

LONG ISLAND

PLAY BALL!

1864-STYLE

BY AISHA AL-MUSLIM

aisha.al-muslim@newsday.com

The crowd was small and the uniforms strange, but for baseball purists it was bliss.

With the clock turned all the way back to 1864, the Brooklyn Atlantics, Flemington Neshnock and New York Gothams returned to the field.

Once again, players caught balls with their bare hands and pitchers threw underhand yesterday in a vintage "base ball" exhibition at the Smithtown Historical Society.

About 30 people watched the teams face off for three matches, faithfully played by 19th century rules.

Players ranging in age from their 20s to 50s wore reproduction uniforms, with long trousers, shield shirts and soft cloth hats.

"We are not professionals, but we have fun," said Frank "Shakespeare" Van Zant, 50, of Long Beach.

"We re-create the game of baseball to teach people how the game used to be played," said Van Zant, an English teacher who plays for the Atlantics.

"It is baseball in its infancy."

Vintage base ball has been enjoying a revival, with more than 200 teams now competing across the country. They play weekly in a season that stretches from April to November.

"Ballists," as they're called, play without gloves and use custom-made balls and traditional wooden bats. Pitchers are only allowed to throw in an underhand or sidearm motion.

"I have always had a love for baseball and history," said Brad "Brooklyn" Shaw, 57, of Flemington, N.J., who put the Neshnock together in 2001 and still captains the team.

The teams that played yesterday are based on old-time base ball clubs.

In the exhibition, the Atlantics defeated the Neshnock in the first game, but the Gothams beat both the Atlantics and the Neshnock in the last two matches.

"This is way cool," said Andrea Garone, 59, of Northport, who watched the games for the first time. She was especially taken by the bonds between players.

"I love that they have a camaraderie that . . . [spans] ages," she said.



A batter for the Brooklyn Atlantics in action during opening day of vintage base ball in Smithtown.

PHOTO BY ED BETZ

In North Amityville, support for Martin family