park was also used for two seasons (1926-27) by the Salt Lake City team in Utah-Idaho League. After the 1925 season, the Salt Lake City franchise was moved to Los Angeles and became the Hollywood Stars. That team stayed in Los Angeles until 1936, when the Stars moved to San Diego and became the Padres. One might note that this was a different Hollywood Stars team than the one that played in Gilmore Field from 1939-57; that team had formerly been the Mission Reds in San Francisco.

Bonneville Park was located between Ninth Street South

on the north, and on the south a parcel 250 feet north of Herbert St. Main St was the boundary on the west and State St on the east. During construction in late 1914 and early 1915, the site was called Majestic Park. After the 1916 season, the park's name was changed to Bonneville Park. The ballpark had a 4,000 seat wooden curved grandstand. The ballpark seating in 1915 included a section of roofed bleacher seats adjacent to the grandstand on the first base side, followed further down the first base line by a section of un-roofed bleachers. Total capacity was about 6,000. For the 1916 season a small set of bleachers was added down the third base line. In 1924-25, capacity was reported to have been 10,000. A strange thing about the playing field-the infield was grass, while the outfield was rolled gravel and dirt.

#### DIMENSIONS

In the article about Tony Lazzeri (Source No. 1), the dimensions of Bonneville Park were listed as LF/RF 325, and CF only 360. The late great SABR ballpark historian, Larry Zuckerman, researched all PCL parks through 1997. He plotted the distances at Bonneville Park from a Sanborn Insurance Co. map, and he noted that these

numbers are only estimates, albeit fairly reasonable. LF: 308, CF: 408, RF: 319, Backstop: 45. The planned RF dimension was given in a March 1915 Salt Lake City newspaper article as 320. This reference suggests the Larry Zuckerman dimension estimates are quite good. One should note that Sanborn ballpark maps rarely showed the foul lines or the location of home plate. Therefore, the home plate-backstop distance was uncertain, and home plate could have been closer to CF.

If the Zuckerman estimated dimensions (in particular CF =408) are reasonably close, the dimensions of the park would lend itself to quite a few inside-the-park-home runs (IPHR). My calculations from the Bonneville Park diagram make left-center 355 and right-center 369. If CF at Bonneville Park was 408, there should have been a goodly number of IPHRs. Conversely if CF was no more than 360 there would likely have been very few if any IPHRs.

As Larry Zuckerman found a minimum of 12 IPHRs for Lazzari in 1925, the Zuckerman Sanborn-map-derived dimensions are far more likely.

The relationship of IPHRs and the CF dimension can be tested with some actual ML data. Consider the case of HRs at Hilltop Park (NY AL) in 1911-12. After the construction of the CF bleachers in front of the existing CF diagonal fence for the 1911 season, Hilltop Park possessed what was the ML's shortest CF on record—at least since 1900. For the last two seasons of Hilltop's use, CF (dead CF) was an estimated 370-375 feet —left-center and right-center dimensions were noticeably more. In the two seasons 1911-12, there were a total of two IPHRs to CF— out of a total of 35 HRs to CF. At Hilltop Park in those two seasons it was a case of there being virtually no IPHRs. In the same two seasons there were 21 IPHRs to right-center RC and RF.

Bear in mind Salt Lake City was one of the minor league cities at a high altitude. (4,266 feet). At that altitude, a batted ball will travel 6.4 % further than at sea level.

When one considers the altitude effect, and the data on IPHRs, the reported dimension of 360 for CF is unbelievable small. Conclusion-Bonneville Park was likely about LF 308, CF 408, and RF 320, as Dick Beverage reported from the Zuckerman research.

**FENCES**

Zuckerman (Source No. 3) had access to some photos of the park, and they suggest the fences were quite high,



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*Bonneville Park*

perhaps 20 feet or more. There is a photo of the RF and CF fences at Bonneville Park (Source No. 2) in which the RF fence is 12-14 feet high including a two-three foot wire screen atop a portion of the RF fence near the RF foul pole. The low CF diagonal fence was about three to four feet high and was located in front of a higher (about 12 feet) CF diagonal fence. The space behind the low CF fence was likely the

location of the bullpens.

