

The London Twilight Baseball League of 1976

Joe Gray ★ 28 May 2009

This article has been written for Project Cobb (the Project for the Chronicling of British Baseball).

In April of 1973, an American honeymooner named Jeff Archer landed in Britain with his wife Ann, unaware of the path that a copy of *Time Out* was about to send him down. The issue contained an article advertising baseball in South London, which was something that the honeymooner could not resist finding out more about: Archer was a baseball addict.

Archer has written about his introduction to British baseball in the opening chapter of his 1995 book *Strike Four: Adventures in European Baseball* (available here: <http://www.white-boucke.com/strikefour.html#>), a highly amusing account that contains many subtle observations that hold true today.

In short, having turned up as a spectator at the Croydon Bluejays' field (he had turned his attention from playing to coaching at the age of 20 owing to persistent soreness in his pitching arm, coupled with a leg injury he sustained after being hit by a car), Archer made the same mistake as many of his countrymen have done in admitting to being able to pitch, and was thrust onto the mound. He pitched the Bluejays to a 2–1 win. Before his honeymoon was over, Archer also had the pleasure of a rain-out that was not called until everybody was at the field, despite the weather clearly rendering baseball unplayable. His short introduction ended on a happier note, though, as he starred with the bat in a British classic, a 16–15 victory.

Two years later, Archer returned to England as a UK sales representative for an American sporting goods company. He filled a managerial vacancy at the Crawley Giants for the 1975 season and the following year became President of the Southern Baseball League. As President, Archer formed and



Figure 1. Jeff Archer pitching in his British debut at Rosehill in 1973, wearing the clothes he turned up in as a spectator.

ran a new team – Kensington Spirit of '76 (see Figure 2) – and also set up a baseball competition called the London Twilight Baseball League, taking the lead in what was a joint project with umpire Hank Chmielewski.

Archer came to Britain with experience of running summer leagues in the US, as well as a tendency for innovation. For instance, in 1969, he became the first player in Newport, Rhode Island, to



Figure 2. Spirit of '76, pictured in 1977 in an away game against the Wiesbaden Eagles, defending US Army European champions.

have an aluminium bat confiscated during a game. These bats were not available for distribution at the time, but he had managed to convince the owner of a sports shop to sell him a prototype.

The August 1976 issue of *Baseball Mercury* (http://www.gbbsa.org.uk/mercury/issue_13.pdf) described the Twilight League as follows:

“the most exciting venture to be launched in Southern England since World War II [...] and [...] the first time that a league programme will be played on a [floodlit] ground in England, although the occasional game has been played under lights, for instance National League All-Stars v. London Mormon Elders in 1966.”

The article also complimented the state of the Southern Baseball League under Archer’s very active presidency:

“[T]he existing Southern Baseball League shows a much more attractive competition due to the formation of four new clubs during the past winter. The new clubs are well-uniformed, and the umpiring situation had improved, adding greatly to the enjoyment of games for players and spectators alike.”

The story of the league

The details of the Twilight League provided below are drawn from multiple sources:

- 1 chapter 4 from *Strike Four*, which is supplemented by correspondence with Jeff Archer;
- 2 the aforementioned issue of *Baseball Mercury*;
- 3 an interview with Dave Ward, who was a player in the league;
- 4 and an interview with Dennis Newman, a keen spectator, who also supplied me with scoresheets and a schedule list.

The creation

Several important decisions were made early on in the planning process, including opting for a night league and proposing to combine existing Southern Baseball League teams to ensure a high calibre of baseball. Once the initial plans had been agreed on by the teams, the next step was to find a suitable

ground. After being led down a number of dead-ends (including by the owner of a greyhound track, who failed to mention on the phone that the grass area was only 100 feet by 50 feet), the ground of Rosslyn Park Rugby Club was settled on as the venue.

It was also decided that players would receive free meals before games, equipment and umpires would be paid for by the league, and the winning and losing sides would both be given a portion of the gate fees (15% and 10%, respectively). The last main task before the league got started was to gain publicity.

