

Hometown Hardball: Local Baseball Heroes Went to Big Cities Bring Back Both Pride and Scandal

By Jim Johnson

Before national league franchises, big-screen television, or \$1 million commercials, there was hometown hardball. And, for thirty years, baseball was golden.

From the closing decade of the 19th century to the Roaring '20s, baseball exploded into full-fledged status as America's pastime, spreading across the countryside like a wildfire. This was an era before big money and super stardom separated baseball players from the ordinary folk, a time when fans sat on benches to watch the game and uniforms were homemade. Many players, including pros and semi-pros took jobs in the off season to supplement their income. Barnstorming—traveling across the country and playing exhibition games—was common.

In 1910, there were hometown teams in every city, town and village. Occasionally, small town teams, stocked with local heroes and hired pros, competed with much larger cities. According to local historian Geoff Dunn, who has written extensively on baseball's past, the big city—small town rivalries made the game more intimate.

"There wasn't the separation between the pros and the other teams that there is now," Dunn said. "The minor leagues and the semi-pro teams were just as important [as the major leagues] in this whole Americana that was going on."

Baseball With A Small Town Fever

A century ago, when baseball teams were sprouting like saw grass across the nation, Santa Cruz County sported its share of local teams. Aptos, Soquel, Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Felton and Ben Lomond all had their own semi-pro squads.

While the teams were organized, few belonged to formally ordered leagues. The teams scheduled games with neighboring teams, often on Sunday.

"Basically, that's how all small town teams were across the country," Dunn said.

Aptos' town team in the early 1900s featured such players as Lloyd Haines, D.L. Maguire, George Traités, Bud Parks and Willie Baughauser.

The Soquel Giants, also known as the Grover Gulch Wildcats, played in a ballpark located about where the Soquel High softball fields are today. The Giants were known as a rugged lot, made up of mainly loggers and ranch hands.

The Giants featured players like Paul Johnston, the famous Hall of Famer Harry Hooper (who played for the Giants in the off season before, during and after his major league career), and the infamous Hal Chase, who grew up in the rough environment of his father's saw mill in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Soquel.

Hooper, who played on several World Series championship teams with the Boston Red Sox, and Chase, who played for the New York Yankees, were two of several local baseball stars to enjoy a professional baseball career.

Others included Edward and Charley Daubenbiss of the pioneer Soquel family who played with Santa Cruz's first professional baseball team (the Beachcombers), and Frank Arellanes, a Santa Cruz native who played with the Beachcombers before being picked up by the Boston Red Sox.

Santa Cruz Goes Pro

During the late 19th and early 20th century, Santa Cruz enjoyed status as one of the most popular resort destinations in California. Santa Cruz featured a casino, a boardwalk and one of the finest beaches in the state. In addition, despite the fact that the population was no more than 5,600 townfolk, Santa Cruz was a popular convention locale, hosting the 1906 Republican Convention.

With the introduction of a railway to town, many leading citizens thought Santa Cruz might continue to grow. Fred Swanton was one of those big dreamers and liked baseball.

When Swanton decided to enter his semi-pro team—the Beachcombers—in the Pacific States League (later the Pacific Coast League) in 1898, no one looked askance. Indeed, there were entries from such small towns as Watsonville and Fresno in addition to teams from San Francisco, Stockton, Oakland and San Jose.

Playing in Dolphin Park, which was located across from the Casino where the old Casa Del Rey Hotel used to be, the Beachcombers became known as one of the better teams in the league. And, the team's players became famous.

There was the pitcher-catcher team of Ed and Charley Daubenbiss, of Soquel. Wild Bill Devereaux was also known as "Red" or "Brick" because of his red hair. "Turkey" Mike Donlin went on to the major leagues. Louis "Cannonball" Balsz, Abe Arellanes, George "Chief" Borchers and Jules Streib were also on the team.

By the end of the season, the Beachcombers would finish second in the league with a 23-17 record.

Santa Cruz was a quick, high average team at bat and leaned on a deep pitching staff. Arellanes won the league's batting title with a .348 average and led the league with nine triples. Balsz and Borchers both finished with .300-plus batting averages. Streib led the league in stolen bases with 23, and Santa Cruz led the league with 111 stolen bases.

Outlaw Players



Photo of the Aptos Ballteam, 1903.

Top row: Castro, unidentified, Lloyd Haines, D. L. Maguire, Castro, unidentified.

Bottom row: George Traités, unidentified, Bud Parks, Willie Baughauser.

The building in the background is the Bayview Hotel.

Though the Pacific League generally tried to assume the appearance of propriety, some rules were winked at. While other so-called "outlaw leagues" tacitly allowed players under contract with other leagues to play, many PCL teams also used illegal players from the major leagues or other minor leagues.

Santa Cruz dropped into last place in 1899, finishing 35-49 despite the best efforts of Streib, Donlin and Balsz.

More importantly, Santa Cruz was one of the teams from smaller towns whose light attendance figures meant the league suffered at the box office and the bank. Fresno and Stockton had been dropped before the 1899 season due to a lack of fan support, and San Jose and Watsonville couldn't even make it to the end of the 1899 season.

Though Santa Cruz finished the season and management hinted that it wanted to return in 1900, the Beachcombers would have a short life in the semi-pro league.

Devereaux, Streib, Donlin, Borchers, Balsz and Whalen all continued to excel in the minor leagues, only with teams other than Santa Cruz. Other local stars such as Hooper, Chase and Abe Arellanes' brother Frank would waltz through the minor leagues on their way to the big show—the major leagues.

Hooper, who played a short stint with the Sacramento Senators in 1908, is the only Hall of Famer to begin his career in the California League. Though Hooper stuck with the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago White Sox after a short stint with the Sacramento Senators, Chase came back to play several times during salary or disciplinary disputes with the New York Yankees.

In 1908, Santa Cruz was awarded a membership in the fledgling California State League, another outlaw league. Still owned by Swanton but renamed the Sandcrabs and playing at Casino Park, Santa Cruz was led by player-manager Devereaux. Frank Arellanes decided to join his hometown team for the 1908 season, but left for San Jose halfway through the season and was sold to the Boston Red Sox the following year, as was Hooper. An aging Louis Balsz came back to play with Santa Cruz in 1908, and other notable players included Joe Collins, Jimmy Shinn, George Haley and Sylvester Loucks.

In 1909, the Sandcrabs were one of the top teams and won 17 straight, a CSL record, at one point. In second place midway through the season, Santa Cruz was dropped unceremoniously from the league after team owner Swanton announced his retirement from the game because "the season has not been profitable."

Santa Cruz had an outside shot at another minor league franchise in 1913 when a team called the Dreadnaughts were looking for a home. But the 'Naughts chose smaller Watsonville because fans wouldn't be distracted by the amusement park and other beach attractions in the resort community of Santa Cruz.

Nearly two decades later, Santa Cruz finally got one more chance, Swanton again agreed to sponsor a minor league team. This time, the team was named the Padres and sported ex-major leaguers like Hooper and former Yankee Ping Bodie.

Sources

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