**CAPACITY**

6,500 (1915), 8,000 (1916), 10,000 (1924)

**IMPACT OF THE PARK'S CONFIGURATION AND DIMENSIONS ON BATTING**

We have six seasons (1918, 1921-25) of batting data for Bonneville Park (Source No. 3). The batting average at Bonneville Park during those six seasons averaged some 50 plus points above the league batting average; Three times as many home runs were hit over that period of time as at the average PCL ballpark; One & one -half times as many doubles were hit there; and, as for triples, they averaged slightly less than the league average. Note that comparing batting data for one park vs. the league average contains a potential defect. It is possible that the outstanding batting marks at Bonneville Park were in part due to the home team batters having been above average and the home team's pitchers having been below

(Continued on page 11)

average.

For the 1923 season at Bonneville Park, the home team SLC Bees hit .369 while the visitors hit .353. On the road the Bees hit .285 compared to the league average of .299. Excluding Bonneville Park, the batting average at the other seven PCL parks in 1923 was .290. Historically, teams on average hit about four percent higher at home than on the road. The Bees hit .285 at the other seven parks while the league average at these seven parks was .290. However, all of the Bees games at these seven other parks were on the road while the other seven teams were at home for half of the games. Adjusting for the Home/Road effect for comparison purposes, makes the Bees batting average at the other seven parks .291. Thus it appears that the Salt Lake City's batters were nearly ex-

actly the same caliber as the rest of the league and the huge Home/Road differences were due to the effect of Bonneville Park.

Sources:

- 1) "Tony Lazzeri: Baseball's First 60 Homer Man", by Dick Beverage, 1991 SABR Baseball Research Journal
- 2) "A bit about Salt Lake City's Bonneville Park in the 1920s", The J. G. Preston Experience
- 3) Ballparks of the PCL, Larry Zuckerman, Baseball Press Books, San Diego, CA 2007
- 4) "Huelsman, Tony Lazzeri, and Salt Lake City", SABR-L by Carlos Bauer, 14 February 2005

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## Let the Old Decision Stand

### ***Baseball's Surprising Salary Problem and Its Unlikely Solution***

By Greg Larson

I think the most absurd part about Major League Baseball is that the coaches wear uniforms. It's kind of adorable, when you think about it: here's this man being paid to manage a group of grown boys honing their skills in a child's game and he's wearing the same costume as them, cap and all. It's like they're all playing pretend together.

Imagine AARP-member Phil Jackson's bony six-foot-eight frame poking out of a red Chicago Bulls jersey as he whispers in Michael Jordan's ear. Or Herb Brooks in full goalie pads — with stick and glove crossed in front of him — as he stands like a sentinel while his Olympic hockey team takes on the Soviets. No. They'd look ridiculous. Instead, those guys are sporting full suits on the sidelines like the professionals they are.

But baseball has to be different. So the manager gets his own jersey and even his own number, just like the players. And then, as if he's performed some significant physical exertion of his own, the manager turns in his jersey to the clubhouse attendant to be washed at the end of the night.

In a game where players will continue wearing the same unwashed jockstrap or eating the same lunch every day if they're on a lucky streak, it doesn't get much odder than the manager wearing his own uniform.

It's a tradition that started in the early days of the game — the late 1800s — and became common practice in the

first part of the 20th century, a time when managers were often players as well. Owners could save a few bucks on travel expenses and salaries by combining two jobs into one; they'd choose a well-respected player (say the Philadelphia Athletics' Connie Mack or the New York Giants' John McGraw) to manage the team as well as play on it.

These penny-wise, pound-foolish moves have been a hallmark of the baseball establishment. The owners of the Baltimore Orioles, for example, might dump more than \$20 million a year on their struggling first baseman, Chris Davis, but refuse to pay their low-level minor leaguers even a minimum wage salary. And that, I think, is the second-most absurd part about Major League Baseball:

### **How it treats its minor leaguers.**

I saw, first-hand, Major League Baseball's conduct toward its minor players during the summers of 2012 and 2013. I was a clubhouse attendant (or "clubbie" for short) washing jerseys for the Aberdeen IronBirds, the short-season single-A affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles.

Single-A is where new draft picks get their training wheels. In the New York-Penn League, where the IronBirds played, young men would learn the rigors of travel and life as a minor leaguer.

First-year players only make about \$1,400 per month in single-A. To make ends meet, most of them have to cram into tiny apartments or live with host families. (Host families are locals who take in ballplayers for the season. Sometimes they ask for a token rent in return, say \$10 a day, but usually families house players out of the kindness of their hearts and their love for the team.)

