In Nine Aces and a Joker, leading British baseball writers come together to provide an engaging tale of the sport's history in the country by focusing on standout pitchers' defining seasons. Beginning with John Reidenbach in 1890 and running through to Jason Roberts in 2010, nine "Ace" pitchers and a less conventional standout — the "Joker" — are put under the spotlight. In addition, several other star pitchers are featured in a short stories section.

Praise for What about the Villa?, Project COBB's first book:
A "dazzling accumulation of research" that demonstrates "superb scholarship" — Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game

In what is a truly international effort, contributing authors include Harvey Sahker (Ontario, Canada), Joanne Hulbert (Massachusetts, USA), Josh Chetwynd (Colorado, USA), Jeff Archer (California, USA), Mark George (Kent, UK), and Alan Smith (London, UK; Auckland, New Zealand). Additional research assistance was provided by Graham Rumble (Queensland, Australia), Colin Allan (East Yorkshire, UK), and Alan Smith (London, UK; Auckland, New Zealand).
Nine Aces and a Joker

Defining seasons from British baseball’s standout pitchers
NINE ACES

and a Joker

Defining seasons from British baseball’s standout pitchers

edited by Joe Gray

Fineleaf

PUBLISHED BY FINELEAF, ROSS-ON-WYE
www.fineleaf.co.uk
Contents

1 – Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
2 – John Reidenbach, Ace #1 ................................................................................................. 5
3 – Max “Lefty” Wilson, Ace #2 ............................................................................................ 17
4 – Ross Kendrick, Ace #3 ...................................................................................................... 27
5 – Wally O’Neil, Ace #4 ........................................................................................................ 37
6 – Alan Asquith, Ace #5 ........................................................................................................ 51
7 – Cody Cain, Ace #6 ............................................................................................................ 61
8 – Gavin Marshall, Ace #7 .................................................................................................... 73
9 – Brian Essery, Ace #8 ........................................................................................................ 81
10 – Jason Roberts, Ace #9 ..................................................................................................... 95
11 – Short stories ..................................................................................................................... 105
12 – Ben McGrath, the Joker .................................................................................................. 119
13 – Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... 133
To anyone who has toiled
on or off the field
in the name of British baseball
In a baseball game, pitchers can be viewed not only as the conductors, dictating the pace of the contest through the batons of their personal tempo, but also as the protagonists. They are the central characters, both in their location on the infield and in the fact that they alone touch the ball in every play. In Major League Baseball (which consists of the American League and the National League), starting pitchers typically appear in just one-fifth of a team’s contests (a five-man starting pitching rotation is standard), yet their contribution can still be of sufficient magnitude to gain Most Valuable Player honours. In 2011, for instance, Justin Verlander of the Detroit Tigers scooped the American League award. The reason that a starter only throws one game in five is that Major League Baseball is played almost every day during the spring and summer, and pitchers need time to recover from the exertions of releasing a hundred missiles at close to 100 miles per hour, not counting warm-up pitches and pick-off throws, in every outing.

In contrast, throughout much of Britain’s domestic baseball history, baseball has been confined to just 1 or 2 days a week. In leagues where sides play one nine-inning game each weekend, a team can, theoretically at least, survive with a single pitcher. In today’s British top-tier baseball (the National Baseball League), once-a-week seven-inning double-headers are the norm, and so two main pitchers can steer a team through an entire campaign. (Pitching restrictions written in league bylaws prevent a single player from throwing a complete double-header, even if physical capacity allowed for this.)

Another important distinction between Major League Baseball and the British league is that pitching is a specialized role in the former but one of several potential contributions the same player can make in the latter. In the States, pitchers in the National League are generally viewed as an easy out at the bottom of the line-up, and in the American League they are absent from the line-up altogether. Over in Britain’s National Baseball League, though, a player might pitch seven innings in the first game of the double-header and play a key fielding position such as shortstop or centre-field in the second game, while batting high up in the order in both contests.

Two major effects of these differences are as follows. Firstly, pitchers are almost always the most important players in British baseball. Secondly, the playing time...
Nine Aces and a Joker

that they accumulate in Britain comes much closer to that of their Major League counterparts than is the case for batters. For instance, the pitcher ranked highest in the National Baseball League based on innings pitched in 2010 accumulated just under 40% of the total amassed by the Major League Baseball leader, while for the standard measure of overall playing time for batters (plate appearances) the equivalent figure was less than 15%. This means that the milestones that players in Britain can rack up are more impressive – at least on a Major League scale – for pitching than for batting, and also that the pitching statistics posted are less prone to drifting from a player’s true ability as a result of chance.

There is at least one other significant impact of the scheduling difference, and this was an idea raised to me by Josh Chetwynd, one of the invited authors for this book, when we were having a discussion on pitching in British baseball several years back. In Major League Baseball’s postseason the schedule is less intense than in the regular season, with more gaps between games, and thus a pitching rotation will typically undergo contraction (to allow the best pitchers to maximize their playing time). In Britain, however, the postseason generally brings a more demanding schedule than is faced in the regular season, with teams often playing three or more contests on the final weekend. Thus, teams are often forced to find new arms to expand their staff. As a result, management of the pitching staff is often the most fascinating tactical aspect of the British postseason.

Following the thread from the above argument that within the British baseball set-up a good pitcher is generally more instrumental than a good hitter in a team’s prospects of winning, this book brings together the stories of some of British history’s star hurlers in a defining season. There is one chapter each for nine aces, another chapter for a less conventional standout (the “Joker”), and a further chapter for a bundle of short stories. Together, they represent the second book produced by Project COBB (the Project for the Chronicling of British Baseball; www.projectcobb.org.uk).

In selecting subjects, the luxury of having a complete statistical record to work off was absent. Moreover, it would have been a totally overwhelming task to attempt to assemble such a record from which to make the fairest possible selection of players. Instead, the limited resource for piecing together individual seasons (namely, research time) was assigned using a mixture of existing knowledge and informed guess-work. Other elements that had a bearing were the known availability of a detailed account for a crucial game in which a pitcher appeared – often a national final – and the breadth and quality of coverage that existed in the newspapers published in a player’s local area. While the process may thus seem to have been at the mercy of certain random factors, it is important to note that periods of high-volume press coverage of baseball often coincided with the appearance of star pitchers (as was the case in the pro leagues of 1890 and the
Introduction

1930s). Furthermore, the inclusion of a chapter of shorter stories, for which a wealth of source materials was not a prerequisite, goes some way to removing any imbalances in representation that this may have caused. Finally, if this book is well received within the British baseball community, this may provide the motivation to research the less accessible stories from history, perhaps with a view to releasing those within a follow-up volume.

The stories of some of the featured pitchers have already been told in print (Max Wilson, for instance, is one of many subjects in Harvey Sahker’s *Blokes of Summer*), but in the present work greater detail and a sharper focus is the remit. Other pitchers have all but slipped out of the British baseball community’s collective memory. Alan Asquith, whose wonderful 1968 season earns a chapter, is a good example. Frank Petrucci, a Canadian-born star from the late 1940s, is another (the tale of his 1948 season is told in the short stories chapter).

The range of years chosen spans 1890 to 2010, with most key periods for the British game represented by at least one season. As such, the work as a whole could be seen to provide an overview of Britain’s baseball history. While this will by no means be comprehensive or even systematic, what is offered is a dip into different pools of the game’s past.

The aim within each of the single-pitcher chapters is to tell the story in as engaging and enlightening a fashion as possible, without getting too bogged down with statistical details. As part of the research undertaken, however, a reasonably complete record of statistics was collected. These details, along with some photographs and other artefacts, are presented within a dedicated online appendix for each chapter. If and when any further details emerge after publication, they can simply be added to the relevant appendix without having to produce a new version of the book.

It is probably clear from this interest in telling stories and capturing statistical details that the emphasis of the book is on chronicling British baseball history rather than attempting to draw out any social inferences from within it. Any deeper themes presented within chapters result more from the skill of the invited authors than the will of the editor. And any cross-chapter themes that exist have resulted through good fortune rather than any crafting or foresight. But no apologies are made for that. Despite efforts over the past two decades to repair the historical record – notably, the books *Strike Four, British Baseball and the West Ham Club, What about the Villa?* (the first Project COBB book), and the aforementioned *Blokes of Summer* – there is much work that still needs to be done before British baseball historians and chroniclers can feel that even the most basic of elements are all in place.

The compiling of this work proved to be a truly international effort. Brief biographical details of the invited authors, in chronological order of their subjects,
Nine Aces and a Joker

are as follows. Harvey Sahker, author of The Blokes of Summer, has been a freelance sportswriter since the late 1980s. He played baseball in England from 1988 to 2000 and during his years in the country did extensive research into the history of British baseball. Harvey returned to his native Canada in late 2000 but continues his research from his home in Ontario. Joanne Hulbert, who is based in Massachusetts, in the United States, is a member of the Boston chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research. Josh Chetwynd is co-author of British Baseball and the West Ham Club. He represented Great Britain in international competition from 1996 to 2006 and played in Britain’s top domestic league between 2002 and 2009. Josh was also a baseball analyst on the British TV channel Five between 2002 and 2008. Since 2010, he has served as the expert analyst on a baseball programme on BBC Radio, a role he performs from his Colorado home in the United States. Jeff Archer, another writer from the United States, is the author of Strike Four. This is a book about his experiences in European baseball from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, which included administrative roles in Britain and team management in the top tier of the Dutch league. He lives in California. Mark George, who lives in Kent, England, is a newcomer to writing on British baseball history. A professional journalist, Mark is also a keen student of the Major and Minor Leagues, which made him well suited to the Gavin Marshall assignment. He not only wrote a chapter but also assisted with research on Ross Kendrick. Matt Smith, like Mark, is a relative newcomer to British baseball history, but he is an accomplished writer on modern baseball in Britain. He spends much of his spare time filling the roles of Editor and Chief Writer on his BaseballGB website and is based in Cambridgeshire, England. In addition to writing on two of the aces, he provided research assistance for the chapters on Max Wilson and Ross Kendrick.

Finally, three other helpers for the project served by providing research assistance: Colin Allan, a retired history teacher with an interest in minority sports, including baseball, who lives in East Yorkshire, England; Graham Rumble, who played baseball in Hull in the 1960s and who now lives in Queensland, Australia; and Alan Smith, whose baseball career is the subject of one the short stories, and who now splits his time between Auckland, New Zealand, and London, England.

