



The 1907 Santa Cruz Beachcombers finished second in the California championship tournament. Devereaux is in back row at far left.

BRICK AT BAT

William Devereaux was the pride of early Santa Cruz baseball

By Geoffrey Dunn

During the Golden Age of baseball in Santa Cruz County, from the 1890s into the first volleys of World War I, no other player quite captured the imagination of local fans — or “cranks,” as they were popularly known — as the fire-haired William “Bill” Devereaux, whose professional career was to span nearly a quarter-century.

Certainly, no other player was bestowed with so many colorful nicknames. A scan of the era’s sports pages reveals a virtual panoply of appellations for Devereaux, including “Mad Dog,” “Red Dog,” “Brick,” “Farmer,” “Cappun,” “Wild Bill,” “Ol’ Brick,” and various combinations thereof. And in due candor, that does not quite cover them all.

Out-of-town scribes from San Francisco to Seattle offered up far less favorable descriptions of the hard-playing, rough-and-tumble Oakland native, who was not afraid to throw a body block into runners attempting to take an extra base. San Francisco Examiner sports writer Joe Corbett, the younger brother of heavyweight boxing champion “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, once declared that Devereaux “looks for all the world like a large-sized bottle of Tabasco sauce.”

But the locals loved him. With his trademark handlebar mustache, “Red Dog” was known to walk along the hometown bleachers just across from the Boardwalk, waving his cap and yelling at the top of his lungs to exhort the local partisans. And his play was always first-rate.

“Cappun Brick Devereaux carried off the fielding honors,” noted one account in the Santa Cruz Sentinel. “His handling of lawn mowers and slow hit balls bordered on the phenomenal.” Another declared that “Devereaux loomed up like a rockbound coast on a foggy night.” Although not the best regional player during the era, he ranked near the top in virtually every season he played. In his 20s, he excelled as a pitcher, then shifted to first base and finally to third, where he became a skilled defensive player, while consistently being among the best hitters and base runners in the game. He also became a superb field captain and, later, a manager.

One astute baseball analyst noted that Devereaux was shifted to an everyday player because he “was too clever a base runner and too nifty a hitter and too speedy an infielder to give his time to curving.”

Born in 1871 to immigrant parents from France and Ireland, Devereaux came of age with the burgeoning national game. By the time he was 18, he was playing sandlot ball throughout the Bay Area. At 21, he joined his first semi-professional team, the Oakland Piedmonts, then journeyed to Lincoln, Neb., but returned soon, homesick for the more temperate climate of California. Upon his return, Devereaux accepted an offer to join a fledgling band of ball-players in Santa Cruz as a pitcher.

Baseball proved to be the perfect vehicle for marketing the Santa Cruz beachfront as a vacation destination to tourists from the sweltering inland valleys. The first significant Santa Cruz semi-professional team was formed by William Ely, founder of the first Santa Cruz electric trolley line. Dubbed Ely's Electrics, they played their games at the western end of Ely's streetcar run, near Woodrow Avenue overlooking West Cliff Drive.

By mid-decade, the Ely's were replaced by a series of professional and semi-professional teams owned and operated by famed waterfront promoter Fred Swanton. The teams — alternately known as the Dolphins, Beachcombers and Sand Crabs — played their games at Dolphin Field, located directly across from Swanton's Neptune Casino (site of the present-day Seaside Company parking lot), often to crowds of 2,000 or more.

The Santa Cruz team quickly became among the best in California. Devereaux pitched Santa Cruz to the state amateur championship in July of 1895, with a 3-2 victory over the San Francisco Olympics. He also delivered a key hit.

Two years later, the Santa Cruz Beachcombers, with Devereaux as their captain, nearly won the San Francisco Examiner's statewide championship, finishing second among 54 teams. The exciting run to the finale captivated the local community, and when Santa Cruz lost to the California Markets 8-4 before some 5,000 fans in San Francisco, several hundred local supporters had made their way to the city by train.