Guys toil away in the minors because unlike new football

and (many) basketball draft picks who are able to make an immediate impact in the NFL or NBA, baseball players must work their way through the minor league system. The road from being drafted to the big leagues goes through single-A, double-A, and triple-A (if a player lasts that long).

### Salary Scale

<b>GCL</b>	1st year	\$1,100 per month
	2nd year	\$1,150 per month
	3rd year	\$1,200 per month
<b>Aberdeen</b> (short season-A)	1st year	\$1,100/\$,1200 per month
	2nd year	\$1,250 per month
	3rd year	\$1,300 per month
<b>Delmarva/Frederick</b> (single-A)	1st year	\$1,400 per month
	2nd year	\$1,500 per month
	3rd year	\$1,600 per month
<b>Bowie</b> (double-A)	1st year	\$1,800 per month
	2nd year	\$1,900 per month
	3rd year	\$2,100 per month
<b>Norfolk</b> (triple-A)	1st year	\$2,500 per month
	2nd year	\$2,800 per month
	3rd year	\$3,200 per month

Years after I quit working for the IronBirds, most of my friends from the team have now fallen by the wayside of Major League Baseball's charging locomotive.

A few have made it to the Show — like Trey Mancini, Steven Brault, and Josh Hader — but they are the exceptions, not the rules.

Some guys jumped off the train of their own volition, but most of them had to be pushed. Then they dusted themselves off and moved on with their lives (unless they got lost in the wasteland of the independent leagues, but

that's another story).

As if waking from a dream, many of them snapped to the realization that they had nothing to show for their time as a minor leaguer other than a lack of education, a laughable bank balance, and a wasted youth they could never retrieve.

My best friend from Aberdeen, Alex Schmarzo, who was a mullet-sporting twenty-three-year-old when he pitched in relief for the IronBirds, felt ripped off by minor league baseball. "This life f\*\*ks with you, man," he told me. "I always say it's like scratching lottery tickets: when you have enough guys together playing the lottery — buying scratch-offs — of course one or two of them are gonna win big. It's inevitable. But they win and you're just left sitting there scratching away. You throw your money and time away one dollar and one day at a time. But those guys won, right? Maybe I can too.

"So we keep coming back for more until we realize we're broke and out of time. That's what it's like to play single-A baseball."

### Chump Change

As time went on, I tried to unravel the mystery of minor league baseball and the oddly unjust treatment of its players, the main attractions. That's when I discovered the minor league hockey system, which is set up similarly to MLB's. Except for one thing: they pay their minor leaguers quite well.

Minor league hockey players make about \$30,000 in the ECHL (their lower minor league) and as much as \$350,000 in the AHL (their higher minor league), plus room and board.

If you look at the salary numbers in the image I put above, a baseball player who spends a full season with the Orioles' single-A affiliate in Delmarva would be paid approximately **\$7,500** for his services (*and* he'd be responsible for his own housing).

Think about that: \$7,500 for six months of nonstop commitment to your work, complete with six-hour bus rides, early morning workouts, and late nights at the ballpark.

This is hardly just compensation, especially considering these are the guys whose backs carry the weight of the entire baseball establishment. If we figure that the Orioles, for example, have 200 minor leaguers in their system (which is a fair estimate) and they were to increase each one of those players' salaries by \$10,000, that would add up to an extra expense of only *\$2 million a year* total.

In other words, it would require relative chump change for the Orioles (a team that, according to Forbes Maga-

zine, is worth \$1.3 billion) and other teams to reach something closer to fair pay for its employees. (The Blue Jays have taken active measures by increasing their minor league player salaries by 50%, which is a big first step.)

Don't get me wrong: I don't think minor league baseball players should be paid anything *close* to what major leaguers make — they simply don't bring in enough money to warrant it. But I do believe people should be compensated for the work they do, and for minor leaguers the bare minimum should be a livable wage.

Now, I hear Judge Judy's voice in my mind, yelling in her courtroom shriek:

"If you don't like the way you're being treated in your job, then quit! This is America. You're free to work somewhere else."

Maybe that's true of these minor league baseball players. Maybe if they were truly being mistreated, they'd just quit and work somewhere else. But the dream of reaching the majors keeps them tethered to the game. I believe MLB exploits these players' willingness to sacrifice for their dream by giving them as little compensation as feasible (there's no doubt in my mind that many minor leaguers would play for free if they had to).