The competition

The four competing teams were the Essex Green Sox, the Surrey Braves, the US Navy, and Archer’s Kensington Spirit of ’76. Games were scheduled on Wednesdays and Fridays each week, starting at 19.00 and with the last inning commencing no later than 21.45 (Mondays were available as rain-dates). The league was set to run from Friday 30 July through to Wednesday 8 September, with the top two teams advancing to the championship game on Friday 10 September.

Game 1: Surrey Braves 13–7 Essex Green Sox

The league started with a victory for the Braves in an error-strewn game that was nevertheless well enjoyed by the spectators. The game ended after the bottom of the seventh.

Game 2: US Navy 2–3 Kensington Spirit of ’76

Archer’s team was to make its first Twilight League appearance in this game, but the manager was not looking forward to the occasion as much as he might have otherwise been, because of a new Spirit of ’76 player, Ben McGrath. In just a few weeks with the club, McGrath had revealed an erratic and untameable temper on the field. Archer was close to kicking McGrath off the team, but a combination of solid playing skills and commendable off-the-field efforts persuaded the manager to let him stay.

Archer spoke to McGrath before the game and was assured that he was going to get good behaviour out of his player, and he did – for the first four innings. After that, a US Navy player voiced an insult in the Kensington player’s direction, which led to a torrent of obscenities and a need to physically restrain the angered McGrath.



Figure 3. In *Strike Four*, this image is accompanied by the caption: “Ben McGrath, in one of his more sedate moments.”

The game resumed once the irate fielder (pictured in Figure 3 in a photo taken in Balboa Park, San Diego, for the publication of *Strike Four*) regained his composure, and Spirit of '76 crossed the plate twice in the sixth inning to cancel out 2 US Navy runs in the fifth. There were no more scores in the next two-and-a-half frames, bringing Archer's team to the plate in the bottom of the ninth needing 1 run to win.

The youngster Shaun Ward led off the inning with a base on balls and was then advanced home after a series of walks from the US Navy's relief pitcher, to get Archer's outfit off to a perfect start.

But Archer still had the worry of how the British public were going to have received the outburst from the volatile McGrath. Fearing the worst, Archer loaded his pockets with free game passes, food vouchers, and cash, and was prepared to appease the fans using any means necessary. But the volatile player was not to be the cause of angry complaints; instead, Archer emerged from the clubhouse to find McGrath at the centre of a crowd of adoring fans. The feelings were summed up by one spectator who

informed Archer that “he'd never seen such dedication in a player of any sport in all [his] life.”

Archer did not have the same worry again, not because he was now convinced that the spectators would be accepting of any antics that might be displayed, but instead owing to McGrath's departure to Germany to take up a college place in Munich.

Game 3: Essex Green Sox 2–9 US Navy

By the time the Green Sox plated their first runs of the game in the sixth inning, the US Navy already had 5 runs in the scorebook, aided by a 2-run homer in the second. The Navy then scored 4 more runs without a further Essex tally to ease to their first victory of the competition; the Green Sox amassed just three hits in the nine-inning game.

Game 4: Kensington Spirit of '76 13–10 Surrey Braves

Spirit of '76 batted around in the top of the first inning, plating 4 runs; however, Surrey scored 9 runs to Kensington's 1 through the remainder of the first three innings to open up a lead. Archer's team hit back with 2 runs in the top of the fourth to halve the deficit, but the Braves responded with a solo home run in the bottom half of that frame. The fifth inning saw Kensington tie the game at 10–10, and the score remained like that at the end of the sixth inning.

As they had did in their opening game against the US Navy, Spirit of '76 broke the tie decisively late in the contest, with back-to-back hits with two outs in the seventh driving in the last 3 runs to be scored in the eight-inning contest. The Braves did come to the plate with the heart of their order due to bat in the bottom of the eighth, but the side was retired in order.

After four games, Spirit of '76 had a half-game lead over Surrey and the US Navy, while Essex sat a further half-game back at the foot of the table.

Game 5: Surrey Braves 8–7 US Navy

Surrey held a 5–1 lead going into the bottom of the fifth, but the Navy side responded with 3 runs in each of the next two innings to sandwich a lone Braves score in the top of sixth, giving them a 7–6 lead.