Thanks go to each of the authors and researchers for their commitment of time, effort, and talent to this book. No-one is lining their pockets as a result of it. If a profit is turned by the publisher, this money will be donated in full to a baseball-related charity. We are not marketing the book based on its charitable intent, though, as we hope that the finished offering is fully deserving of readers in its own right. ♠
In 1890, during what was almost certainly the first year of formal structured domestic baseball in Britain, a Cleveland-based metal moulder named John Reidenbach was brought over from the United States to ply his trade in a Derby ironworks and pitch for the company’s baseball nine. He excelled from the pitcher’s box but soon found himself at the centre of a story that became the feature of the league to live longest in the memory.
Nine Aces and a Joker

BACKGROUND

In March 1890, John Reidenbach was working as a metal moulder in Cleveland, Ohio. That month, a letter arrived at his foundry asking for a couple of men who would be willing to transfer to a malleable castings factory in England to ply their trade while also playing for the ironworks’ recreational baseball nine. The letter had been sent by the Derby industrialist Francis Ley, who had developed a passion for baseball during a visit to his industry partners in Ohio in the summer of 1888. Ley wrote in the *Lancashire Evening Post* that he found baseball to be a better fit for the businessman’s calendar than cricket was:

> Fond as most of us are of cricket, business men cannot afford time to dawdle about on a cricket field watching a game spread over three days. Cricket is a game for people with plenty of leisure time, but we want a game that we can see disposed of in two hours.

Derby were to be one of four teams who would compete that summer in the inaugural British baseball league, a national professional circuit. Unlike Derby, the other three teams – Birmingham Aston Villa, Preston North End, and Stoke – were all offshoots of established association football clubs and among their ranks boasted some of the leading practitioners of that sport, including a number of international players. Soccer clubs had at least two reasons for seeing an attraction in baseball: they were lacking a form of physical activity that they could pay their players to engage in during the summer off-season and their grounds were not being made use of in those months.

Ley’s works team differed from the opponents in another respect. The Derby industrialist ran the club as an independent commercial venture. In contrast, the soccer clubs’ baseball nines were all propped up financially by majority shareholder Albert Goodwill Spalding. It is quite possible that this sporting equipment magnate hoped the spread of baseball to Britain would lay foundations for the globalization of his firm. Indeed, Spalding had been instrumental in an earlier stage of baseball’s introduction to Britain: his touring party of Major Leaguers made a stop there in 1889 to play a series of exhibition games as part of their world tour. The flame of interest from the exhibition games was stoked up by a group of college students who visited Britain from the United States in the summer of 1889, offering instruction to native players. In October, a meeting took place in a private room at the Criterion restaurant in London’s West End with the purpose of establishing a national baseball league, and among the attendees were prominent administrators from the British sporting landscape.

Ley’s financial investment was a bold one. With the exception of a small number of baseball teams springing up from the Leicester cricket scene in the
mid-1870s, domestic baseball was a novel concept in Britain. And on the previous occasions when the sport had received a splash in the British media – including the visit of Spalding’s touring party in 1889 – the press generally offered one of three things: a negative comparison with the established summer game of cricket; a derisive likening to the child’s game of rounders; or simple indifference. But Ley’s focus was not just on a profit line. His commitment to growing the sport in his native country was evident from numerous acts of financial benevolence during the 1890s, which included funding the construction of the country’s finest baseball facility and purchasing grand trophies to honour the early champions.

Building a winning team was also a goal for Ley, which is why he sent the letter to his industry partners in Ohio in March 1890. The result of the Derby man’s request was that Reidenbach and co-worker Sim Bullas, both in their late 20s, found themselves heading to Derby that April. In Cleveland, the pair had played as battery-mates in an amateur league, with Reidenbach being an outstanding left-handed pitcher. The southpaw quickly made an impression on Derby’s neophyte baseball fans, astonishing them with his ability to make the ball break in flight. He was also described in pre-season press coverage as a “terrific hitter, and a splendid fielder.”

Unlike Reidenbach, whose baseball playing in the States seems to have been limited to amateur competition, Sim Bullas came with Major League experience. According to US census records, Bullas hailed from England, which would make him the only known British-born player to have competed in both the Major Leagues and British domestic baseball. He had played in 1884 for the Toledo Blue Stockings of the American Association, where he caught for a pitching staff that included Tony Mullane, an Irish-born ambidextrous hurler who compiled a record of 284 wins and 220 losses in an exceptional big-league career. Another catcher making his debut in the majors with the Blue Stockings that year was Moses Fleetwood Walker, who is credited by some baseball historians as being the first African American to play in the big leagues. After the 1884 season, it would be more than six decades before the big-league colour barrier was broken again, by Jackie Robinson.

Acting as player–manager of Ley’s nine was Will Bryan, a native of Zanesville, Ohio, who brought great coaching experience to the team, having managed a number of baseball clubs in the United States during the 1880s. Bryan had slipped out of the world of baseball towards the close of the decade, but re-emerged on the other side of the Atlantic and penned the following explanation in the spring of 1890 for the Sporting Life:

I was the victim of a villainous blackmailing scheme in Nebraska, but escaped the blackmailers. I then married a lady, which caused the principal
party in the blackmailing scheme to go into Des Moines, Ia., and make a foul, damnable charge against me, and the grand jury bound me over to answer. There being no way to break this woman’s oath, I could only do one thing—“levant”—which I did. I have been all over Scotland, Ireland and England; [I] was asked to come to Derby, which I did, and take hold of base ball, which I have done.

Derby were billed as pre-season favourites, owing largely to their superior training programme, using a combination of regular practice, dumb-bell weight training, and Turkish baths. The first test would come on Saturday 21 June, opening day in the 42-game league calendar.

STORY OF THE SEASON

Fast-forwarding to 30 July, with the 10-week league schedule just past its halfway point, Derby held a four-game lead over Preston North End in the standings. Aston Villa sat a further half-game behind while Stoke lagged 13 games back from the leaders. That evening, in Preston, before a crowd reported to be just under 1000 in number, John Reidenbach clutched the ball in the top of the ninth frame with 23 strike-outs to his name. He needed to retire three North Enders to register a no-hit shut-out. But Reidenbach was far from being on the verge of a glorious achievement. Instead, he was at the centre of one of professional baseball history’s most farcical contests, in Britain or anywhere else. A chain of increasingly vehement wrangling was nearing its culmination.

Signs that Reidenbach’s proficiency as a pitcher might not hold universal appeal came even before the season started. Writing on 16 June, Aston Villa player–manager William Barr complained in a dispatch to the Sporting Life that Reidenbach’s use as a pitcher would lead to a competitive imbalance, given that Derby’s opponents were training up local players for this role.

The first chance for Barr to test his assertion came in Birmingham on 25 June when his Villa line-up served as Reidenbach’s first adversaries. Rising soccer star John Devey was handed pitching duties for the home team. The Derby hurler was reported in the Sporting Life to have favoured a “swift down-shoot” for his first pitch to a batter, and this was said to have “simply terrified” the opposing hitters in the early part of the season, and in his first start against Aston Villa he picked up 20 strike-outs and yielded just three hits in a complete-game victory. The final score read 10–8; Aston Villa had been able to assemble a respectable run tally via free passes and fielding errors.

Reidenbach’s home debut came against Preston on 28 June in front of approximately 4000 fans at Ley’s Baseball Ground. Holding a 6–0 lead after six frames, pitching duties were switched to a Derby local named Presbury, who had
John Reidenbach

been playing at second base. Preston chipped away at the lead; a brace of runs in the bottom of the ninth brought the score to 6–4. With the replacement pitcher still needing to find two more outs, Bryan brought Reidenbach back in from second base, and he duly closed out the game without a further score.

The next three starts for Reidenbach were also at home, and all came against Aston Villa, who were emerging as Derby’s main championship rivals. On 30 June, before a crowd that included members of the touring Australian cricket team, Reidenbach continued his dominance in the pitching box, as Derby won 4–1. It was not until the ninth inning that the Birmingham team registered their solitary hit of the game, a single off the bat of HE Simon, a catcher from Chicago. In the sixth frame, a fine catch by Edwin Booth off Barr’s long drive had preserved the no-hitter bid at that point.

Three wins from three became four out of four on 3 July, as the Derby southpaw yielded 3 runs on six hits to once again get the better of Devey. Two days later, the same pair squared off, and after three innings it was Devey who looked in control, his side leading 3–0. But in the fourth he ran into difficulty and Barr was forced to bring himself in as pitcher. The damage from that frame was 5 runs, but the Aston Villa player–manager staunched any further run-scoring and the Birmingham team pulled level in the bottom of the ninth. Reidenbach and Barr dealt three more scoreless innings, but in the bottom of the 13th Aston Villa and Scotland soccer player James Cowan doubled with none out and was driven in by Fred Dawson, a team–mate from the football field, to end the absorbing battle. Barr’s nine had scored their 6 runs off 14 hits and handed Reidenbach his first loss.

On the date of Derby and Aston Villa’s next meeting, 9 July, Barr again wrote to the Sporting Life about Reidenbach’s use as a pitcher by Derby. With the league now in its third week, Barr’s view on the matter was more developed:

[I]t was a mistake in Derby importing an American pitcher as it gives them an unfair advantage over the three other clubs, and it is almost impossible for the masses to appreciate twenty strike outs in a game, as it eliminates all that beautiful fielding for which the game is noted.

That day, Barr selected his brother, Frank, to face Reidenbach and was rewarded with a 6–2 win. The Derby pitcher conceded eight hits to his opponent’s seven, but had 12 punch–outs and no free passes, compared with figures of 10 and two for the Villa man. “The day was perfect, and the excitement great,” wrote a Lancashire Evening Post scribe.

Present at Aston Villa’s second triumph over Derby, reported the Birmingham Daily Post, were “all the prominent officials of the league.” Although the league executives had just witnessed Reidenbach getting beaten, they proposed in a
Nine Aces and a Joker

meeting afterwards that the Derby speedballer be banned from pitching in the league. According to Bryan, Ley had strongly opposed the motion, threatening to withdraw his team from the league if it was passed. A compromise was reached in which it was stated that imported players were not allowed to pitch except for in games between Derby and Aston Villa.

The person said to be responsible for requesting the ruling against Reidenbach was Major Sudell, who was president of Preston North End. Three days before the meeting, Sudell had been quoted in *The Umpire* for his dislike of imported pitching, a view that was echoed in the article by Leech Maskrey, his team's player–manager and another former Major Leaguer.

William Barr's next Reidenbach-related offering to the *Sporting Life* was penned on 15 July:

> Reidenbach still continues as effective as ever for Derby, but his team has not backed him up well and the consequence is he tries to strike every batter out in order to retire the side.

