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Old-time baseball delights players, fans in Smithtown

By Alyssa Melillo

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A player on Smithtown's Atlantic Base Ball Club team waits for a pitch. Photo by Alyssa

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Times of Smithtown

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As the air warms and flowers begin to bloom, everyone knows that spring has arrived — and so has baseball season.

That includes the Atlantic Base Ball Club, a team that adds a historic twist to America's favorite pastime, re-enacting the baseball played by the 19th century Brooklyn Athletics.



A Flemington Neshanock lobs one in to a Smithtown batter. Photo by Alyssa Melillo

The Athletics are part of the Mid-Atlantic Vintage Base Ball League, a group of teams that play the sport as it was back in the 1800s. The Athletics kicked off its seven-month-long season on Saturday at its home field on the grounds of the Smithtown Historical Society property. The team is

celebrating 150 years since the original Brooklyn Athletics played its first undefeated season in 1864, nine years after forming in 1855.

On Saturday, the present-day Athletics, founded in 1997, hosted long-time rivals Flemington Neshanock and the Elizabeth Resolutes, both from New Jersey. The Smithtown-based team's game against Flemington ended with a win for the Athletics, at 26-1, but it faced a 12-7 loss against Elizabeth. The

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Atlantics will host Elizabeth again on June 1 and play a game to honor one of the founders of the present-day Smithtown team, Al "Old Dutch" Dieckmann.

The vintage baseball community takes pride in its homage to the old days of the game, many describing it as more of a "gentleman's game" rather than a battle between the pitcher and batter.

"The rules of baseball haven't always been the same," said Kevin "Flash" Harrison, a member of the Smithtown Atlantics. "Today's a power-hitting game. The game back then was about who played the best defense."



A Flemingington batter swings for the ball. Photo by Alyssa Melillo

Vintage baseball players wear baggy pants tucked into their knee-high socks, pitch underhand, and hit a softer ball with heavier bats. Men of all ages, even some in their 60s and 70s, contribute. They are allowed eight balls instead of four while batting and can get a player out after catching the ball on one bounce, all done without wearing any baseball gloves.

"The whole experience ... gives it a real feel," said Dean "Dreambucket" Emma, a member of the Atlantics and the acting field captain for opening day. It's "like you're back in the 1800s."

Spectators also enjoy watching the old-fashioned game. Players hit high-flying

pop-ups and hard line-drives, many caught with their opponents' bare hands, plays that prompt loud cheers from the crowd. For some, vintage baseball adds a fun spin to their favorite sport. And for others, it's a piece of history acted out right before their eyes.

"When you watch a vintage game, it's more engaging for the spectator," said Neshama Marcus of Highland Park, N.J., whose husband, Dan, plays on the Resolutes. Marcus watched the game with the young daughter and explained the ins and outs to her while comparing it with modern baseball.



Smithtown Atlantic players and Flemingington players share a bench during the game. Photo by Alyssa Melillo

Although the competition was heavy on the field, at the end of a long day, all three teams put it aside and enjoyed food and beers at the Pleasant Inn in St. James, who sponsored the games that day.

While team captain Ed "Pigtail" Elmoro thinks a championship

tournament is a long shot, he said playing vintage baseball is more about the experience rather than the competition. "It's a lot more fun. That's the big thing."

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 by Andrea Moore Paldy

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