Here's another big part of the problem: minor league baseball players have no union of their own, nor are they part of the Major League Baseball Players Association (which is widely regarded as the best union this country has ever seen).

Minor league hockey players, on the other hand, are represented by the NHL players' union. That means they have a voice when player representatives sit down to create a collective bargaining agreement with NHL team owners. Moreover, it'd be easy to say that the NHL is better equipped to take care of its players because there are a lot fewer of them, and the matter comes down to simple dollars and cents. But in 2018, Major League Baseball out-earned the NHL by more than *five billion dollars* (\$10.3 billion and \$4.9 billion, respectively).

It all begs the question: **Why?**

Why aren't minor league players represented by the MLB union?

Why doesn't MLB take care of its minor leaguers while the NHL, which has a significantly smaller revenue stream, does such a good job providing for theirs?

Those are the questions that brought me to a Norfolk Admirals game, the ECHL affiliate for the Edmonton Oilers. It was years after I'd washed my last jockstrap for the Ab-

erdeen IronBirds and I wanted to find out first-hand how minor league hockey stacked up against minor league baseball.

### **"Just Go Out There and Try to F\*\*k Shit Up"**

A glass-wall façade circled all the way around Scope Arena in Norfolk, Virginia. Above the glass, the rounded concrete top spilled over the edges to form flying buttresses, as if keeping the arena safely tied to the Earth. I walked up the steps to the plaza in front of the entrance. I could almost hear some self-congratulatory executive in an era past: "Fans will love Scope Arena's plaza area. Families can play with their kids in the sunshine and the trees surrounding the reflecting pool will create a brief natural respite in the urban landscape. Heck, people might just stay out there rather than go in for a game!"

When I visited, the dark, cloudy sky tickled disquiet in my belly, and wind swept plastic bags and food wrappers across the empty plaza. The place looked more like a concrete relic of the cold war than a futuristic playground.

The arena itself was dark and cold. The press box, where I'd be watching the game, was little more than a few rows of seats at the top of section 201, barricaded with black-painted plywood. It might have made a better sniper's nest than a press box. I was the only person actually wearing a press pass and I suddenly felt like a college freshman dangling my new school ID around my neck on a lanyard.

I tried in earnest to decipher who the best players were as they passed and shot during warm-ups, but I might as well have been judging figure skating. I hadn't watched or played hockey since I was in high school in Minnesota. Even then, I only played pickup games, during which my buddy Jeff taught me everything I know about hockey.

"Hold the end of your stick out to the side, not in the front," he told me. "That way if you hit a rough patch of ice with the blade, the end of your stick won't jump up and knock yer dick off."

He then saw my feeble attempts to play the game and gave me another valuable piece of advice that I have since applied to most aspects of my life: "Don't worry about passing and shooting and all that skill bullshit. Just go out there and try to f\*\*k shit up."

As warm-ups proceeded, the Admirals looked like they'd overheard some of Jeff's advice in their time as hockey players. They circled their half of the ice, firing shot after shot at their goalie. Almost all of them sailed wide, high, or both. It looked like they were purposefully getting all the bad ones out of the way before the game, like a starting pitcher warming up by throwing every ball over his

leaping catcher's head to the backstop.

Of course the players were actually skilled. That level of hockey in the ECHL, where the Admirals played, is considered double-A hockey. They're two or three rungs above the IronBirds in terms of their place in their respective organization. (The next level up, the AHL, is considered triple-A hockey, one level below the NHL.)

Warm-ups ended and a staff sergeant from the Navy belted her spine-tingling rendition of the National Anthem.

*Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.*

Half the crowd belted out "O's!" in unison as she started the next line then fell back into silence.

*O's! say does that star spangled...*

It surprised me, at first, to hear people at a hockey game partake in this Baltimore Orioles national anthem tradition. But then I remembered that we were just a mile northwest of Harbor Park, home of the Norfolk Tides, triple-A affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles.

Hearing the "O's!" brought me back in my memory from the southern tip of the Chesapeake Bay in Norfolk to the northern tip—all the way to Ripken stadium, home of the Aberdeen IronBirds.

The sun didn't shine in Scope Arena. I never got to see any stars, either. Birds don't chirp in an ice rink. But in baseball, the sun almost always shows up in due time. There are even stars, sometimes, if you wait long enough. And at Ripken Stadium, there were always birds of some kind.