When Barr and Reidenbach faced each other as starters for the first time the following day, in Birmingham, Derby showed fine fielding form to offer an immediate contradiction to this viewpoint, but a high strike-out tally was still a distinct possibility. The Derby hurler's arm was fresh from nearly a week's rest, which was afforded by a mixture of off-days and games at second base. A cagey start to the keenly anticipated match-up saw the first three innings pass without any score. By the end of the fifth, Derby had built a 3–0 lead, but after a scoreless sixth Aston Villa plated a run in the next frame to spoil Reidenbach's shut-out attempt. It remained 3–1 going into the top of the ninth; however, the Derby ace failed for a second straight contest to close out a nine-inning win. Barr's men plated the 2 runs they needed to keep the game alive, and the manager then held Derby scoreless to send the game into extra innings. But the home team failed to score in the top of the 10th and Derby plated the game-ending run with one out in the bottom half of the inning. Reidenbach finished with 15 punch-outs and no free passes, with the Villa's runs coming off five hits and a solitary Derby error. Bullas must have winced at every one of Reidenbach's fireballs that he caught: according to the *Sporting Life*, the catcher had sustained a hand injury around the end of the first week of July.

Barr and Reidenbach met again 3 days later, this time in Derby. Barr's men nursed a 2–1 lead from the fourth inning into the eighth but in that frame conceded the tying run. It took a fine catch in left-field from cricketer Harry Widdowson to strand the go-ahead run at third. In the top of the ninth, Bullas managed to advance to third base, but Derby failed once more to bring the go-
ahead run home. Thus, the Birmingham nine came to the plate in the bottom of the ninth requiring 1 run to win the game. With a man on third, Simon drilled a Reidenbach offering into the outfield, but another fine catch was made to send a third Derby–Villa contest into extra innings.

On this occasion, it was Derby who emerged victorious, taking the game 6–2 after one additional set of at-bats. Derby’s player–manager Will Bryan reflected on his side’s increased vigour in the 10th inning within a column he wrote for the *Sporting Life* a couple of days later. After noting that whenever his side met Aston Villa there was “blood upon the moon,” he described the end of the game as follows:

The game stood 2 to 2 at the close of the ninth inning, and when Derby went to the bat it was for gore, and we got it. We got the pitcher and catcher rattled, and scored four runs on the erratic, wild throwing of the infield, and then shut them out in their half.

The following instalment in the flourishing rivalry, at Derby on 24 July, was another occasion with “blood upon the moon.” Barr decided to take another crack at Reidenbach, despite having been unsuccessful in his previous two attempts. Bullas continued to receive Reidenbach’s heat, in spite of his injured hand; “he must have suffered agonies with the pain at times,” Barr reflected in the *Sporting Life*. Extra innings loomed with the game tied 2–2 going into the bottom of the ninth, but Simon succeeded in finding a route round the bases to end the game in the visitors’ favour. Reidenbach wound up with six strike-outs, three walks, and four hits against his name in the box score.

Up until this point, Derby had followed the league’s agreement on the use of imported players, but this would change on 26 July. Reidenbach was brought in to relieve Presbury in the bottom of the seventh with Derby trailing 10–9. The move led to a protest from Preston, but the southpaw remained in position, and the game was played out (without any further scoring). No immediate action was taken against Derby for their infringement of the pitching agreement. Later, Bryan defended his action in the *Sporting Life* by quoting from a letter in which Ley instructed him that the arrangement was “subject to Presbury not getting hurt or ill,” adding that “in case our English pitchers are unable to pitch from causes beyond my control then you can put Reidenbach on.” In this game against Preston, Bryan argued, he was left no option but to use Reidenbach.

My pitcher, Presbury, a young English lad, pitched [many games] and finally his arm gave out and I was finally compelled to put in Mellors, my short stop, against Preston, and we were beaten. Mellors never had even tried to pitch,
and he injured his arm so badly that I had to lay him off two games, and he was useless during the balance of the season. While playing second base, Presbury received a severe injury to his right hand, having his index finger knocked out at the third joint, his hand being very much swollen, and when Preston came to play us on July 26, I did not know what to do, as I did not want to put Reidenbach in the box, knowing the cry that would be raised. But Presbury said he would do his best. He was knocked all over the field, and we were beaten. In fielding a hard hit ball he got hit on his sore hand and could not hold the ball, and, as we were beaten I put in Reidenbach.

In Derby, on the evening of 28 July, Bryan made it clear that Reidenbach’s appearance in the pitcher’s box against Preston 2 days earlier was not a temporary aberration: in this game, the tricky left-hander was given the start. Stoke responded pragmatically to Bryan’s violation by also breaching the agreement; they threw James Prior, their own imported pitcher. The result was a tight game: only once did a team manage to add more than a solitary run to the scoreline. That occasion was a 4-run rally for Derby in the top of the third, and it proved to be the difference in a game that finished 6–3.

The Reidenbach issue was to come to a head on 30 July, with Derby visiting Preston. Seeing Derby’s ace take to the pitcher’s box in the top of the first caused Preston to lodge an immediate verbal complaint, but Bryan refused to remove his countryman. Playing under protest, William Hendry led off the game with a battling plate appearance in which he fouled off a series of pitches, but eventually struck out. The same fate was met by the second- and third-place hitters in Preston’s line-up.

After 2 runs for Derby in the bottom of the first, Major Sudell, Preston’s president, escalated the complaint against the visitors to a written protest and then instructed his players to not swing their bats any more, a brash move that instantly turned the match into a farce. And so it was that Reidenbach found himself in the ninth inning needing three outs for a shut-out.

But Preston managed to engineer a run while carrying out their orders. This was described in the *Lancashire Evening Post*:

Dobson was given his base on balls. He quickly stole second and third, and while Livesey was striking out Bullas dropped the ball. Dobson started for home, and, with the idea of fastening him, the Derby catcher threw to third base. Allsop dropped the ball and Dobson got home, scoring a run without his team having ever hit a fair ball. The crowd cheered the feat heartily; indeed, from the moment the North End ceased to strike each one was cheered as he left the home plate.
John Reidenbach

The *Lancashire Evening Post* also reported that Sudell’s ambition was to “mark their sense of want of fairness, and to have the matter definitively settled by the League Executive.” Bryan later claimed in the *Sporting Life* that Sudell was inebriated when he gave the order to his players: in “the second inning, he was so drunk he could hardly stand.”

Reidenbach missed out on what would have been the only shut-out of the pro league, but he did finish with 26 strike-outs. From the box score, it appears that Dobson drew another walk earlier in the game, but on that occasion was gunned down by Bullas while attempting to swipe second for the only put-out not to come on three strikes. Technically, the Derby ace gained a no-hitter. It is likely that the teams in the British league of 1890 were the first professional outfits beyond today’s boundary for North America, which would give Reidenbach the first professional no-hitter outside of that geographical area, albeit it one in need of an emboldened asterisk.

Normal competition temporarily resumed the next day, in Derby, as Reidenbach again faced off against William Barr. By the middle of the seventh the visitors had edged out to a 6–1 lead, and while Barr conceded 4 runs in the bottom of that inning, he dug deep in the final two frames to close out a 6–5 victory. Reidenbach gave up seven hits and no walks and fanned six.

Triggered by Preston’s formal complaint about the use of Reidenbach on 30 July, the governing body assembled on 1 August for an evening meeting at Birmingham’s Colonnade Hotel, where it was determined that Morton Betts, the league’s honorary secretary, would send a letter to Ley formalizing the ban on Reidenbach’s use as a pitcher in games against Preston and Stoke. Previously, the rule on Reidenbach and other imported pitchers could have been perceived as more of a gentleman’s agreement than an official edict.

Before Derby’s game with Preston that day, Will Bryan was served with a copy of Morton Betts’s letter by the hand that penned it. The memorandum contained the following resolution:

That as Mr. Ley, on behalf of the Derby Baseball Club, undertook at the League meeting held on July 9th not to pitch his American pitcher, Reidenbach, against either Stoke or the Preston North End clubs in any of the remaining Championship games, and as he has broken his promise or obligation by pitching Reidenbach in the game at Preston on July 30th, it is hereby resolved that the Board require the Derby Baseball Club to comply with the above undertaking given by its president in all the remaining Championship games.

Bryan was reported in the *Lancashire Evening Post* to have “informed Mr. Betts that he had not received any previous intimation on the matter.” Thus, when
Nine Aces and a Joker

Preston went to bat in the top of the first, they found Reidenbach holding the ball in his hand once again. The game went ahead, but Morton Betts gave Bryan formal notice that his club had broken the league’s ruling. Reidenbach collected 10 punch-outs in a 13–9 Derby victory.

Bryan persisted with Reidenbach in the box against Stoke and the opponents responded once again by throwing Prior. In what was a game with few balls in play, Bullas, who was still nursing a damaged catching hand, was on the end of 18 remorseless strike-outs from Reidenbach, and Charles Bartlett took 15 from Prior. The sum of these figures was a record for any game in the season. Derby won the contest 6–2 but they were to take no more part in the league.

A difficult decision for the league’s governing body was rendered unnecessary with the announcement on 5 August that Derby had chosen to withdraw. The full reason for this was never revealed, but exchanges in the press over the ensuing weeks revealed disagreements that extended beyond the Reidenbach issue into more general matters such as finances.

The competition was played to completion with an adjusted schedule and Aston Villa were the eventual winners. Devey’s 13–11 win–loss record gave him the most victories, with Hogan of Preston (12–12) just behind him. The unofficial tallies of Reidenbach (10–4) and Presbury (9–1) put these Derby team-mates third and fourth in the list.

Ignoring the protested contest against Preston and any games for which full pitching tallies were not available, Reidenbach posted strike-out and walk rates, respectively, of 11.4 and 2.0 per nine innings. In non-protested games, his strike-out tallies of 20, 18, and 15 were first, second, and joint-third in the league rankings for single-game performances. His batting average of .369 was Derby’s third best – aided by a 5-for-6 game against Preston on 14 July, the only five-hit game for Ley’s men – and he had a team-best three triples, while tying for the lead in doubles with 12.

EPILOGUE

Not long after the truncation of Derby’s 1890 season, John Reidenbach, along with battery-mate Sim Bullas, boarded the City of Berlin steamer in Liverpool destined for the United States. The pair arrived at Ellis Island on 22 August. On Derby’s withdrawal from the 1890 pro league, William Barr had written in the Sporting Life that Reidenbach “is certainly a good man” and “should be able to get a good engagement in the States.” And he did not need to wait long. In September 1890, Reidenbach, with Bullas, joined an amateur team in Cleveland. From there he moved in 1891 to secure a pitching role on the squad of Port Townsend in the Pacific Northwest.

Fondly remembered in Derby after his departure, the ace returned 7 years later to play for the town’s baseball team once more. He came back to a burgeoning
local baseball scene, the success of which was largely attributable to Francis Ley. Instead of turning his back on baseball or just continuing to focus on a works recreational team, Ley had set about expanding Derby’s baseball strength into more of a presence in the town and surrounding area. He established regional competitions and also achieved national success when his Derby team won the British title, by then an exclusively amateur affair, in 1895.

