

THE SQUIBBER

June 2023

The Squibber is the SABR Bob Davids Chapter's newsletter. It is emailed to chapter members roughly every three months. If you're a Bob Davids Chapter member and are not getting the Squibber, please check that your email address and chapter affiliations listed on the SABR site are correct. Please send submissions for future editions to Squibber editor Walt Cherniak at wcherniakjr@aol.com.

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TRIVIA QUESTION: Ryan Zimmerman (1,799) played the most games of any player in Expos-Nationals franchise history. It also is the most games by a player who spent his entire career with the Nationals. Who has appeared in the SECOND-most games for the Nationals without ever playing for another MLB team? (See answer below).

SAVE THE DATE: Chapter Minor League Game Coming Up

The Bob Davids SABR chapter will hold its annual minor league game on Saturday, July 22 at 6:35PM when the Bowie Baysox host the Harrisburg Senators in a matchup of the Double-A teams for the local Nationals and Orioles franchises.

This should be a good game featuring players we hope to be seeing soon in Nationals Park and Camden Yards. Plus, it's Hawaiian Shirt and Fireworks Night!

Keep an eye out for more details about costs and how to reserve your spot. But in the meantime, Save The Date!

D.C. GRAYS GAME RECAP: SABR Helps Pack the Park, By Mark Pattison

It was a couple of years ago. "More than a couple of years," corrected Washington Times sports columnist and D.C. Grays board member Thom Loverro.

He was referring to his invite to the Bob Davids Chapter to take in a Grays game. He got all of two people. Well, in 2023, let the record show that the chapter quadrupled that turnout for a June 17 home contest at the Washington Nationals' Youth Baseball Academy against Fairfax County's finest, the South County Braves -- not to mention the beloved SABR custom of a pregame Q-and-A.

Sitting in for the interviews were Loverro, Grays founder-president-board chair Mike Barbera, and Grays catcher Parker Goff.

Barbera was expansive yet detailed as he was telling the Grays' story.

Major League Baseball had instituted the RBI (Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities) program well before the Nationals crossed the Canadian border from Montreal. Barbera said D.C.'s RBI program ran in fits and starts. "It was an all-volunteer operation," he said, run principally by parents. But as their own children "aged out" -- got too old or too distracted to play youth baseball -- RBI would lay fallow until another cohort of parents stepped in.

Some members of the D.C. Council had insisted on MLB, at that time the owners of the Expos, committing to building a youth baseball facility if it wanted to see a \$600 million commitment from the District to build a stadium for the new home team. The Lerner family, the buyers and still owners of the Nats, built the facility in Ward 7 in the early 2010s.

There are four RBI programs in D.C.: the Youth Baseball Academy in Ward 7; one in neighboring, and similarly distressed economically, Ward 8; and two in wealthier sections of D.C. About 200 boys and girls get instruction and experience playing.

The total budget for all of this is roughly \$200,000 a year. That includes \$13,000 for facilities rental from the Nats, which Barbera said is "the highest in the (Cal Ripken Collegiate) league. "And each year," he added, "we ask, 'How are we going to raise the money THIS year?'"

Cue Loverro, who arranged with Shelly's Back Room, a downtown eatery on Eye St. NW, to host an annual "Cigars and Curveballs" fundraiser each spring before the CRCBL gets under way. The evening at Shelly's nets about \$20,000.

The Grays' front office depends on finding enough host families to give players a room, food and access to a washing machine to clean their clothes and uniforms. Most of the families live in the suburbs, as do most of the fans coming to games; despite free admission and parking, the Grays aren't a draw in their own neighborhood. If not enough host families sign up, "then we've got to buy housing for them," most likely college dorm rooms, Barbera said.

Fifteen or so years ago, you could watch some CRCBL action and see maybe one Black player in uniform on either bench. "Today, everybody wants Black players," Barbera said, adding that the demise of Howard University's baseball program makes that job all the tougher.

However, the Grays have benefited from having the sons of former major leaguers Jeff Kent and Dusty Baker grace their roster. And Dusty's son, Darren, now in Triple-A ball in the Nats' system, may turn out to be the first Grays alumnus to break into the majors, Barbera predicted.

To acquire future potential big leaguers, the Grays depend on player recommendations from colleges' assistant baseball coaches. "The head coach doesn't get involved in that," Barbera said. And if an assistant coach moves from one school to another the team follows the coach. One caveat, according to Barbera: "You don't want to be fighting with another team in your league for the same players from a school."

The Grays have a good working relationship with an assistant coach at Brigham Young University. That coach tends to offer players who have a good chance of being BYU starters the next season. Enter Parker Goff. A Utah native, he hasn't stepped much off his native soil except for family vacations. His time with the Grays is his first extended time on his own.

Goff had caught the 4-6 Grays' win the night before: a complete-game shutout with no walks and fewer than 100 pitches thrown by Eddie Kaftan from Mitchell College, a Division III school in New London,

Conn. ("There's no way that kid should be playing D-3 ball" Barbera said.) Since Kaftan wasn't going to pitch the day after his start, they used him and a Grays staffer to sell raffle tickets, including as many tickets as could be stretched across Kaftan's wingspan for \$50 for a chance to win a \$50 gift card from Chick-fil-a.