### **The American Dream in the Minor Leagues**

It was opening day 2013 at Ripken Stadium and everyone in the sellout crowd hollered out the "O's!" in the national anthem. I stood in front of the dugout along with the players and coaches. The line ended with me, the clubhouse attendant, the only non-jerseyed person out there.

A low haze trapped the mid-June humidity, but the evening was mild, comfortable. Players from the visiting teams always told me that Ripken Stadium was the best in the New York-Penn League. The exposed brick throughout reminded you of Camden Yards, where the Orioles played. The smell of cinnamon pecans danced around the concourse in the early innings, yielding eventually to the Old Bay scent of blue crabs wafting in the later, hungrier parts of the game. The stadium buzzed with the energy of anticipation. Ripken Stadium, on nights like that one, could have been a dream.

But minor league baseball is where most dreams go to die.

Dead dreams or not, baseball has still been romanticized like no other sport in America. Although the NFL has gained popularity in recent decades, baseball has been tied to the American identity for longer — and tied more fervently at that. We can evoke any of the nostalgic clichés that have been thrown around the ballpark for centuries: the smell hot dogs, the taste of beer, spitting tobacco juice in brown gobs, teaching your son how to spit sunflower seeds, the national anthem before every game, and on and on forever. In fact, baseball's exalted status in this country even extends as far as the law.

Baseball is exempt from the laws that are meant to prevent monopolies from forming, like the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 and the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, both in place to prohibit businesses that the government deems anti-competitive.

Why is baseball exempt?

Because of *stare decisis*, a legal concept that roughly translates to "let the old decision stand." Baseball's exempt status has been famously challenged (but ultimately upheld) in three major Supreme Court cases known as The Baseball Trilogy:

Federal Baseball v. National League (1922)

Toolson v. New York Yankees (1953)

Flood v. Kuhn (1972)

This antitrust exemption has allowed the owners to pay their minor leaguers a pittance due to a lack of competition.

Players may get millions of dollars in signing bonuses when they're drafted, but outside of the top prospects taken in the first few rounds, the bonuses are modest at best. For example, a graduating college senior would be lucky to garner anything around \$10,000 as a signing bonus. This happens because a college senior doesn't have any leverage.

"You don't wanna sign for \$10,000?" the team that drafted him might say. "Then don't sign."

And if the player has already used his four years of NCAA eligibility, he can't go back to college baseball. It's the end of the line for a draftee, who isn't allowed to negotiate with any other teams.

### **Hotel Aberdeen**

We lost that home opener 5-0, but as the clubhouse attendant (clubbie) I was more concerned with quickly played games rather than won games. My duties in the clubhouse centered mostly around laundry, so the sooner we got off the field, the sooner I could scrub the jerseys,

wash them, hang them, and get to bed.

As the season moved along, the IronBirds' white uniforms started to grow stains that couldn't be scrubbed out: dirt from sliding on the infield, tobacco spit, peanut butter from the pre-game spreads, and god-only-knows what else.

And the clubhouse turned into a regular Hotel California. On any given night after a home game, I'd be asleep in the equipment closet, our trainer would be knocked out drunk in the weight room, the manager would be catching a few winks in his office, and our bench coach would be snoring on a locker room couch. Hey, it was cheaper than getting a hotel room for the night, or signing a lease.

The year before, the IronBirds actually put me up for free in a two-bedroom apartment. I'd let players crash with me if they needed a place to stay, so I had anywhere between one and four guys sleeping in the living room at a time.

Sometimes I'd come home in the sleepy hours of morning, stepping over new players I'd barely said hello to before. Our catcher and new draft pick, Sam Kimmel, stayed with me almost the entire season. In return he paid the utility bills, but even that made me feel guilty: here I was, the uniform-scrubbing clubbie, living for free on the team's dime, and there was Kimmel, busting his ass every day chasing his dream, getting no help from the team whatsoever.

It did make *a little* sense: I was technically an employee of the IronBirds, while the players were employees of The Baltimore Orioles. It would only be reasonable for the team to put up one of its employees for free and not the players.

But here's the part that never made sense to me: clubhouse attendants, all across professional baseball, get paid a small token salary from the front office, but derive the bulk of their income from the players themselves.