There was to be time for one more inning. The Braves did what they needed to in the top half by scoring 2 runs to regain the lead. The game then

ended dramatically with the Navy's number-seven hitter striking out with two outs and the bases loaded.

Three of Surrey's runs were scored from the lead-off spot by Simon Mundy, one of Kensington's regular players. Mundy was not alone in playing for more than one team in the competition, though. It was a trick that Archer had to use many times to keep the league functioning in the face of unreliable player interest. The Twilight League had good fan support but insufficient dedication from many of the players, which is the reverse of what Archer had experienced in the US with newly formed leagues.

Game 6: Kensington Spirit of '76 12–6 Essex Green Sox

The Green Sox team, which included Jeremy Kilby, Brad Thompson, and Pete Binns, were comfortably defeated by a strong Kensington side. Al Brown started on the mound for Spirit of '76 and the Swindon-born southpaw Gary Charles came in to close the game. Charles, who was aged 16, had been clocked at over 80 miles per hour. Randy Cooper, Kensington's catcher, hit the nine-inning contest's only home run.

Game 7: Kensington Spirit of '76 13–3 Surrey Braves

Spirit of '76, who were a game ahead of the second-place Braves going into this match on Friday 20 August, made it to double digits in runs for their third straight game. Arthur Bloomfield, Surrey's third baseman, scored two of the losing side's 3 runs.

The win gave Spirit of '76 a two-game lead in the standings (see Table 1), but an event that occurred during the contest rendered this development meaningless as it led to the game being the London Twilight Baseball League's last.

The disbandment

Following an argument between a player and an umpire in the game above, the player grabbed the official's shirt and the official responded by punching the player in head. While the game was played to a conclusion, the on-field fracas was not the end of the dispute, as Archer explains in *Strike Four*:

“After the game, the player ambushed the umpire in the clubhouse and other participants joined in. Punches were thrown and the melee

began to gain momentum, but a few of us jumped in and split up the combatants.”

Archer's willingness to accept an incident of this nature was greatly reduced by the lack of dedication to the league that many of the players had shown.

Included with a letter confirming the league's disbandment – sent by Archer to managers, players, umpires, and all fans for whom he had contact details – was another note, which announced the resignation of the President of the Southern Baseball League.

A player's perspective

As a London-based player in 1976, Dave Ward looks back at that whole season as one of his highlights of British baseball. He felt that the Sunday league was very good that year, with Spirit of '76 being a stand-out team, and that this was complemented well by the contrasting experience of playing at night in front of a large crowd, with the buzz that that generated.

Ward would leave work early to get to the games, and despite having to fight through rush-hour traffic he still really enjoyed the experience, especially once he adjusted to the slightly uneven playing surface and the rugby floodlights, which were not ideal for fielders trying to track high fly-balls.

Ward was very disappointed when the Twilight League came to an end, as he knew he was going to greatly miss the experience of being there. With the great players, the loud enthusiastic crowds, and the smell of hot dogs all combining to create a memorable atmosphere, it was something very special for him. In addition, he saw it as a genuine showcase for baseball in Britain that grew baseball's exposure by a considerable amount and that given more time would have led to a much-increased interest for the sport in the country.

Team	Wins	Losses
Kensington Spirit of '76	4	0
Surrey Braves	2	2
US Navy	1	2
Essex Green Sox	0	3

Table 1. The London Twilight Baseball League standings at the time of disbandment.

Ward says that a similar idea could in theory work today, but that it would be dependent on a large effort from the British Baseball Federation and the baseball community.

A fan's perspective

For Dennis Newman, a regular attendee in 1976 of games in both the Twilight League and the Sunday league, the former offered more entertainment since the All-Star nature of the competing teams ensured a noticeably higher standard of baseball. Working as a postman, and therefore getting his working hours out of the way relatively early in the day, Newman had no difficulty in getting to the ground on time for what he described as a very well-organized event.

For Newman, the crowd were knowledgeable and noisy, with the cheers for the players (and jeers for the umpires) seemingly amplified under the roof of the stand, which ran along the third-base line.

Newman also recalls tracking where high flies were hit by watching the fielders move into place rather than attempting to follow a hit ball on a trajectory that would take it out of the floodlights' coverage.