On 19 May 1897, Derby hinted that they might be ready for a shot at a second national title, downing Remingtons, the losing finalists from 1896, by a score of 21–19. Reidenbach pitched in a line-up that included four of his team-mates from the pro league: Allsop, Booth, Mellors, and his understudy Presbury. Another notable member of the team was soccer star Steve Bloomer, a prolific goal-scorer for both Derby County and England.

As the season progressed, Derby advanced through the rounds of a knock-out tournament that would determine the national champion. On Saturday 14 August, a London select side made the trip to Derby’s Baseball Ground for the semi-final. Reidenbach pitched a gem, limiting the visitors to 4 runs, while the home team amassed 22 runs over the nine-inning contest. The final was to take place at the same ground 2 weeks later, and Middlesbrough, champions of 1892, were the team standing in the way of a first national title for Reidenbach and a second one for the team. The old rivals had met twice that season already, with Derby emerging victorious on both occasions. On this third occasion, they would be playing for a large trophy – supplied by Francis Ley as a substitute for the Spalding Cup, which had been stolen the previous year – and gold medals, also donated by the Derby benefactor.

Winning a second national title proved to be a simple task for Derby. They built up a 21–0 lead after five innings, with the visitors being “unable to do anything” in the “face of [R]eidenbach’s deliveries,” according to a Derby Mercury reporter. Middlesbrough brought an element of respectability to the scoreline by plating at least 1 run in each of the closing four innings, although a 3-run rally in the sixth was attributed in the press to a slip by Presbury in the outfield. This was a small matter, though, with the final score being 30–7 and Reidenbach convincingly winning the title game in what appears to have been his last season in British baseball.

Derby successfully defended the title in 1899 after a season in which no national title was decided, but fell in the 1900 final to a Nottingham Forest team captained by ex-Derby player Dennis Allsop. After a further five years with no evidence of a national competition, a London Association ran between 1906 and 1911, again with close links to soccer. And then there was a break of 22 years before the involvement of another wealthy benefactor revved British baseball up for its golden era, in the 1930s.
Nine Aces and a Joker

Francis Ley later became Sir Francis, and he was posthumously elected into the British Baseball Hall of Fame as the first 19th Century inductee. At the centre of two of his more memorable years of involvement in British baseball was the pitching of John Reidenbach.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaAJ/1890.html.

SOURCES
Birmingham Daily Post
Derby Mercury
Lancashire Evening Post
Leicester Courier
Sporting Life
The Umpire


3 – Max “Lefty” Wilson, Ace #2

1937

by HARVEY SAHKER

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
The diminutive figure of Max “Lefty” Wilson, when elevated on a mound, would have struck fear into opponents. Statistically, his 1937 season for Hull was one of incomparable pitching dominance in British baseball.
Hull was part of the semi-pro Yorkshire Baseball League when it opened for business in 1936 with the financial backing of Sir John Moores. The circuit was a major piece in the expansion of British baseball during its “golden era” of the mid- to late 1930s. The Hull club was based at Craven Park, which was home to greyhound racing and rugby league’s Hull Kingston Rovers. As the season progressed, crowds at Craven Park grew steadily. Hull’s first home match drew about 1500 spectators. In mid-season, a throng of 5000 watched Hull lose 4–0 to a team of sailors from the US Navy. Shortly after, a crowd of 6000 saw the Yorkshire Baseball League Challenge Cup final, even though Hull was not playing in the match.

In late July, some 8000 people descended on Craven Park to see Hull host the Greenfield Giants. The visitors won 4–0. Greenfield’s Canadian pitcher, Jimmy Sherwood, was almost unhittable. He had 23 strike-outs, setting a league record. Three days later, an even bigger crowd showed up at Craven Park to watch the same two teams again. The game was a Yorkshire area semi-final of the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup, which was effectively the national championship competition. Sherwood was on the mound again and Greenfield eked out a 4–3 victory, in front of 9000 spectators. Sherwood struck out 17 Hull batters. The Giants went on win the Yorkshire Baseball League pennant.

Hull player–manager Ellis Lydiatt was determined to bring a winner to Craven Park in 1937. One place where Hull needed improvement was on the mound. Lydiatt was Hull’s number one hurler in 1936 but he was not a dominant pitcher. Before the 1937 season started, word reached North American shores that baseball clubs in England were looking for players. One player who was chosen to sail to England for the upcoming campaign was Max “Lefty” Wilson, a 5 foot 7 southpaw from Haw River, North Carolina. They did not know it yet, but Hull had found their very own Jimmy Sherwood.

Max Wilson was a month away from his 21st birthday when he made his Hull debut, at Greenfield Stadium on Saturday 1 May. The Greenfield Giants no longer had Jimmy Sherwood, but they had brought over another Canadian to replace him as their top hurler. Johnny Macdonald, from Montreal, faced Wilson before a crowd of 2000. Macdonald was terrific for the Giants, striking out 17 and allowing only 3 runs. But Wilson was even better. He fanned 19 and kept Greenfield off the scoresheet. No slouch at the plate, he also doubled in Hull’s first run of the game.

Over 5000 fans saw Wilson make his home debut on 8 May. The Wakefield Cubs were Hull’s opponents. Ellis Lydiatt was Hull’s starting pitcher. Lydiatt had
Max “Lefty” Wilson

little trouble with the Cubs, but in the eighth inning he handed the ball to Wilson. The newcomer faced seven batters. He gave up a lead-off single, then struck out the other six. Wilson also hit the only home run of the game.

Early in the season, Wilson was selected to play for Yorkshire against Lancashire in a “War of the Roses” game on the Monday of the Whitsun holiday weekend. He was the only Hull player in the side. This was to be the second War of the Roses baseball clash. Lancashire had won the inaugural game 6–5 at Sheffield the previous year.

On 12 May, Hull hosted a friendly against West Ham of the London Major Baseball League. The game was called after nine innings with the score 2–2. The visitors almost won it in the ninth. With a runner on third and two out, Roland Gladu came into the game as a pinch-hitter. Heralded as the “Canadian Babe Ruth” when he joined West Ham in 1936, Gladu had made his debut in professional baseball in 1932 when he was still a teenager. He would go on to play for Major League Baseball’s Boston Braves in 1944.

Gladu was nursing a sprained ankle and had been unable to start at Craven Park. Here, finally, was a match-up that the fans had been waiting for. Wilson, Hull’s top hurler, was facing the man who was arguably the best hitter in England. Wilson promptly ended the game by making Gladu his 20th strike-out victim of the afternoon.

Hull carved out a 10-inning 2–1 win at Sheffield on 15 May. Wilson started on the mound for Hull. The first 12 pitches that he threw were strikes. By the time the game was over, he had whiffed 22. Hull was now unbeaten in three regular season games. Sheffield’s shortstop was Roland Gladu’s brother, Eddie.

On Monday 17 May, a holiday crowd of 9000 handed over a record gate taking to see the War of the Roses game at Craven Park. Yorkshire won 4–2. Wilson did not pitch in the game, but he did appear as a position player. He entered the game in the bottom of the fourth. With the score tied 1–1, Wilson whacked a triple. Three runs scored in the inning.

Although he had not pitched in the War of the Roses, there was no doubt that Wilson was the most dominant pitcher in the north of England. Opposing hitters could not touch him, as evidenced by his multiple outings with 20 or more strike-outs. But if any pitcher in the league was Wilson’s near equal, it was Canadian right-hander Ross Kendrick of the York Maroons. Hits were hard to come by when Wilson and Kendrick faced each other. The York Maroons visited Craven Park for the first time on 22 May. Wilson hit a home run and beat Kendrick 2–0. Wilson logged 23 strike-outs, tying a record that Sherwood had set the previous year. Wilson had registered 65 strike-outs in his last three games.

Nine Aces and a Joker

won 9–3 and Wilson had 20 strike-outs. His streak of consecutive 20-plus strike-out games was now up to four.

On Saturday 5 June, 2 days after Wilson’s 21st birthday, Hull visited the Wakefield Cubs. Lydiatt started on the mound for Hull. The Cubs knocked him out early. Wilson came in to relieve him. After four innings, with the Cubs ahead by 6 runs, there was an argument over an umpire’s call. The entire Hull team left the field in protest. They came back, some time later, but they were missing one player: Max Wilson. Hull stormed back and sent the game into extra innings. With the score 7–7 after 12 frames, the game was called.

Wilson got back to business against the Sheffield Dons in Hull’s next game, on the following Thursday. He fanned 18 and won 3–0. All of the runs were scored in the first inning. Happy Kasnoff pitched for Sheffield. Kasnoff had 10 strike-outs of his own. Neither hurler allowed a runner past second base after the first frame. The attendance was 6000 – a sizeable throng for a mid-week game.

On 12 June, Greenfield’s Macdonald became the first pitcher to strike out Wilson at Craven Park. Greenfield had Hull’s number early on in the game. After they scored 3 runs in the third against Lydiatt, Wilson took the mound. The bases were loaded. Wilson got Hull out of the inning without any further damage. He pitched the rest of the game and had 13 strike-outs. Hull emerged with a 4–3 victory. Wilson singled home the winning run.

Hull then played Leeds on 17 June in the final of the Yorkshire Baseball League Challenge Cup, a mid-season knock-out competition involving teams from that regional circuit. The game was played at Owlerton Stadium, a greyhound track in Sheffield. Leeds pitcher Charlie Wonoski (see Chapter 11) was in fine form. He struck out 11 Hull batters and won 11–0.

Wilson was missing from the Hull line-up that day. He had been summoned to London to discuss the incident at Wakefield. By the time that the meeting ended, it was too late for Wilson to get to Sheffield in time for the game. In the end, while Leeds were pasting his Hull team-mates, Wilson made a guest appearance for the Catford Saints of the London Major Baseball league.

A team made up mostly of Mormon missionaries from the United States, the Saints had won just one of their first five games and had been out-scored by a ratio of almost two-to-one. Wilson, all 140 pounds of him, was scrawny enough to hide behind his team-mates as he entered West Ham Stadium. The South London Press, which covered the Saints regularly, crowned Wilson the “Midget Marvel.” Wilson, “who looks more like a jockey than a baseball player, lived up to all expectations as he struck out 20 West Ham batters and kept their few hits well scattered.” West Ham scored an unearned run in the bottom of the first to take an early lead, but Catford surged ahead with 5 runs in the fourth and cantered to a 7–1 victory. Wilson was back on the mound at Craven Park 2 days later, as
Max “Lefty” Wilson

Hull faced Sheffield in a National Baseball Association Challenge Cup match. He fanned 15 and stole home on a delayed double steal. The run held up as the game winner in a 3–2 decision. Some 4500 people witnessed the game.