Players pay dues to the clubbie to reimburse him for doing their laundry and buying pre- and post-game meals. The dues, though, seemingly by design, result in a surplus for the clubbie: his income. For example, I charged each player \$7 a day for dues. If we had 30 players, that added up to \$210 per day that the players gave me in cold hard cash. Did I spend \$210 per day in peanut butter, bread, and animal crackers? No. Not even close.

In fact, during my two seasons in Aberdeen, I netted about \$15,000 each summer just by spending less on food than I got from player dues. This number added up to about double (or more) what the players made in the same amount of time. Where's the logic in that?

One of our pitchers told me about a conversation he had with a friend who was curious about the dues system. The pitcher broke it down for him.

Then the friend said, "That doesn't make sense. Why doesn't the team just pay the clubbie enough money that he doesn't need to charge the players?"

The pitcher said, "You don't get it, man. That's just the way it works with every team."

I nodded in agreement when the pitcher told me the story, but his answer still didn't appease the logic in his friend's question. To me, charging dues always seemed like another easy way to defer costs to the players. It was an absurd system, but guys accepted it because that was all they'd ever known. Someone in baseball's youth made the decision to use this dues setup in the clubhouse, and the players, by complying with this now-archaic system, simply let the old decision stand.

### **The Social Safety Net**

The Admirals hockey team won their game 6-1.

The head coach, Eric Veilleux, entered the little press room drinking from a water bottle. He wore a dark blue pinstriped suit, his face was clean-shaven, and his shoes were freshly shined. I couldn't imagine him sleeping in Scope Arena or wearing goalie equipment during a game.

He spoke in his light French-Canadian accent about one of the night's star players: "Pelech's been working hard during practice and now it's paying off. He's finally skating."

"He's finally what?" one of the newspapermen asked.

"He's skating. Instead of gliding."

"The difference being?"

Eric took a swig from his water bottle. "Well, when you glide towards somebody you get there later than when you skate hard."

"Okay. So it's an effort thing." The newspaperman jotted something on his pad.

Eric looked over at me, as if to say, "Have you guys ever watched hockey in your entire life?"

I pursed my lips and stayed silent until he left.

At practice later that week everybody looked like they were gliding. Ten players plus a goalie performed a drill under Eric's watchful eye on one end of the ice. On the other end, five players and a goalie stood around tripping each other and shoving in playful boredom.

(Continued on page 16)

(Continued from page 15)

Practice ended a half hour early, leaving just a few rogue players taking extra reps. I went over to meet Jordan Hill, the team's captain.

He spoke to me with his back to the ice, which struck me as strange at first. In baseball no player would stand on the field with his back to the action; he might get clobbered with a line drive. But there's no glass wall surrounding a baseball diamond.

He had a square jaw and sported a constant half-smile that beamed friendliness. I asked him what his plans were after his playing career.

"I'm actually trying to figure that out now," he said. "Obviously in the ECHL I understand the situation I'm in. I'm still trying to play as long as I can, but the body doesn't hold up forever. And once you forego college, like I did, you kinda need a secondary thought process, y'know? For a lot of guys that's the hardest transition: going from being at the rink every day to the afterlife."

I was struck by his keen sense of sporting mortality. When I talked to baseball players they were always all-or-nothing: "I'm gonna be a major leaguer, play as long as I can, then worry about the next step when I get there."

Jordan, on the other hand, had dreams of being a coach and, eventually, a general manager.

"I'm not saying I'm not trying to move up to the next level. But now I'm looking more at what's coming *after* hockey, y'know? I wanna be making those trades, dealing with those deadlines, and networking."

Until that day came, he was taken care of by the league. As part of the NHL's collective bargaining agreement, minor league hockey players are put up in furnished apartments. The Admirals apartments were a five-minute walk from the Virginia Beach oceanfront (not bad for a bunch of small-town Canadian kids) and, according to Jordan (who was, at the time, a six-year AHL and ECHL veteran) they were some of the nicest in the league.

"I came here knowing that I'd have a good living arrangement," Jordan said. He surprised me when he added: "Especially compared to baseball."

"I've had friends get drafted, so I've seen how much they're getting and it's nothing. They're good players, too, same as here. But in hockey, we have no excuses to complain — everything is taken care of, even utilities. So, okay, we only make \$30,000 a year here. But I'm saving, you know, \$15,000 in rent and expenses. And we get forty bucks a day for meal money. Nothing crazy, but you can survive off it. So I'm living just fine. I'm saving and I'm

enjoying myself.