By then, Devereaux had become one of the premier players in the state. He was fourth in batting during the tournament, with a .392 average (44 hits in 112 at bats), and was also the leader in runs scored and stolen bases.

The following year, when Swanton decided to enter the Beachcombers into the fully professional Pacific States League (a precursor of the Pacific Coast League) in 1898, no one looked askance. By the end of the season, the Beachcombers would finish second in the league with a 23-17 record.

Santa Cruz dropped into last place the next year, finishing 35-49 despite the best efforts of Devereaux and Company. Gate receipts were down, and by the following year, Santa Cruz dropped out of the league.

After nearly a decade of playing baseball in Santa Cruz, where Devereaux also served as a fireman, the famed "Red Dog" signed with Sacramento, where he played the following two seasons, then returned home to Oakland in 1902, where he captained the "Acorns" to the California League championship.

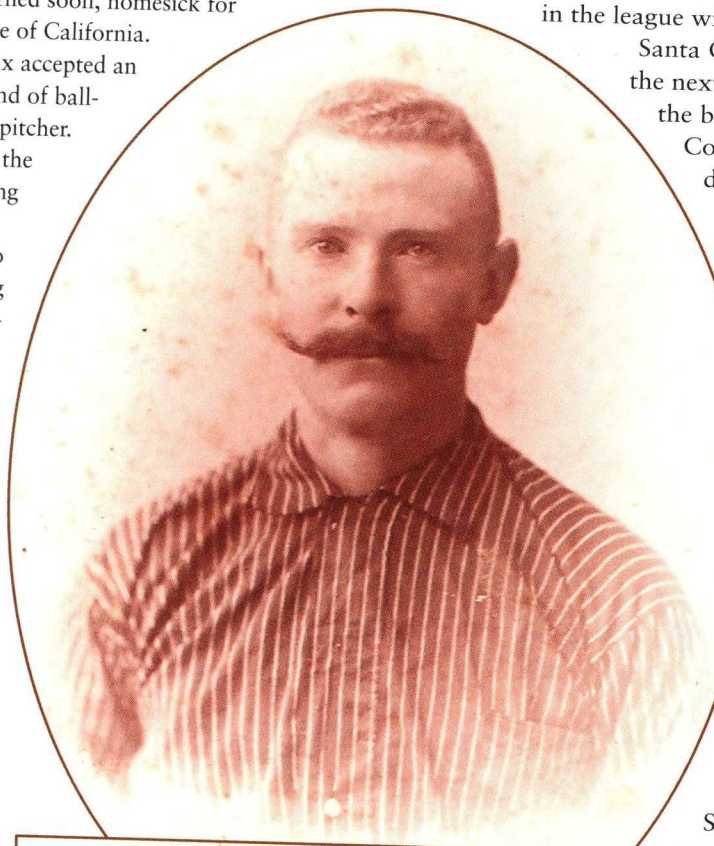
In 1908, Swanton lured him back again to Santa Cruz to manage the Sand Crabs in the newly formed California State League.

"Brick is one of the best jolliers in the league," the Santa Cruz Surf noted. "Instead of removing a player when they

make a mistake, he admonishes them to cheer up and put the next man out."

At the age of 37, Devereaux finished in the top 10 in hitting, with a .313 average, and was asked to join a group of West Coast players who toured Honolulu, Japan and China. Devereaux was brought up to the Pacific Coast League mid-way through the 1909 campaign. He banded about the lower minor leagues after that, playing for Sacramento, Bakersfield, Salt Lake City, Vallejo, Watsonville, and finally, in Calgary, before hanging up his cleats at the age of 43.

Returning to Oakland, he found work at the Standard Oil Company, and played semi-pro baseball for the company team until 1920, when he was nearly 50. When he died at 86, in January of 1958, he was remembered by the Oakland Tribune as "one of the most congenial and best liked players in the history of (California) baseball." ■



Devereaux P

William "Red Dog" Devereaux,
on the state champion Santa Cruz Dolphins, circa 1895