Wilson pitched for Catford again on 24 June, against the Pirates at West Ham. This time he struck out 19. The Saints won easily by a 13–2 score. On 26 June, Wilson was back on the hill for Hull. Just as he had done the previous week, he was pitching his second game in 3 days. His opponents in this game were Kendrick and the York Maroons. Thus far in the season, Kendrick, Wilson, and Wonoski had all matched Sherwood’s record of 23 strike-outs. Kendrick gave up a pair of runs in the first inning but kept Hull off the score sheet for the rest of the game. He fanned 18. Wilson was even more dominant. He broke the strike-out record, whiffing 24. Hull won 2–0.

Some Hull fans must have been mightily confused by Wilson’s side trips to London. Why was he pitching for the Catford Saints and for Hull? What the heck was going on? “I know that my recent two visits to London have caused a great deal of disappointment to Hull baseball fans, but I can assure them that I was powerless in the matter,” Wilson told the Hull Daily Mail. “The authorities in London, and not myself, were responsible for me going down there, their idea being to strengthen the London Major Baseball League through loaning me to Catford Saints.”

Wilson told the National Baseball Association that he wanted to play for Hull, and only for Hull. He got his wish. So did the many Hull fans who had signed a petition, demanding that their star hurler not moonlight in London. “No one appreciated more than I did the petition for my local retention, which was so extensively signed at Craven Park last weekend, and it is grand to find that one has made so many local friends in so short a time.” Wilson added, “Some of the happiest days of my stay in England have been spent among the Hull people, and if my assistance leads Hull to the championship, nothing will please me better.”

Hull continued their quest for the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup on 1 July. Once again, Wilson faced Kendrick and the York Maroons. In the second inning, Wilson singled, stole second and third, and scored on a bunt by Hull’s wonderfully named shortstop, Jeff Allstop. York threatened to score in the seventh. George Foss led off with a drive to right-field and pulled up at third. Wilson then struck out the side. In the ninth, Dave McFaulds hit a long shot to right. The Hull right-fielder hauled it in. Hull hung on and won, 1–0. Wilson and Kendrick had 18 and 12 strike-outs, respectively. The two hurlers had now faced each other three times. Kendrick allowed a total of just 5 runs in those games. Wilson allowed none.

The Rochdale Greys faced Hull in the cup quarter-finals. A boisterous Craven Park crowd of 7000 was on hand to see Wilson whiff 20 and hit the only
Nine Aces and a Joker

home run of the game. Hull won 6–3. After the final out, a group of fans stormed the field and carried Wilson, shoulder high, to the dressing room.

The same day, a US Navy team beat a representative Yorkshire team 3–2 at Leeds. The Navy team was drawn from the battleships New York, Wyoming, and Arkansas. Two days later, the teams played each other at Craven Park. Wilson pitched for Yorkshire and won 4–1.

Two unbeaten pitchers faced each other in Hull’s next game, away at Leeds. Wonoski was one of the biggest reasons why Leeds had not yet lost a Yorkshire Baseball League regular season game when they took the field against Hull on 31 July. Don Adams knocked in the only run of the game in the top of the eighth. The win pulled Hull into a first-place tie with Leeds. Wilson had 17 strike-outs. Wonoski had 15. Two of Hull’s English players played well in the field. Both were professional sportsmen. Bill Teal was a full-back for the Wakefield Trinity rugby league club. Fred Miller played soccer for Hull Football Club.

Wonoski and Kendrick both pitched for Yorkshire in another War of the Roses game, which took place in Manchester on 2 August. The game was played at Maine Road, long-time home of Manchester City Football Club. Yorkshire won 9–3. Wilson did not pitch in the game but he did play.

The next day, Wilson was back in the Manchester area. Hull were in Oldham to play the Greyhounds in their National Baseball Association Challenge Cup semi-final. A crowd of 5800 was in the stands at Watersheddings, another dog track. With Hull ahead 1–0 in the fifth inning, Oldham had two runners on base with two out. Maurice Gerth hit a mammoth drive towards centre-field. Miller raced after it and made a spectacular leaping catch to quash the threat. George Shaw held Hull to just four hits and struck out 13. It was a virtuoso pitching performance but, as usual, Wilson was even better. Wilson threw a two-hitter and whiffed 18. Hull won 3–0 and clinched a berth in the cup final. The national championship was but one game away.

Hull were now close to “doing the double” – winning the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup and the Yorkshire Baseball League pennant. They were tied for first in the Yorkshire circuit with Leeds. The clubs had lost one game each. Just 2 days after Wilson defeated Oldham, he took the mound against Leeds at Craven Park and beat them, 6–1. Hull was now in sole possession of first place.

On 14 August, a record crowd of 11,000 assembled to watch the cup final. The attendance was not just a Craven Park record. There has never been a crowd that large to see a domestic baseball game in England, before or since. Craven Park had been chosen as the cup final venue long before Hull asserted themselves as one of the strongest teams in the country. The National Baseball Association had picked Craven Park because baseball was popular in Hull.
Max “Lefty” Wilson

The visiting Romford Wasps had scored 51 runs in their previous four cup games. Their lowest single-game tally in the competition was 9 runs. They were the big boppers of the south, led by catcher Tallie Ellis, player–manager “Slugger” Cranston, and 1936 United States Olympian Carson Thompson. Ellis had sailed to England with Wilson. He had swatted more than his share of homers during the 1937 London Major Baseball League season, but he had not yet faced his friend.

The game was scoreless until the bottom of the fourth. With Miller on base, Lydiatt hit a home run. The 2-run cushion was all that Wilson needed. He struck out 14 and allowed just six hits, three of which came off the bat of his pal Ellis. Hull won 5–1. Romford scored their lone run in the ninth. Gracious in defeat, Ellis rushed to the Hull dressing room after the game to offer his congratulations.

The Hull Daily Mail celebrated the win by publishing a large cartoon that featured a sweating wasp having its tail removed with a set of pliers. Another wasp was on the verge of being squashed by an oversized mallet. Still another was the target of a large spray gun. There was a caricature of a smiling Lydiatt, following through on a sweet left-handed swing. Last but not least, the cartoon included a diminutive Wilson, wearing a cap with a massive bill and receiving a throw from the catcher with a mitt that looked like a boxing glove more than anything else. In the cartoon, Wilson was preparing to throw his “camphor ball” to one of the Wasps.

Three days after their national final triumph, Hull clinched the Yorkshire Baseball League pennant by defeating the Sheffield Dons. Lydiatt homered for Hull again. Wilson was nursing a sore shoulder and did not pitch in the game.

At the end of the season, the Hull supporters’ club presented Wilson with a white jacket. One arm was adorned with the Hull city insignia and the flags of the United Kingdom and the United States. The white rose of Yorkshire decorated a breast pocket. The Hull Amateur Baseball League gave Lydiatt an attaché case. Hull’s star pitcher in 1937 had been truly amazing. “Wilson’s praises have been often sung,” crowed the Hull Daily Mail, “but he must have proved by now that he is the best pitcher this side of the Atlantic.” Despite the brevity of the English baseball season, Wilson had struck out 10 or more batters at least 14 times for Hull and twice more for Catford. In those 16 games, he fanned a total of 300 opposing batters for an average of roughly two an inning.

EPilogue

Max Wilson returned to the United States and pitched a game in the spring of 1938 that put even his strongest Hull outing to shame. He was playing for the Oak Ridge Military Institute, a preparatory school. On 27 April, he threw a no-hitter against Wingate Junior College and amassed 25 strike-outs in the process.
Nine Aces and a Joker

He would go on to pitch in the Minor Leagues for 8 years. Wilson spent most of the 1938 season – his first as a pro – with Springfield of the Class C Middle Atlantic League. He posted an 8–4 win–loss record and earned a promotion to Portsmouth, Virginia, of the Class B Piedmont League. He had a 15–10 win–loss record with the Portsmouth Cubs in 1939 and finished second in the league in strike-outs (153) and complete games (21). Wilson returned to Portsmouth in 1940 and had a fabulous season. He tied for the league lead with 20 wins and lost only 10 times for a team that finished with a 59–78 record. He threw five shutouts and logged 127 strike-outs.

One Tuesday in September 1940, in the Major Leagues, the last-place Philadelphia Phillies hosted a double-header against the Pittsburgh Pirates. Pittsburgh won the opener 11–3. Late in the second game, Philadelphia trailed 4–1 in the bottom of the seventh. Mel Mazerra pinch hit for Charlie Frye, the home team’s starting pitcher. Manager Doc Prothro had to go to his bullpen. He summoned a short, slight southpaw who had recently been called up from the minors and who had never pitched in the big leagues before. It was Max Wilson.

The capacity of Shibe Park was over 30,000, but a puny crowd of about 1000 fans watched the double-header. How strange Wilson must have felt. He had reached the big leagues, but he was performing in front of a throng that was a 10th the size of the Craven Park crowd that had watched him dispose of the Romford Wasps in the 1937 national final.

Perhaps Wilson was relieved that there were not more people in the stands in Philadelphia that day. He got bombed. He pitched the eighth and ninth, gave up nine hits, walked a man, uncorked a wild pitch, and struck out nobody. The Pirates scored 3 runs in the eighth, plated four more in the ninth, and won 11–1. It was their 10th straight win over their cross-state rivals. The double-header sweep dropped Philadelphia’s win–loss record to 43–89.

On 8 May 1941, exactly 4 years after Wilson’s Craven Park debut, the Blitz came to Hull. Ships departing from the city carried all sorts of supplies to the Soviet Union and the Red Army. This made Hull a primary target for the portions of the Luftwaffe that were based in Norway and The Netherlands. Air raids would claim the lives of over 1200 Hull residents. By the end of the year, over 40% of the city’s population was rendered homeless. The docks were battered. The city’s commercial core, its churches, and its town hall were all pummeled. Fires could be seen in villages 50 miles away.

As Hull burned, Wilson was back at Portsmouth. He finished the 1941 season with a 19–9 win–loss record. He was one victory short of the league leader. He was still only 25 years old when the season ended, but he would be almost 30 when he played in his next professional game. Wilson spent the next four seasons in the US Navy. While in the service, he pitched for the Norfolk Naval Station team...
Max “Lefty” Wilson

with Bob Feller. He pitched for Navy nines in Hawaii, too, where his team-mates included big leaguer Johnny Pesky.

When the war ended, Wilson resumed his baseball career. He made nine more appearances in the Major Leagues, for the Washington Senators, but spent most of the 1946 season with Double-A Chattanooga. His final big-league appearance came on 9 June. Over 24,000 fans assembled at Griffith Stadium to see Washington play a double-header against the slumping Chicago White Sox, who had lost eight straight games. They made it nine in the opener, which the Senators won 7–1.

