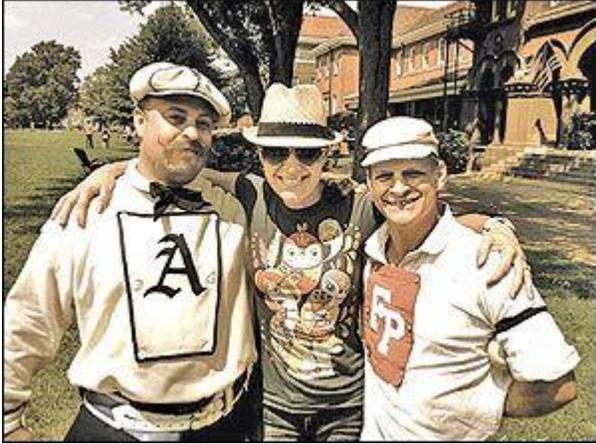


Vintage baseball enthusiasts gather in Philadelphia



Scott Alberts Marisa Stevens and Brian Lynch of the Talbot Fairplays. Photo: G.G.

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For the Weekly Press*

"If you build it they will come," so goes the oft-repeated catch phrase. And so come they did, this past weekend, on August 20th and 21st to the Naval Yard, to see the first-ever vintage "baseball match" and exhibition in Philadelphia, replete with more than a dozen teams in the North Eastern seaboard, 1860s rules, period uniforms, baseballs and spirit.

"The beauty of this is it's not highly competitive. In the era, it was based on gentlemanly play," said Brian Lynch of the Talbot Fairplays from Easton, MD. Sporting a spiffy handlebar moustache and period correct uniform complete with metal buttons styled to the era, and hand-sewn team insignia, this second baseman/batter went on to brandish an authentic 19th century-issue/style handmade base ball made of an Indian rubber core with extra seams, and wrapped with yarn, explaining that at the end of a match the winning team would get the ball painted gold as a trophy with the dates and scores engraved. He went on to explain that most base ball players [the modern term baseball as we know it, was originally coined from what was essentially a ball game that had designated bases which were made of canvas, no pitcher's mound, and a 'home plate' that was made out of a round metal disc] were "mundanely dressed as they didn't have enough money for uniforms, so you played in your work pants."

Having noticed the gloveless players and how possibly painful that must've been, a player for the Athletic Base Ball Club of Philadelphia was keen to let me know that they played with an underhand pitch and didn't really know of the potential injuries. What a kinder and gentler time it must have been!

But while most players in the era during the waning years of the Civil War were soldiers drawn to the game "to pass the time", (thus coining yet, another byword: the pastime) in the lull between battles, Lynch, like quite a few of his fellow vintage ball players ran into it by accident through their local Historical Society which started it in Maryland six years ago.

"I started the ball rolling," piped Philadelphia Base Ball Club President and Athletics Captain, Scott Albert, of his role in bringing back an enthusiasm for 19th Century baseball, by organizing the Mid-Atlantic Base Ball League match in his home field. "I'm overwhelmed at the successful turnout. It's going to be an annual event," Alberts added. In a fit of nostalgia I offered to sign-up as a woman player in their co-ed team and

wondered out loud if I needed to wear my bloomers. "As long as you can throw a ball, catch it and bat it, " said Albert.

"We threw it all together in a few weeks," revealed Eric Berley, half of the Berley Brothers duo of The Franklin Fountain, one of the chief sponsors of the event. "We're doing it to bring back history and have fun, and it's nice to be competitive."

Indeed the expansive Naval Yard Marine Parade Ground provided ample space for an exhibition of three simultaneous matches of the more than a dozen teams that played for two days from 10 a.m. to about 4 in the afternoon. "It's a great space for celebrating the nostalgia of baseball," chimed Marisa Stevens, a fashionable spectator charmed by the vintage look and feel of the event: "I love vintage anything!"