"It's not as bad as people think it is. It's not millions, that's for sure, but it's definitely comfortable."

Jordan continued: "I know baseball. All of their money is in the bigs. In hockey, we have a very good union that protects us." Right when he said it, to my disbelief, a puck smacked the glass behind him and he didn't even blink.

I said goodbye to Jordan, still wondering why the MLB Players Association didn't include minor leaguers in its union.

On a whim — in one of my "don't worry about skill, just go out there and fuck shit up" moments — I sent Andrew Zimbalist an email.

Zimbalist is a professor of Economics at Smith College and one of the most prolific and respected sports economists in the country (he's even testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee in hearings on baseball's antitrust exemption).

"Why is the NHL better able to take care of its minor leaguers than MLB?" I sent.

He responded ten minutes later.

"quick answers," he wrote, too hurried to capitalize consistently. "first, your conclusion is a bit subjective. ["No shit," I thought.] second, the number of minor leaguers in hockey who are under contract with NHL teams is much smaller. In MLB each team has over 150 minor leaguers under contract. third, there are different histories in the two sports and many minor leaguers in hockey are Canadians where there is a stronger social safety net."

He seemed to be saying that the NHL values stemmed from the values of Canada at-large, and Canadian values included "social safety nets" like public healthcare and extensive welfare benefits.

But only 7 of the 31 NHL teams, 4 of the 31 AHL teams, and 2 of the 26 ECHL teams are in Canada. And, not for nothing, the National Hockey League headquarters is in New York City.

So although many of the players themselves grew up in Canada, the NHL is very much an American institution.

And as I said before: although the MLB has many more minor leaguers than the NHL, major league baseball out-earns the NHL by more than \$5 billion. And it would take a pittance from each big league team to ramp up their minor player salaries to something more livable.

On top of all that, Zimbalist's argument is simply illogical: if Canada has such a strong social safety net, then wouldn't the teams have *less* incentive to take care of their play-

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ers? If wronged by the NHL, the players would, by Zimbalist's logic, presumably be saved from the poverty free fall by the big red maple leaf of Canadian socialism.

I responded forty-five minutes later: "Would you be willing to talk for fifteen minutes to discuss more?"

He responded five minutes later: "sorry, too busy."

So that's it, right? Case closed. The guy who wrote the books on sports economics said I was full of shit.

*Baseball is tied to the national identity of Americans; hockey is tied to the national identity of Canadians. The way each sport treats its players says something about the ideals of each nation.*

But it struck me as surprisingly similar reasoning as the rest of the baseball establishment:

***Don't worry about trying to change anything. Stare decisis: that's just the way we've always done it.***

### **Stare Decisis**

Baseball's antitrust exemption will survive for as long as baseball holds its place as the national pastime. But the national pastime isn't as rosy as people like to think; it has a storied history of labor struggles.

Curt Flood's famous Supreme Court case against commissioner Bowie Kuhn, for example, came about after Flood, the Saint Louis Cardinals outfielder, refused to accept a trade to the Philadelphia Phillies.

"I didn't think that I was going to report to Philadelphia," Flood said, "mainly because I didn't want to pick up twelve years of my life and move to another city."

He demanded that commissioner Kuhn declare him a free agent, a request that was predictably denied. When Flood took it to court, they wouldn't overturn MLB's antitrust exemption because of stare decisis, established by the previous two Supreme Court decisions in the Baseball Trilogy (Federal Baseball v. National League and Toolson v. Yankees).

Although Flood v. Kuhn did improve free agency for players, the decision has now become precedent, just like those cases that came before it, and has only solidified baseball's exemption.

There are currently multiple former minor leaguers attempting to reverse the exemption with a class-action lawsuit against MLB and the commissioner's office, led by a former Marlins draft pick named Aaron Senne. Those former players are claiming that they (and minor leaguers

across the country) are owed more money in compensation for obscene working conditions, sometimes putting in 70 hours a week including training and bus rides.

The lawsuit will likely be thrown out because of stare decisis, but if it does reach the Supreme Court, *Senne v. MLB* could be a landmark case in abolishing the antitrust exemption.

Even so: the exemption doesn't explain *why* baseball is part and parcel of our national identity...

The game is so appealing because baseball itself reflects the freedom and spaciousness of the American spirit: the large playing field opens up from a single point (home plate) and spreads out into an infinite mouth that would go on expanding forever if not for the people in the grandstands. Those people, the American public, are the ones who have the luxury of watching baseball from their romantic distance, where the stains of the game are invisible.