Goff wasn't slated to play, either. But he took advantage of the day off to change his walk-up music. His original tune was "A King Is Born" by Aloe Blacc. "But I wanted to change it up to something more summery," he told the SABR assemblage, who made up more than 15 percent of the game attendance of 60 (as counted in the fifth inning). The trouble was, he couldn't remember the name of the song. It was, though, something by Sade.

As the Grays built a 6-2 lead over South County, things seemed to be in control. But the Braves stormed back for five runs in the top of the seventh inning to take a 7-6 lead. It got to the point that Evan Bouldin, listed as an infielder on the Grays' roster and the team's DH for the game, pitched the final 2.1 innings -- even though there are 18 pitchers on D.C.'s roster.

With two on and one out in the bottom of the ninth, Goff got into the on-deck circle to pinch-hit. Would we hear and identify the mystery song? Alas, no. The Gray at the plate bounced into a game-ending double play.

MYTHS OF BASEBALL: True or False?, By Charles Pavitt

This is the 18th in a series of Squibber contributions intended to report the truth (as far as present data suggests) of the tidbits of "conventional wisdom" that TV analysts and comparable pundits make without any true knowledge about their validity. This is the third of these installments on a single issue; in this case, postseason play.

Myth #52: Pitchers have the upper hand in the postseason.

This might well be true. Russell Carleton, based on 1993 to 2011 play, noted that when compared to the regular season, postseason play resulted in relatively more strikeouts at the expense of all types of batted balls except homers. Some of this may be due to the better pitchers receiving a larger proportion of postseason innings, but even so, some of the measures seem to reflect pitchers' seasonal performance more than batters', again including strikeouts but also singles and (doubles plus triples).

In other words, pitchers seem to have relatively more impact than batters during the postseason. In addition, the postseason saw an increase in ground-ball rate at the expense of fly balls, with pitchers again seeming to be more responsible. Three True Outcomes batters tended to be an exception, hitting more homers and walking more often in the postseason than previously.

Myth #53: Teams suffer a postseason penalty for having to survive the Wild Card game.

Russell Carleton did a quick-and-dirty estimate of this issue. Given the assumptions that (1) a team will use its ace pitcher in that game results in a disadvantage in pitcher matchups such that it will have to use its No. 2 pitcher twice in a five-game series rather than the ace; (2) the fact that the division winner being faced has the home field advantage; and (3) that the division winner gets a day of rest that the wild card winner does not, Russell estimated that the "Wild Card penalty" is probably worth something in the order of 4 percent of odds of winning beyond any discrepancy in team talent across the two teams.

Myth #54: The National League has an advantage over the American League in the World Series because their pitchers' added experience as hitters matters in games played in the N.L. team's park.

Ray Ciccolella looked at relevant data from 1976 to 2005 World Series games and uncovered some evidence in support of this myth. N.L. pitchers as hitters produced an average of 1.57 runs created per game whereas A.L. pitchers contributed only 0.96.

However, the same logic applies to designated hitters in games played in the A.L. team's park, and again there is supportive evidence. A.L. DHs produced 4.72 runs per game versus 4.28 for the N.L. Combined, the A.L. ends up advantaged; 4.51 runs produced per game versus 4.32. That translates to only 0.15 runs per game, so it is far from decisive.

Ray also noted the same tendency in the regular season, with N.L. pitchers (.146 BA, .351 OPS) outperforming A. L. pitchers (.122 BA, .299 OPS) and A.L. DHs (.268 BA, .801 OPS) outdueling N.L. DHs (.256 BA, .748 OPS). This comparison was a bit unfair, as the data for A.L. pitchers and N.L. DHs come from interleague games whereas data for their counterparts came from all games (a bad research move; I would have restricted the comparison to interleague play).

1949 SENATORS SET A RECORD, WINNING NINE IN A ROW: They Still Finished Last, By Andrew Sharp

Until 1949, no Washington team since Clark Griffith's arrival in 1912 had ever lost 100 or more games. Managed by Joe Kuhel, that year's Senators finished at 50-104, despite being in fourth place, a game over .500 on June 12.

In May, the team set the record for consecutive wins by a team that would end up in last place in the eight-team American League. The 49ers reeled off nine wins in a row, beginning in Chicago on May 3. Washington won, 14-12, in 10 innings. On May 1, after losing both ends of a double header in Philadelphia, the Nats had been in last place with a 3-11 record.

Washington fans were so giddy at the team's sudden turnaround that a crowd greeted the team as it returned to Union Station after the winning streak. The players were paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue with an estimated 10,000 people on hand. A photo of Kuhel hoisted on the shoulders of admirers appeared in *The Sporting News*.

Before divisional-play began in 1969, the only other team to finish last but win nine in a row was the 1907 St. Louis Cardinals.