Wilson came into the second game in the top of the seventh. Washington trailed 5–1. He pitched the final three frames, giving up 3 runs in the eighth. The White Sox ended their losing streak with an emphatic 8–1 victory. One of the batters who Wilson faced in the eighth was infielder Leo Wells. The two men had several things in common. Like Wilson, Wells had now spent parts of two seasons in the big leagues: one before a stint in the armed forces, and one after. The war had robbed both men of what could have been their best baseball years. Neither would return to the Major Leagues after 1946.

Wells had hit one previous home run for the White Sox. That had been in 1942, before he served in the war. Now, batting against Wilson, he hit another. It came with a runner on base, and it was of the inside-the-park variety. Wilson might have felt a sense of déjà vu as he watched Wells circle the bases. The unusual field configurations at Yorkshire Baseball League venues were conducive to inside-the-park homers. Those round trippers would have been hit by the Hull players when Wilson was playing. After all, he had been virtually untouchable in that circuit. Now in the big leagues, things were just a little bit different. An opponent, rather than a team-mate, was racing around the bases.

In 1947, Wilson became a player–manager in the Class D Coastal Plain League. The club, which was coincidentally based in a North Carolina town called Wilson, finished in first place. Their pitcher–manager had a 15–4 record. They won the league pennant but were defeated by Kinston in the best-of-seven finals, four games to two. Wilson’s Minor League odyssey saw him split the 1948 season between his namesake Class D club and Burlington of the Class C Carolina League. He finished his career with Burlington in 1949 and was later a scout for the Senators.

Wilson would go on to see his two sons become National Collegiate Athletic Association pitchers. He had watched his sons from the stands as they grew up with baseball. Wilson was always willing to give advice, but he was never a meddlesome parent. Owner of a lifetime pass to Major League games, he introduced his awestruck sons to big leaguers during road trips to places like Washington, DC. On 2 January 1977, Wilson died of a heart attack, in Greensboro, North Carolina. He was just 60 years old.
Nine Aces and a Joker

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/1937.html.

SOURCES
Hull Daily Mail
South London Press

www.baseball-reference.com

Possessing grit and guile in equal measures, Ross Kendrick was an adversary that no pitcher would have wished to do battle with in British baseball’s heyday of the mid- to late 1930s. His 1938 season saw him at the centre of the action in some of the hardest-fought contests from any point in the history of the game on these shores, including a gruelling national championship final that will probably never be surpassed as a pitcher’s duel. Kendrick was the sole inductee in the baseball players category when the British Baseball Hall of Fame announced its inaugural class in 2009.
BACKGROUND

What are the most desirable qualities in a big-game pitcher? First and foremost, you want talent. He has to be a guy who possesses the skill-set to compete against any hitter. Then there’s make-up – that intangible quality that allows a pitcher to shake off any pressure and consistently throw to the best of his abilities. Finally, you want durability. The ideal ace is going to go the distance, or close to it, when it matters most.

Ross Kendrick was the epitome of that type of pitcher.

During the heyday of professional and semi-professional baseball in Great Britain from 1936 to 1939, Kendrick started more high-pressure games on the mound against top-quality opposing pitchers than most experience in a career. And while he didn’t always post a victory (in fact, he lost as often as he won), Kendrick always gave his club a chance to win – no matter the depth of talent on his team’s roster. Moreover, when he was backed by a first-class line-up – as was the case when he took to the mound for England against the United States in what would be dubbed the first baseball world championship – he was unstoppable. Amazingly, he did all this despite carrying a secret that likely weighed heavily on him during these halcyon days of British baseball.

Born on 25 August 1909, Kendrick grew up in the idyllic Canadian town of Merrickville, Ontario, which is approximately 45 minutes west of the capital Ottawa. Local foundries and an electric company formed the hub of commerce for this small town, which became known as “The Jewel of Rideau” and in modern days has been described as Canada’s most beautiful village. The right-hander took to baseball at a young age and by the time he was in his mid-20s, he emerged as one of the area’s star pitchers.

In 1936, Kendrick secured a place in the rotation for the Smith Falls Railroaders in the Ottawa Valley Amateur Baseball League. It was his first full season playing high-level adult baseball in Canada and he rose to the challenge – especially in the most high-profile match-ups. For example, he was tapped to pitch against a team featuring a line-up full of athletic National Hockey League regulars on Dominion Day (1 July). Kendrick yielded just four hits en route to a 13–1 thrashing.

Thanks in large part to his pitching, Smith Falls earned a spot in the league finals and Kendrick made the most of the opportunity. In game two of the best-of-five series, he tossed a three-hit shut-out and then clinched the championship in game four with a complete-game effort. The win meant Kendrick’s club would advance to the Eastern Ontario Baseball Association play-offs. In a best-of-three series, he would pick up the win in game one against an Ottawa club called Eastview. But, after the club dropped game two, he would come out on the wrong end of a 2–0 pitcher’s duel.
Ross Kendrick

Nevertheless, Kendrick was an emerging talent at just the right time. British baseball officials were on the hunt for proficient players from Canada. A few years earlier, after witnessing the game during a trip to the United States, successful businessman Sir John Moores decided baseball deserved a place on the British sporting landscape. He started professionalizing the game in England in 1935 and by the following year was running three top-notch leagues across the country packed with scores of hired players from Canada and the States.

Kendrick’s standout effort in 1936 made him a target for Moores’ scouts. For a player who was competing at the amateur level, the thought of getting paid to the play must have been very appealing. It is unclear how much he was offered, but the average British baseball professional made between £1.50 and £3.50 per game. In modern terms, that was a tidy sum, in the region of £80 to £190 per contest.

At the same time, there must have been some doubt in Kendrick’s mind. The reason: he had a young wife and three small children. In an era when a voyage across the Atlantic was arduous and often cost-prohibitive, one would expect Kendrick to have worried about what this choice would mean to the family he was leaving behind.

We’ll never know just how much – or little – Kendrick fretted, as it appears he never discussed his Canadian wife or kids with anyone in the British baseball community. In fact, one long-time team-mate and friend in England, Buck Jones, had no idea that Kendrick had married or produced kids in Canada until 2006, decades after Kendrick’s death.

“He was a very private man so that even people who travelled to games for many years with him did not know all the facts of Ross’s life,” said Jon Prescott, an umpire who knew Kendrick later in his life.

Other than some correspondence with his local newspaper in Ontario, Kendrick made a seemingly clean break with his native country. After he set sail to England on the SS Andania with three other ballplayers in early 1937, he would never see his Canadian wife and kids again.

If Kendrick was weighed down by this unspoken past, he never showed it on the mound. The hurler shone from the start of his British baseball career. In 1937, he played for the York Maroons in the Yorkshire Baseball League. The year-old circuit boasted a bevy of impressive imported talent. Most notably, American pitcher Max “Lefty” Wilson joined the league that season. As was described in Chapter 3, the future Major Leaguer was on his game in 1937, serving as the driving force for the ultimate league champions, Hull. Wilson was also one of Kendrick’s greatest foes on the mound.

The nature of the battles between Kendrick and Wilson, as illustrated in Chapter 3, bears repeating. The two squared off for the first time on 23 May at
Nine Aces and a Joker

Hull’s home field, Craven Park. Kendrick pitched well, but Wilson struck out 23 (and hit a home run) to beat Kendrick and his York squad 2–0. The pair had two more epic battles later in the campaign. In one game Kendrick struck out 18 batters, but was bested by Wilson and his 24 strike-outs in another 2–0 Hull triumph. The final match-up was probably the most excruciating for Kendrick. Wilson fanned 18 and Kendrick 12 in a 1–0 Hull win that knocked York out of the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup.

It was clear in 1937 that Kendrick was limited by the talent on his team. He faced Wilson three times and Kendrick’s team scored a grand total of zero runs in those contests. In contrast, when Kendrick represented Yorkshire county in an all-star exhibition against Lancashire (in what was dubbed the “War of the Roses” game), he cruised, picking up the win 9–3. Kendrick calculated that he struck out 348 batters in 204 innings for the Maroons in 1937. He also said he allowed 44 runs. If all those runs were earned, he would have sported a nifty 1.91 earned-run average, but his actual average was probably vastly lower as the runs were “mostly unearned as the English lads, accustomed to soccer, can’t help booting a baseball,” he wrote in a letter to the Smith Falls Record News back in Canada.

STORY OF THE SEASON

In 1938, Kendrick was determined to avoid the same fate. The British baseball landscape was changing dramatically. Sensing the game was being dominated by foreign imports, Sir John Moores consolidated his two circuits up north – the Yorkshire Baseball League and the North of England League – to form the Lancashire–Yorkshire Major League. Each team in the new league would be allowed only two or three non-British participants. This crucial feature would impact the likes of Kendrick greatly. The rationale behind the change was a positive one: if baseball was to grow in the United Kingdom, domestic players needed to develop and a glut of foreign pros was not helping that growth. “A stern attempt is being made to cut out sham amateurism in the game,” The Green Final in Oldham wrote on 26 February.

This solution may have helped meet that goal, but it was going to hurt all the Canadians and Americans who had been lured to Britain to play ball. Some, like “Lefty” Wilson, would return across the Atlantic, while others refused to end their British baseball experience. Those in the latter group flocked to the International Baseball League, a breakaway circuit with no restrictions on foreign players.

After his impressive 1937 campaign, Kendrick had options. The Oldham Greyhounds in the nascent Lancashire–Yorkshire Major League wanted him, but he was also being wooed by an International Baseball League club in Leeds. Maybe Kendrick had memories of his British footballing team-mates kicking ground balls when he was with York or, possibly, he just liked what Leeds had to
Ross Kendrick

offer, but Kendrick opted to take a chance with the renegade league. Leeds made sure Kendrick would be comfortable on the mound, securing the services of Don Adams as his battery-mate. The catcher had been Wilson’s catcher for the national champion Hull side the previous year.

At season’s start, Kendrick appeared to be returning to the same vicious cycle with Leeds that plagued him in 1937. He had put up a sparkling performance, only to be outshone by another. Wilson was gone, but Jerry Strong, who had been a key player for the London club West Ham for the previous two seasons, joined Halifax in the north. He immediately served as a replacement adversary on the hill. In one early contest, Kendrick struck out 18 batters and allowed just 2 runs, but would still be handed a loss thanks to Strong’s 1-run outing with 21 punch-outs.

Even with losses like the one to Strong, respect for Kendrick in the playing community was sturdy. Tom Forgie, who played for Newcastle in the breakaway circuit, was among Kendrick’s many admirers.

“When I first went up there, they said, ‘Wait ‘til you see Ross Kendrick. He’s a great pitcher,” Forgie told author Harvey Sahker for the book *The Blokes of Summer*. “I said that I looked forward to seeing him. And he was a very good pitcher. I found that out when I was batting against him! Some of the other pitchers were just guys who could throw the ball somewhere near the plate, and hope that you didn’t hit it. But Kendrick knew where it was going. He was exceptional.”