Maybe they come out to the stadium because their father brought them as a child. Or maybe they heard stories of legends swatting heroic home runs. Either way, they show up because of tradition — a decision in the past that they've continued to make again and again.

So America's love affair with baseball and baseball's love affair with the "let the old decision stand" mentality are what separate it from hockey and every other sport. It's the ancient traditions in baseball that foster both the beauty and the inhibitive rituals of the game. The coach wears a uniform (which is actually a wonderful tradition) because "that's the way we've always done it" and minor leaguers spend years wasting away, penniless, for the same reason.

Part of the romanticism of the game is that some kid can get pulled off the cornfield in his late teens, then work his way through the minors with no recognition before eventually breaking through to the stardom of the majors.

Because baseball is where hard work is rewarded. Baseball is the democratic sport. Baseball is where your Average Joe can be a hero.

Or at least that's what he tells himself.

### **The Dust of Magic**

The sky blossomed like blazing flowers on a mid-summer evening on the Chesapeake. The lush green of the field at Ripken Stadium awakened a youthful freedom in me — a remembering, of some sort. I took a seat in foul territory near right field, enjoying a mid-game break from my laundry duties. I don't know exactly when this was and, to be honest, I don't think it matters: it could've been any

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time at any minor league game across America.

Ripcord and Ferrous, the mascots, danced on the dugouts and children smiled from their seats, begging for their attention — a high-five, a wave, anything. The IronBirds first baseman threw lazy ground balls to his infielders. They scooped them up with ease and lobbed them over to his mitt, which he lazily flicked out of the air with hardly a glance. The pitcher threw his final warm-up pitch, a strike, and the catcher hopped up and threw to the right side of second base.

And everything was right from there — the sun was setting, the breeze was light, and the heat of summer had lifted for the day. I was surrounded by pointing fathers, young couples laughing, cold beer, hot dogs, Cracker Jacks, and the palpable hope for a foul ball or even a wink from one of the three-hour gods on the field.

I sat, quietly amazed by the team's uniforms of all things. I couldn't spot a single stain on any of them. Just as the thought crossed my mind, the batter sliced a fastball high over my head and the faces around me all turned to watch it fly toward the clubhouse. They had eager looks in their eyes, as if the ball might take a lucky bounce off the green clubhouse roof and ricochet some 200-odd feet back to

them. No such luck.

To my surprise, I found myself wishing for a foul ball. I realized, on a logical level, that I had access to hundreds of the exact same baseballs in my equipment closet. I could just walk back there and grab one if I wanted it so bad. But this wasn't a logical desire — it was baseball. And my dream for the day was to grab a foul. The pearls in my equipment closet were just baseballs, but these — these had dust of magic on them: they had been blessed by touching the field of play in a professional baseball game. Alas, just like always, a foul never came my way.

I couldn't get over their jerseys. I'd spent hours scrubbing them after every game, seemingly to no avail. But from that vantage point, up in the stands, their uniforms looked as white as the last flashes of dying stars.

**Greg Larson is an author and ghostwriter from Austin, Texas.**

**This article is based on his memoir *Clubbie: Two Seasons with Baseball's Broken Dreamers*, for which he is actively seeking agent representation.**

**If you'd like to read the manuscript, complete at 77,000 words, reach out to him at [thegreglarson@gmail.com](mailto:thegreglarson@gmail.com).**

## Beating the Bushes



A publication of the Society for American Baseball Research  
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## RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Are you interested in minor league research but not sure what to do?

The **SABR Baseball Biography Project** is a collection of biographies written by SABR members. While concentrating on major league players, studies of career minor leaguers are encouraged as well. If there is a player you'd like to work on, consult the biographies posted on the BioProject Committee's website ([bioproj.sabr.org](http://bioproj.sabr.org)) and see if one has already been written. If not, contact Rory Costello ([rcostello@nyc.rr.com](mailto:rcostello@nyc.rr.com)) to join the committee.

But the BioProject isn't just limited to writing stories about players. You could also write an article about a ballpark, minor league umpire, manager, or owner, or other participant.

Or, you could write a [game story](#) about an interesting or unusual minor league game. Game stories are less involved than biographies, and are a good way of "getting your feet wet".

There's no shortage of topics that could be explored.