The Nats were 18-10 in May, and by June 3 Washington had climbed to five games over .500 at 24-19 – in second place, 5.5 games out of first. As late as June 21, Washington had won as many games as it had lost (29-29).

Soon, the bottom fell out. The Nats went 5-23 in July and 6-25 in August. Starting by being swept in a July 4 double header, Washington lost 42 of 50 games through Aug. 27, the day the Nats fell into the cellar. That stretch included a pair of 11-game losing streaks (July 16-26 and August 12-21) and a seven-game skid (August 1-7).

The rest of the way, the Nats were 8-21. A loss at home to the Yankees in the second game of a Sept. 23 double header was No. 100.

A weak pitching staff and a thin bench helped doom the 1949 team. The mound staff's ERA was 5.10, next to last in the league. Appendix surgery limited Walt Masterson, counted on for the starting rotation, to 10 games. Third baseman Eddie Yost, having his second solid season, missed 30 games with an ankle sprain. No adequate replacement was available. The outfield lacked punch. Griffith, in a fit of anger, dumped lefty starter Mickey Haefner. Future Hall of Famer Early Wynn had been traded to Cleveland in the off-season.

The second-half collapse marked the end of Kuhel's two dreadful years managing the Senators. He was the seventh former Nats player Griffith had hired as the field boss, and the least successful. His team lost 97 games in 1948, avoiding last place only because the White Sox lost 101.

Griffith brought back Bucky Harris for his third tenure in D.C. in 1950. The Nats won 17 more games and climbed to fifth place. Harris managed the last Senators' team to finish over .500 (78-76) in 1952, but Washington again lost 100+ games and finished last in 1955 under Charlie Dressen. Griffith died that October.

BUDDYING UP FOR A NATS-TIGERS TREAT, By Mark Pattison and Todd Miller

In a time when people can still be a bit skittish about meeting in person, the Bob Davids Chapter buddied up with the D.C.-founded Mayo Smith Society, now a nationwide Detroit Tigers fan club, for a joint luncheon and game outing May 20 when the Tigers were in town to play the Washington Nationals.

And in the switch-it-up department, rather than same-old, same-old catering inside Nats Park, not to mention the room charge, participants went instead to the Union Pub, a mile and a half from the ballpark but just a couple of blocks from Union Station. And the menu was a welcome change of pace, including sliders, mini corn dogs and fried cheese curds. (If you've never had them, think of what the Iowa State Fair does with cottage cheese. Yum!)

Of course, it wouldn't be a Bob Davids Chapter outing if it didn't have guest speakers. One of those invited guests was Stephen Borelli, the editor of USA Today Sports weekly. He addressed a variety of topics, including the merits of "tanking" or the philosophy of a team deliberately losing to obtain high draft picks to build a winner.

It's a strategy that the Cubs and Astros used successfully en route to World Series championships in recent years, and one that many chapter members believe the home team is using with no end in sight given issues related to the Lerner family trying to sell the team. Further complicating the situation is a protracted court battle with the Baltimore Orioles over the value of television rights on the Orioles-owned MASN.

Borelli's feeling, shared by many Nats fans in the room, is that a year of glory, such as the Nats winning the World Series in 2019, is not worth multiple years of futility. Better to build a strong farm system that feeds a steady stream of talent to the major league club than to operate in cycles of peaks and valleys.

Borelli shared audio clips of an interview he did with Ernie Harwell in the Tigers' dugout at Camden Yards in 2001 before a Tigers-Orioles game. Harwell related that he enjoys being around the ballpark

after more than 50 years of broadcasting because it gives him a chance to be around his friends. Asked whether the game could survive the large contract that Alex Rodriguez had just received, Harwell replied that baseball's best quality is its resilience. Steve used much of the content from that interview in an appreciation he wrote when Harwell passed away nearly a decade later.

A New York-area native who moved with his family to the Washington area as a teenager and played baseball at Bethesda's Walt Whitman High, Borelli wrote a book about legendary announcer Mel Allen titled *How About That! The Life of Mel Allen*.

Also speaking at the luncheon was Sam Menzin, VP and assistant general manager of the Tigers. While he addressed many topics about the game and the team on an off-the-record basis, Menzin gave his thumbs-up to the rules changes that took effect his season. "They're fantastic," he said. With games a half-hour shorter than last year, Menzin added, "I will probably save 40 hours (from being at the ballpark) so I can actually have a social life."

Menzin also deftly handled a clumsy not-a-question comment from a chapter member. We won't get into the gist of the exchange, but Menzin may have won himself some Tigers fans at the pub. And if not fandom, then some serious consideration of the Tigers as their "second team."

While the luncheon speakers gave much food for thought, the Tigers-Nationals game was much less satisfying as the Nats spotted Detroit an early 2-0 lead thanks to a Spencer Torkelson home run, but came back over the course of the game to claim a 5-2 victory over the visiting team.

TRIVIA ANSWER: Victor Robles, who through June 19 has played in 515 games, all with Washington, is second to Zimmerman on the list.