One programme from the 1938 season lauded Kendrick, calling him a “pitcher with a very clean style of hooks, speed and endurance.” And the *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian* offered this compliment:

Kendrick: Outside of Lefty Wilson, the finest pitcher to have played in England. One who is a credit off the field as well as on. Star pitcher in the St Lawrence League in Eastern Canada. Noted for his control and unhurried style of delivery. One of the most popular players in the Major League last season.

As much as Kendrick’s talent was undoubtedly a calling card for the International Baseball League, it was not enough to keep the fledgling league in business. With crowds as small as 500 or less, the league could not draw enough to cover costs. After just a handful of games, the season was suspended in mid-June.

At the same time, Oldham – the team that had coveted Kendrick as far back as February – still needed him. The club had been relying on another import named Alan Forrest to anchor its pitching. It was not going too well. Forrest had put up some credible performances, but the club lacked depth and Forrest’s arm was getting sore. The Greyhound’s 20–10 loss on 18 June to front-running Halifax was emblematic of the pitching woes. “The secret of the Halifax success
was that the Oldham pitchers between them walked no fewer than 11 men, and in the sixth frame it would almost be correct to say that the Halifax side walked round instead of batting round,” the Oldham Evening Chronicle lamented 2 days after the game.

Kendrick was the perfect antidote for the Greyhounds’ ills. Within days of Oldham’s embarrassing defeat, the briefly unemployed Kendrick was in uniform and on the mound for the Greyhounds. Kendrick made an immediate impact. In his debut against a solid Greenfield Giants club he allowed seven hits and struck out 14 in a 13–4 triumph. “Kendrick’s obvious ability had a tonic effect on the team as a whole,” the Oldham Standard proclaimed on 24 June.

Oldham had been mired mid-table before Kendrick joined the squad. Now, the team was playing with confidence behind the righty’s ace performances. After a heartbreaking 3–1 loss to Halifax, the newest Greyhound carried the team throughout the summer. Following the Halifax game, Kendrick dominated one of the league’s top teams, the Rochdale Greys, striking out 15 and yielding just two hits in a 9–1 victory. Kendrick even slammed two doubles in the contest. He then beat the Liverpool Giants in the third round of the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup, and in a league game against his old club, York, Kendrick stuck out 17 in a tight 3–1 win.

Kendrick’s “red-hot pitching has put new life into the Oldham Greyhounds,” wrote the Oldham Standard on 8 July, “and so long as he maintains this form they must be considered challengers for the championship of the Lancashire–Yorkshire league.”

Repaying the paper’s faith, Kendrick pitched Oldham into the finals of the Challenge Cup, which would determine the national champions. His semi-final performance was masterful. He allowed 2 runs on three hits and struck out 22 in a hard-fought 4–2 win against Hull. Kendrick must have taken particular pride in that win as he beat recent Hull addition Jerry Strong, who had bested Kendrick while a member of the Halifax team earlier in the season.

Kendrick had gone a long way towards burying the memories of the gut-wrenching losses that marred his 1937 campaign. Oldham would end up finishing just a game outside of first place in the Lancashire–Yorkshire League, and Kendrick could take credit for almost single-handedly making them a contender.

More importantly, he had manoeuvred the team into a shot at British baseball’s most prestigious hardware: the Challenge Cup. That said, the results Kendrick delivered had come at a price. In order to keep Oldham winning Kendrick threw 16 innings in the 5 days leading up to the cup final. No doubt, all that hard work must have left him fatigued as he trotted to the mound to face Rochdale in front of an estimated 5000 fans at Spotland, on 6 August.
Ross Kendrick

If Kendrick’s recent workload did not leave him at enough of a disadvantage, he was facing yet another marquee pitching opponent. Rochdale were relying on Bruce Hanks, who had been a standout hurler for the Catford Saints in southern England the season before and, in 1938, continued to impress up north. The two men lived up to expectations. Their performance that day remains arguably the most spectacular pitching duel in the history of British baseball.

Inning after inning, the two pitchers matched zeros. By at least one account, Hanks was the sharper man on the mound, but Kendrick was the grittier competitor, shrugging off the dead arm he likely had from over-work. At the end of nine innings the score remained 0–0 and neither pitcher was ready to yield to a reliever. The battle continued like a prize fight between boxers… 10th inning, 11th inning, 12th inning, 13th inning, 14th inning. No runs were scored and both pitchers stayed in the game.

Finally, in the 15th inning, one of the pitchers blinked. With two outs and a runner on first, a Rochdale batter hit a weak dribbler back to Kendrick. Blame exhaustion or a momentary lack of focus, but Kendrick’s throw sailed off the first-baseman’s glove. As it rolled away, the baserunner hurried around the bases to score the only run of the game. Kendrick had gone 15 innings, allowing no walks, five hits and striking out 20 (in comparison Hanks gave up three hits and one walk and fanned 16). Sadly, for all that Kendrick did so well, his error was the difference.

While this monumental moment might have been the psychological end for some players, Kendrick proved his mental fortitude in the aftermath of the crushing championship defeat. What came next would be his finest baseball hour.

On 11 August 1938, the United States Olympic team arrived in Plymouth. The squad was run by former Major Leaguer Leslie Mann. The ex-catcher had ferried a team of Olympians to England in 1936 to play a couple of exhibition contests following the Summer Games in Berlin. This time Mann had devised an “international test series” to serve as a tune-up for Team USA, which was readying for the 1940 Olympic Games planned for Tokyo. (World War II led to the cancellation of that event.)

The format was a five-game series across England between the Americans and an all-star team from British baseball. It was a great opportunity for domestic organizers to show the depth of talent in England. Nevertheless, they decided to put one key restriction on the English roster. Canadians would be allowed to compete, but no American players would be included. From an international sport standpoint this made sense. Canada was part of the Dominion and Canadian players had been allowed to represent England in the Olympics. In fact, Canadians figured prominently on the Great Britain squad that won the gold medal in ice hockey at the 1936 Winter Games.
By late July, Kendrick backers were pushing for his inclusion on the England squad. Under the headline “Tipped for England,” the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* wrote: “It is difficult to see how, on this form, Ross Kendrick can be overlooked as England’s first choice in the international.”

Indeed, not only was Kendrick picked for the roster, but the team’s player–manager George “Chummy” McNeil also tapped him as the opening game’s starting pitcher. McNeil would not regret that decision. Casting aside his Challenge Cup miscue, Kendrick confidently took the hill in front of 10 000 fans at Wavertree Stadium in Liverpool. The American line-up was an imposing one, featuring two future Major Leaguers – outfielder Mizell Platt, who would log five big-league seasons with the Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox, and St Louis Browns, and first-baseman Mike Schemer, who had a brief stint with the New York Giants.

Kendrick’s opposing moundman was Virgil Thompson, an accomplished collegiate hurler. Like so many times before in his British career, Kendrick joined another hurler in a pitching master-class. Through six-and-a-half innings neither man allowed a single run to score.

In past instances, Kendrick’s team often suffered a little let-down at this point and a few errors would lead to runs. But this was not a usual British club side. This squad played tight defence behind Kendrick and the pitcher kept throwing zeros up on the scoreboard. In the bottom of the seventh, England’s Danny Wright slammed a solo home run to break the deadlock. England’s offence would tack on two more tallies. Final score: England 3, USA 0. Kendrick threw a practically flawless complete game, yielding just two singles and striking out 16. (Kendrick undertook the remarkable later that day, reportedly pitching another game for his club team, the Greyhounds, according to the publication *Baseball Mercury*.)

The England righty was not done yet. He got the call in game four. With England leading the series two-to-one, a win from Kendrick could clinch overall victory. Brimming with poise, Kendrick made certain his offence would not be required to do too much to assure victory. Kendrick threw another complete-game shut-out, surrendering three hits and collecting 12 strike-outs.

Decades later, baseball potentates labelled the series the first baseball world championship. No Most Valuable Player award was made following England’s triumph, but if one had been, Kendrick would have certainly received the accolade. He earned two wins, tossing 17 scoreless innings. He struck out 28 batters in all, while allowing just five hits. It was sweet vindication for so many stellar performances in which he gave his club a chance to win, but suffered defeat.
EPILOGUE

While the 1938 season was Kendrick’s most memorable, it was far from his last in Great Britain. Following World War II, Kendrick moved to the Birmingham area and took a job as an electrician. He continued to play and set up numerous teams. He would also compete for two of the area’s greatest teams – Bromsgrove and Garringtons – and never lost his zest for the game, playing into his 60s. His stellar attitude and skill brought him scores of new fans in his later years.

“Ross was not only [a] very good [player], but also an exceptional teacher and coach,” recalled Buck Jones, who played with Kendrick in the 1960s and 1970s. “Although he was getting on in age, he was also still a very difficult man to hit.”

“I had the pleasure of being behind the plate [umpiring] on many occasions when Ross would be called upon to throw a few from the mound,” added Jon Prescott, who witnessed many of Kendrick’s games when the pitcher was in his 50s and 60s. “Yes, I made mistakes but credit to Ross he never came shouting the odds about a wrong call. He had the class to get on with the game and was respected by everybody who was involved.”

Kendrick would pass away in 1975. He was 65 years old.

In what was an outwardly exemplary life both on and off the field, the one anomaly was his decision to cut ties with his wife and three children in Canada and to never return. It was a secret he apparently shared with very few, if any, even in his later life.

Kendrick’s Canadian grand-daughter Kristine Morrison never knew the pitcher, but she did extensive research into his life. She discovered that Kendrick married in England and had two daughters. She was unable to track them down, but in talking to people who knew him it was clear that he did not share much. “He was very tight-lipped and kept things quite private,” she said. “I spoke directly to an old neighbour of his and she confirmed he was a private soul.”

As for his Canadian wife, Laura, she was a beautiful – and resilient – young woman at the time Kendrick moved to England. When Kendrick did not return, she stoically moved on. “She must have mourned the loss of Ross,” according to Morrison, “but never complained and rarely mentioned him.”

