

Out on the Bound:

Vintage Base Ball Comes to East Tennessee

*By Adam H. Alfrey**



On Sunday, July 14, 2013, in the shadow of the Tennessee State Capitol, in one square of the Bicentennial Mall's urban oasis, approximately 24 men stood in a line on a simple but precisely laid out baseball field. A dozen of them donned crisp, maroon-and-white uniforms emblazoned with an Olde English "N" for the Nashville Maroons. The other dozen players for the Franklin Farriers wore gray striped shirts with black workman's britches held in place by leather suspenders. Of note, a goodly portion of both sides showcased amazing feats of facial hair. One by one, they introduced themselves: Mama's Boy! Hooligan! Meatball! Skeeter! Roadblock! Cornbread! Patches! Books! Any other day, they were carpenters, architects, state park rangers, medical professionals, educators, and librarians. On this day, they were 1864 baseball players, and they were really good at it.

On that summer day, my wife, daughter, and I were in Nashville to take in the current exhibitions at the Frist Art Museum and the Tennessee State Museum. Jeff Wells, interpreter-extraordinaire at Tennessee State Parks and a longtime programmatic partner with the East Tennessee History Center, encouraged us to drop by the Bicentennial Mall and take in the scene. From a public history standpoint, when one is invited to a Civil War-era living history event, assumptions are made—sides will be taken, battles will be recreated (or discussed) only to come to their foreknown conclusion, hardtack will be hocked, and, at some point, the gravity of the issues that faced divided peoples will begin to trouble one's spirit. Although sides were

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taken on this day, the scene my family walked into was unique and negated common assumptions about historical reenactments and living history events. Couples, some wearing their antebellum best, picnicked along the baselines, cheering gloveless catches between tasty morsels. A group of vintage cyclists who steered their Penny Farthings beyond the outfield and a pair of instrument pickers behind home plate added enough late nineteenth century atmosphere to aid in the willing suspension of disbelief. The baseball players themselves truly enjoyed the interpretive opportunities of the spectacle. They shared the rules and customs of the national pastime in its historical form with the audience, as much as the pageantry and suspense wrought by the competitive game allowed.



Jeff "Skeeter" Wells, founding board member of the Tennessee Association of Vintage Base Ball and ballist for the Franklin Farriers and later the Stewarts Creek Scouts vintage base ball clubs, ca. 2015.

Of course, the genius of vintage "base ball" (two words, a nod to baseball's common spelling during the nineteenth century) had been known in pockets of New England and the Midwest for some time. Even comedian Conan O'Brien was aware of it, trying his hand at "old-timey baseball" at Old Bethpage Village Restoration in New York for a bit on his late-night television show in 2004. The amateur sport finally made its way south in 2012, thanks to Michael "Roadblock" Thurmon. After becoming impassioned at a vintage match of the St. Louis Perfectos in Missouri, Thurmon returned to Nashville and joined forces with a kindred spirit, Trapper "Mama's Boy" Haskins. Together, they recruited 30 players, formed the Nashville Maroons and the Franklin Farriers vintage base ball clubs, picked nicknames, and in 2013 set out to play a full season either in downtown Nashville or at the Carnton historic home near Franklin.

I do not remember which club won the match that we watched that summer's day; what lingered, however, was the event's potential as a public history program. The event represented an opportunity to interpret the mid-1800s through the lenses of sport and society by way of a highly-accessible and highly-participatory didactic activity. Jeff "Skeeter" Wells, who played for the inaugural Farriers, came to



*Members of the Knoxville Holstons Vintage Base Ball Club in front of Historic Ramsey House. Pictured are: Sour Mash, Grapeshot, Augie, String Bean, Biscuit, Butter Bean, Lil Skeeter, The Kid (front row, left to right); Gasser, Freight Train, Cannonball, Doc (middle row, left to right); Lefty, Molasses, Stove Pipe, Hawkeye, Spike (back row, left to right).
Photograph by Dan MacDonald, March 11, 2015.*

a similar conclusion, and as an experienced state parks interpreter, he helped guide the mission of the fledgling Tennessee Association of Vintage Base Ball (TAOVBB) toward education.

During the summer of 2013, the Maroons and Farriers played each other 11 times, and the ballists (players) craved different competitors. At the end of the season, the TAOVBB set out to expand the number teams from across the state. Wells recruited me—and the East Tennessee History Center’s network of “historyphiles”—to help with the TAOVBB’s expansion into the Knoxville market in 2014. Two teams formed in Chattanooga and four more organized in Middle Tennessee. By 2015, the TAOVBB included a dozen teams.