"We're basically grown men playing a kid's game," Lynch adds. [The vintage league average in age is between early to mid-30s, while he says one player is 77 years old and has played minor league baseball when Hank Aaron was playing.] Modern baseball he goes on to explain evolved from a child's game which existed called Rounders and Town Ball which grew into a community event. It had no bases but had four sticks instead. In the 1870s there was a brief experimentation with base ball bats that had a flat end much like ones used for cricket. The game had evolved after all from a time when there was such a popularity for all things British.

Much more than the look and the feel of the game has changed: the rules have too, and usually by Committee consensus. "That's insane. Tomfoolery!," Lynch exclaims, following a play on the infield by the Mutual Base Ball Club of New York and the Talbot Fairplays. ["This is actually the pre-historic Dodgers," remarked Glenn Stevens with his wife, Marisa while watching from a distance.] "Think about the dynamics of catching and tagging without a glove, Lynch continued. "There was only one umpire called an arbiter. You could catch the ball on a bounce, called the one bound rule. In territory it was fair play. That's an ethical issue. Sometimes it was what the arbiter deemed was a hittable pitch. It's what was true to the era, you know, the rules changed ever so often so basically what happened back then was a Committee would meet once or twice a year. Teams in Ohio won't even know about the new rules until months, even years later."

Still, what ensued that day was good, clean fun. From the excited shouts from the dugouts, refreshingly nostalgic fountain treats from The Franklin Fountain, The Khyber Pass Pub and other delights from the concession stands, serving East Coast oysters, fresh fruit and historical ice creams & sorbets, and old-fashioned root beer, soda waters, historic Mountain Valley spring waters and chilled local beers upon draught to whet that whistle to the pitch-perfect Olde Timey rendition of "I Dream of Jeannie" by a member of the Philadelphia Athletics to regale spectators under a shady tree. Jeannette Brugger, (wife of team player Jamie Ford) wore fashionable 19th century muslin over a hoop skirt and paraded their mascot, a happy large brown dog wearing the team's colors, to cheer her husband's team on, in good form. And to add more than a dollop of authenticity to the event, "Living History" Civil War Navy re-enactor Michael Comfort strode around showing his love of maritime history as befits the Naval Yard venue, in canvas and

leather naval-issue shoes, wide-legged pants and a anchor insignia cambric shirt with all the accoutrements of the period, including a straw boater and a small hand-stitched bag worn around the neck. Fittingly, Comfort was at a dinner in The Union League where he was tipped off by Franklin Fountain's Eric Berley of the event, but so impressed was he by the vintage match and exhibition: "Even baseball at this level is so unusual."

Two days. Thirteen teams. Baseball Clubs from all points of the East Coast: from New York to Virginia and Central Pennsylvania (Mechanicsburg). On the Athletic Base Ball Club of Philadelphia's website(<http://phillyvintagebaseball.org/>) [this is back to the 21st century after all, I have to remind myself!], it reads: Each Club is a "re-formed" team that played from the 1860s forward – when "amateur" meant exceptionally fine play drawing crowds of 20,000+ for Clubs like the Brooklyn Atlantics, the Athletic Base Ball Club of Philadelphia. That weekend matches (1860s speak for 'games') begin at 10am – authentic uniforms, bats, balls, no gloves, play by 1864 rules, with 6-Clubs playing (three simultaneous 1.5-hour Matches) on the Parade Grounds at any given time. Refreshments, food and drink (provided by Khyber Pass Pub and Franklin Fountain) and interesting mid-19th century attractions share the green. Period-style items raffled each day. And this interesting tidbit: "Gents brave enough to grow-out their facial hair the next 30-days can schedule an appointment with a mid-19th century barber for fashionable sideburns, handlebar moustache a plus."

But I think this says it all : "Come down to the Navy Yard -- see Clubs who last pitched and fielded 140-years ago."

In the field of dreams, dreams do come true on this 19th century playing field.

For more information about this and vintage base ball please go to: www.VBBA.org

<http://weeklypress.com/vintage-baseball-enthusiasts-gather-in-philadelphia-p2677-1.htm>