Like Ward, Newman is not certain that a venture like this could succeed at present, but he cites a different reason: the difficulties inherent in the current financial climate.

Lessons for baseball in Britain today

The use of a single facility

One of the main features of the Twilight League was the use of a single facility. If resources are limited, then it makes sense to pool them to focus on making a mutually convenient location as good as possible for playing baseball and watching baseball. In addition, it makes it easier for fans to return week after week, if they are always going to a familiar venue.

In Archer's league, the use of a rugby stadium provided a very good venue for spectators, a reasonable field for players, and acceptable lighting. Clearly, it would be better still to have a high-specification stadium built for baseball.

Purpose-built facilities exist in other European countries, including Austria, Belarus, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland,

Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Turkey, and Spain. In addition, the Swedish Baseball and Softball Federation is currently readying a new facility for the Baseball World Cup at an existing field in Örvallen, which will become the new home of the Sundbyberg Heat club side. As part of a refurbished multi-sport complex, the new baseball stadium will offer dimensions and specifications in accordance with international standards, including padded outfield walls and floodlighting. A grandstand will provide chair-back seating for over 500 spectators, while announcers, scorers, and media personnel will have dedicated facilities.

Great Britain is lagging behind many other European countries in its baseball facilities, but positive news did come at the start of April. With baseball and softball in Britain entering a new 4-year development cycle (2009–2013), BaseballSoftballUK announced that part-funding from the Government has been secured to develop four new dedicated facilities in this country. Work will start with identifying sites in different regions, seeking expert advice, and drawing up specifications. Completion of the facilities is expected towards the end of the new development cycle.

Playing baseball on weekdays

The other main lesson that the Twilight League serves is that there is no reason for baseball to be confined to a Sunday. Using more than one day in the week for baseball obviously opens up more opportunities for different competitions.

While there have been exhibition games played on weekdays (the GB Juniors took on the Croydon Pirates on a Wednesday evening several summers back, for instance), there does not appear to have been any effort after Archer's to use weekdays for organized club baseball. If a central venue with floodlights and comfortable conditions for spectators could be sourced, then there is no reason why a successful operation could not be established (although the caveats of the need for a large amount of work and the potential financial difficulties at present mentioned earlier should not be underestimated). It would have the potential to bring in a new and sizeable group of fans to British baseball.

As a final note, the success of such a project could well be dependent on the quality of training programmes to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of pitchers and, to a lesser extent, catchers to staff the British baseball league as well as a parallel competition, without the quality of either falling off noticeably.

What did Jeff Archer do after 1976?

The biographical details below are compiled from a combination of the pages of *Strike Four* and personal communication with the author.

1977

Spirit of '76 did not compete in a league in 1977 but instead played a series of fixtures against club sides in Europe as well as hosting a busy schedule of fixtures at Wasps Rugby Club. This schedule included a friendly against a team of rugby union all-stars that included the Welsh great Gareth Edwards. Towards the end of the season, the programme suffered a blow when Wasps decided that the pitch needed 6 weeks to recover for the rugby season, forcing the coming week's baseball to be played on a practice field outside of the stadium with no stands for spectators.

It would have been prohibitively expensive for Archer to rent stands, but he managed to find a less expensive alternative. Archer was put in touch with the recreational director of a US military base and learned that he was not the only person facing a problem. The recreational director explained:

"We have two sets of stands here right behind my office. They're not new, but they're in great shape. My problem is that the Little League baseball people and the youth soccer people both say they are theirs. I have to make a decision by Thursday and whatever way it goes, I'll end up with enemies. Now, for some reason, if they aren't here on Thursday, I'll be out of the woods. I'm not telling you what to do, but my building number is 647 and the bleachers are right behind. Again, I'm not suggesting anything, but if they're not here on Thursday, while I'll have a lot of upset people here, at least they can't blame me."

On the Tuesday, Archer rented a truck and sent two 17-year-old Americans to pick up the stands. By late afternoon, they arrived at the Wasps field, and were in just as good a condition as the recreational director had described. After being allowed to play on the practice field for a week, the baseball was again forced to relocate, so Archer shifted the schedule to West Ruislip. The stands came with him and were used not just for the remainder of the season, but for following 3 years too.