Much credit for early success and growth of the league goes to the TAOVBB’s first board of directors—Michael “Roadblock” Thurmon, Trapper “Mama’s Boy” Haskins, Jeff “Skeeter” Wells, Timothy “Meatball” Morgan, Justin “Patches” Brown, and Christopher “Books” Ryland. They had the foresight to instill principles into the league that guided not only its growth but ensured high standards for historical interpretation. For example, historical evidence always informs the naming of clubs and their uniforms (e.g., the Holstons and the Emmett Machinists are based on clubs that existed in Knoxville during the late 1860s). However, when historical practices

are discriminatory to race, gender, age, or ability, they are set aside in favor of inclusivity and accessibility. TAOVBB players cover all of the costs, ensuring matches are free and open to the public; competition, while necessary, is never emphasized over interpretation or community outreach; and decorum of the players trumps all.

Beginning in late 2013, a rogue band of East Tennessee misfits gathered in breweries and on empty fields in Knoxville and Harriman to replace our modern understanding of the national pastime with a historical one. We formed two clubs, the Dry Town Boys of Roane County and the Knoxville Holstons. In 2015, the “prohibitionists” were retooled as the Emmett Machinists of Knoxville. The Historic Ramsey House, just east of downtown Knoxville, became the permanent home grounds for both clubs. Placemaking, creating deeper, meaningful ties to a community’s past, should be at the heart of good public history, and hosting matches at historic sites or in concert with historic events has been integral to TAOVBB’s longevity and influence. It has been an award-winning model for mutually beneficial programming and marketing. The teams have also recorded some unforgettable experiences beyond playing the game, including riding the Three Rivers Rambler to matches alongside our fans, being invited to be a part of the state’s programming for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, and snagging on-the-bound balls down the sloping hill of Rocky Mount State Historic Site and in the nestled fields of Cades Cove in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Vintage base ball is an approachable subject, instantly recognizable as baseball yet just enough different to prompt curiosity, and East Tennesseans have welcomed it in several ways. As the previous essay explained, nineteenth century players did not have gloves and fielded bare-handed. Thus, the team on the field could record an out by either catching a flyball or on one bounce. Plus, each player wears a historic uniform matching the style and material of the nineteenth century. Every minor league baseball team in East Tennessee has included vintage base ball as an on-field program. Local news reporters, bloggers, photographers, and national television programs have drawn attention to the growth of the historic sport in East Tennessee. Further, the publicity for the league served as the catalyst for scholarly discussions and increased grassroots research, especially by members of the Society for American Baseball Research.

In 2022, the TAOVBB celebrated its 10th anniversary. One wonders if the popularity of vintage base ball will wax or wane. Will

Scenes from a Knoxville Holstons vintage base ball match against the Highland Rim Distillers at Historic Ramsey House in August 2014. Photographs by David Luttrell, August 10, 2014.

Nips of the Highland Rim Distillers and Molasses of the Knoxville Holstons conduct a bat toss—a game of chance—to determine the home team as Butter Bean, also of the Knoxville Holstons, awaits the outcome (left); Molasses, a founding member of the Knoxville Holstons (right).



Freight Train of the Knoxville Holstons takes a swing at “the dish,” or home plate (left); Gingerbread of the Highland Rim Distillers delivers a pitch (right).



The Kid takes a “gentlemanly” lead from first sack, or base (left); Dutch watches the action in the field from the club’s bench (right).



Grapeshot, a founding member of the Knoxville Holstons (left); President Abraham Lincoln and his son exit the field after throwing out the first pitch (right).

vintage base ball, like early baseball in Knoxville, become a short-lived “mania” or “fever” that flowed then ebbed in popularity for a time? I, personally, would like to think not. Baseball is still at the heart of the American community. A few blocks away from where I am penning this aside, construction is underway on a stadium that will restore baseball to Knoxville’s urban center. Our love affair with baseball is not over, and if you want to experience its passion in its purest form, at the heart of its community, head out to Historic Ramsey House next summer. Doc, Sour Mash, Hawkeye, Colonel, Biscuit, or anyone on the bench will be happy to orient you to the past. Just be sure to stick around for the end of the match and take a few swings with the Holstons or Machinists. Stepping across the baseline is as close to stepping into 1864 as you will ever come.



*Ballists from the Knoxville Holstons and the Emmett Machinists vintage base ball clubs engage in an arm wrestling match in front of Historic Ramsey House.
Photograph by Chuck Cooper, April 2019.*