1978

In 1978, Archer's involvement in British baseball had a shift of direction, as Archer became president of the Southern Youth Baseball Association.

1979

For the 1979 season, Archer created the London Baseball League as an add-on to the Southern Youth Baseball Association, both of which were run independently from the governing body. The adult season took place after the youth season, all games were played at Ruislip, and teams were composed of a mixture of youth league volunteers, adults who were new to the sport, and some of the older youth league players.

In addition, 1979 saw Archer propose another innovative addition to the British baseball calendar. The idea began with a series of meetings between Archer and the UK director of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Archer's proposal was to field a team of outstanding ballplayers called the London Jesters that would combine high-quality baseball with comedy, borrowing the Harlem Globetrotters' mould. The London team would play home games at West Ruislip and road games all over Europe. Archer had lined up Colonel Sanders – the iconic US owner of Kentucky Fried Chicken, who was aged 98 at the time – to throw out the season's opening pitch.

The second part of the sponsorship was to include support for Germany's baseball *Bundesliga*. All the paperwork was set to be signed, but a development in Germany saw that the deal was never signed. A restaurant owner who had a number of Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in Germany decided to change the label of all his restaurants to Schultz Fried Chicken, after his name. Legally, there was nothing



Figure 4. Ben McGrath, demonstrating his careful preparations for a trip to the mound.

Kentucky Fried Chicken could do, which hit the company's plans for expansion. It pulled out of the baseball sponsorship deal, the now-redundant intention of which was to raise public awareness of the brand to support expansion.

1980

Realizing that what his southern baseball programme lacked was a higher level of baseball for the more talented participants to aspire to, Archer established the London Ducks in 1980 to serve as a super team made up of the best players from the different adult teams in the London Baseball League. The team was supplemented with a couple of US college players spending their summer in Britain, as well as Knute Westergren, a former Minor Leaguer who had moved from the US to London.

The Ducks' schedule consisted of 16 games in London followed by a trip to play sides in Belgium and Germany. In one of the games in Germany, the touring team took on the Frankfurt Giants, joint leaders of the *Bundesliga*, the country's top league. Archer's friend Ben McGrath took the mound for the

contest and pitched the Ducks to a 4–3 victory. McGrath's secret, according to Archer in *Strike Four*, was an hour-long pre-game routine, at the end of which there was "hardly a part of his uniform that was not concealing Vaseline, Ben Gay, or another slimy substance" (see Figure 4).

Following the Ducks' return to London, the team members all went their separate ways. The 1980 season was Archer's last year of British involvement.

1981

In 1981, Archer moved to The Netherlands and managed HCAW, a Bussum-based team that played in the Dutch top league, the *Hoofdklasse*. Archer planned improvements not just on the field but off it too. One project aimed at the latter was securing the services of Ben McGrath as a mascot to try to liven up the team's fans.

McGrath was playing for a team in Haarlem that competed during the week in a regional league. This meant that he was free for some weekend duties. As a mascot, McGrath wore a white bear costume (see Figure 5), and his antics ensured that the fans quickly became more lively. In one of his stunts, he used an injury break as an opportunity to take to the mound in full costume and throw some warm-up pitches.

His services were not just appreciated in baseball. The general manager of BC Markt, a basketball club in Utrecht, realized that his attendance was increasing with McGrath being a mascot at games. He decided to pay McGrath a guilder for every paying fan above a certain number.



Figure 5. Ben McGrath, dressed up as mascot for HCAW in the Dutch *Hoofdklasse*.

1982 and beyond

In 1982, Archer switched *Hoofdklasse* teams and became the manager of De Spartaan. After the end of the season, he moved back to the US to continue his career in journalism.

Today, Archer writes on politics, focusing on the Gulf conflict, as well as atheism in America.

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About Project Cobb

Project Cobb has been established to unify and publicize the various efforts to publish historical details on baseball played in Britain under modern rules. In addition, it serves to promote the preservation of British baseball history as it happens. Further details are available on the Project Cobb webpage: <http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/cobb.html>. If, after reading this article, you would like to share any historical information you have with Project Cobb or wish to become a collaborator, contact details can be found on the webpage.



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