Perhaps it was that ability to compartmentalize elements of his life that made him such a successful pitcher. When he faltered in the 1938 national finals he was able to completely cast it aside and start anew against the United States Olympic team. While that quality may not always be handy, it was one that served him well when he took to the mound.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/1938.html.
Nine Aces and a Joker

SOURCES
Baseball Mercury
Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian
Oldham Evening Chronicle
Oldham Standard
Smith Falls News Record
The Green Final (Oldham)


5 – Wally O’Neil, Ace #4

1965

by JOE GRAY

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
Wally O’Neil’s two-way contributions spearheaded the Stretford Saints’ prominence in the upper echelon of mid-1960s British baseball. The 1965 season might not have been his standout pitching effort in terms of win–loss record, but his demonstration of resilience, the variety of playing opportunities, and a late-season flourish combined to make this arguably his defining year.
BACKGROUND

Walter O’Neil was born on 7 October 1936 in a city called Stratford in the Canadian province of Ontario. While it is not unusual for North American places to take their name from somewhere in Britain, in this case there was real attention to detail. The river passing through is named the Avon, and since the early 1950s the locality has hosted the globally renowned Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

Growing up, Wally – as he was universally known during his time in British baseball – lived on a farm outside Windsor, Ontario. This city sits on a waterway connecting Lake St Clair and Lake Erie called the Detroit River (in French, détroit means strait). The river forms a small segment in a snaking section of the border between Canada and the United States, and such is the geography of the frontier that the Michigan metropolis taking its name from the river lies on the north-west bank, with Windsor and the Canadian side somewhat unusually to the south east.

As a youngster, O’Neil played with various baseball and fast-pitch clubs – often competing for different hardball and softball teams in the same week – but on taking up residence at the University of Toronto his focus turned to fencing. In the academic year of 1957–58, he was a co-recipient of the George Tully Trophy, which was awarded to the fencer deemed to be most proficient in skill, style, and sportsmanship. O’Neil was a bright student, and his academic discipline naturally led to the vocation of electrical engineering. He was aware that England offered better opportunities than Canada for further training and research; thus, on graduating, the Ontarian left his homeland and secured a role at the Trafford Park site of Metropolitan–Vickers (shortly before it became Associated Electrical Industries) in Stretford, Greater Manchester. The site was, in O’Neil’s recollection, an exciting and dynamic place for any young technical person. From a sporting perspective, Stretford had been an area of historical greatness – most famously through the resident teams of Manchester United Football Club and Lancashire Cricket Club – and O’Neil was to become a part of that tradition. He soon found an outlet for his fencing talent, representing north-west England in that pursuit, and also played ice hockey and even cricket on occasion. But it was a connection at work that sparked his most enduring contribution to the Stretford sporting scene.

As British baseball struggled to recover from the loss of momentum caused by World War II, a common recruitment ploy for post-war teams was to closely monitor local firms for any new employees from Canada or the States. In this way, O’Neil soon attracted the attention of his local club, the Stretford Saints.

This team had begun playing in 1947, at Longford Park. The founding players settled on Sioux for the team’s nickname, but they turned up for their first ever match – a road game at Swinton – to find advertisements billing them as the
Wally O’Neil

Saints. This was because no-one had been able to spell their chosen moniker. The variation stuck.

In the years immediately preceding World War II, the Manchester area had boasted professional and semi-professional clubs, alongside numerous amateur teams, with major local sides including the Salford Reds, the Belle Vue Tigers, and the Manchester Blue Sox. In contrast, the local baseball landscape of the late 1940s that the Saints emerged into was one comprising just half a dozen outfits, all amateur. The Saints won the Manchester championship several times over the next 10 years, and when that league folded in 1958 they transferred to the nearby Merseyside circuit.

By 1961, the year that Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth’s single-season home run record, O’Neil had become involved with the Saints, who had established themselves as a mid-table team in the Merseyside League. In a profile on O’Neil that appeared in a local paper at the end of that season, the opportunity was taken to use the hook of a rare international story featuring Babe Ruth, his name probably being the only one in baseball that was recognizable to most readers. O’Neil was quoted as likening Maris’s feat to “hitting three times the usual number of sixes in a cricket season.” Elsewhere in the article, O’Neil dismissed the “fashionable idea that any game is a microcosm of life,” instead advising against taking baseball too seriously: “It’s just a sport like the others,” he commented. This was emblematic of the calm, light-hearted, but always rational attitude that O’Neil has carried throughout life. It certainly did not mean that O’Neil lacked motivation for bettering the Stretford Saints. He was said to have “great faith in Stretford as a breeding ground” for British baseball and to be “striving to improve his play and the team’s position and facilities.”

O’Neil became team manager in 1962 and a year later the Saints signed up to the newly formed National Baseball League. Another player profile in the local press from that time described O’Neil as “working tremendously hard for the game,” spending “most of his spare time […] organising and training players.” Much later, O’Neil would reflect that coaching baseball technique came more naturally to him than managing. Nevertheless, under his leadership, the team won the National League in 1963 and 1964. But his contribution to this success was not just as a coach and a manager: the Canadian was also the team’s ace pitcher. O’Neil always considered himself to be more of an all-round player, who had shortstop as a speciality if one had to be singled out. But the strong arm that made him adept at bullet-like throws from deep in the pocket was more than adequate to carry him as a successful pitcher in the English amateur game. “My right arm was a good friend,” he joked later in life. His talent in his new-found speciality of pitching soon earned him wider acclaim. In 1964, for instance, he was selected as a hurler for Lancashire in baseball’s spin on the county’s deep-rooted sporting rivalry with Yorkshire.
At the end of the 1964 season, O’Neil announced that he would step back from the management role, citing pressure at work, which was preventing him from devoting the time he would like to the game. Over his three seasons at the helm, the Saints had compiled a 56–13 record. And on a personal level, he had been unbeaten as a pitcher since a 5–3 loss to the Liverpool Tigers on 13 July 1963, picking up 15 victories in this time – this more than justified his conversion from an infielder. O’Neil’s replacement was a fellow Ontarian, the 24-year-old Stan Windross, who played semi-pro baseball and ice hockey before leaving his native land for Britain. He had batted .400 and posted a 7–3 record as a pitcher for the Saints in 1964. With Windross the new manager and O’Neil staying on as a player, the Saints were in a strong position to attempt a third straight National League crown, a second straight Merseyside League title, and a defence of the Orford Cup, which was a 1-day competition late in the season. Also lying ahead was the challenge of fighting for a first national championship – the premier title in the British game – which was to be determined in 1965 through play-offs involving the winners of the leading circuits.

STORY OF THE SEASON

On Sunday 16 May, at the Saints’ competitive home opener for 1965, Wally O’Neil stood face to face with a young sportsman on the path to global stardom. That man was George Best, an 18-year-old soccer player blessed with good looks and natural talent who had just claimed the league title with Manchester United. The Northern Irishman’s rise was to be meteoric, with a European Footballer of the Year award coming in 1968, but it was his activities off the field that really cemented his fame. His outlook on life was summed up well by an oft-repeated quote:

I spent 90% of my money on women, drink and fast cars. The rest I wasted.

Even back in 1965, Best was generating publicity, and so it was quite a coup for the Saints to get him out to throw a ceremonial first pitch. The connection was made by Stan Windross, who worked at the Stretford Bowl. He had invited Best, a 10-pin bowling enthusiast who frequented Windross’s alley, to sample another quintessentially American pastime.

In front of approximately 400 fans, Best handed the ball to O’Neil. The Saints were looking to emulate the recent league success of their neighbours by claiming a third straight title in their own sport. Their opponents that day, the Nottingham Saints, were easily overcome, by a score of 19–7. Since O’Neil was relieved in the fifth frame, he was not eligible for the victory. Stretford amassed 16 hits, with three coming off the bat of Larry Guio, a third Ontarian on the squad.
By the day of that home opener, O’Neil already had a victory to his name. The previous weekend, against another Nottingham team – the Athletics – he had assumed pitching duties in the fifth inning with the National League contest tied 2–2. He held the opposition hitless over the closing five frames as the Saints eased to a 12–2 victory. Aiding his cause with a 3-for-5 performance that included a double and a triple, O’Neil earned the headline in a local paper of “Wally stars with bat and ball.” The weekend before that, Stretford had engaged in a pre-season exhibition against players from the mighty East Hull Aces baseball club, whose pool of players were organized – with some overlap – into a National League team called the Hull Aces and a Yorkshire League team known as the Kingston Aces. In the friendly, the right-hander from Canada had pitched into the fifth, exiting with a 2–0 deficit, but crossed with the winning tally in a bottom-of-the-ninth 3-run rally, having found his way onto the bases with a double. The first two scores in the rally came via a homer from catcher and clean-up hitter John Collins, who was described in a write-up as “the most unpredictable and colourful player in English baseball.” The visitors from Humberside would not have been too disheartened by the loss, though, as star player Gus Seddon pitched his way to 14 strike-outs. A healthy rivalry already existed between the Saints and the Aces before the National League was formed, as they had mutual admiration and thus readily organized exhibitions games. However, the additional layers of formal league competition with the Hull Aces and the potential to meet the Kingston Aces in the national championship play-offs ratcheted the significance. It was a rivalry that O’Neil still recalled fondly decades later. Also competing in the National League northern circuit in 1965 were the Liverpool Aces, the Bromsgrove Garringtons, the Austin British Legion Bombers (of Birmingham), and the two Nottingham teams.

On 23 May, the Saints locked horns with the Liverpool Aces. A preview for the game noted that Liverpool’s Alan Williams was “one of the best pitchers” in Britain and that O’Neil anticipated “a great duel.” Windross, who was recovering from a hand injury, elected to start and served up five scoreless frames but thereafter struggled, conceding 2 runs in the sixth, and was forced to bring in Arthur Kendall in the seventh with two runners on and none down. The newcomer lacked control, giving up 3 runs without registering an out, and so O’Neil was brought in. He successfully snubbed the rally, conceding only one further tally in the inning, and then held the Aces scoreless in the eighth to keep the game tied at 6–6. In the top of the ninth, Windross slapped a single into left-field to drive in the go-ahead run, which was scored by Collins, a draughtsman in his early 20s who worked at the same complex as O’Neil. Collins’s Canadian colleague signed off a 7–6 win with a one–two–three bottom of the ninth.

The following Sunday, in another National League game, O’Neil was handed the ball against the travelling Bromsgrove Garringtons. The visitors’ starter
was Johnny Barrass, a highly experienced and versatile player whose career had included caps for England back in 1952. Stretford scored twice in the bottom of the first but Bromsgrove responded with a run on an error in the outfield. The game remained tight throughout with the only other runs in an eventual 4–1 Saints victory coming when Ron Kann singled home Collins in the sixth and Windross doubled home Andy Parkes in the seventh. O’Neil scattered eight hits over nine frames. While it was an outfield error that had led to the only run against O’Neil, his infield had offered fine support, with Len Ridgway and Bob Dawson notable performers as a trio of double-plays were turned in the first four innings.

O’Neil’s complete-game victory represented his 18th consecutive win in Stretford colours without a defeat, but that run was set to come under extreme pressure on the first weekend in June. The Saints were heading out to Rotterdam to participate in the northern bracket of the European Championships, leaving Stretford on Friday afternoon and returning Monday evening. This was the first time a British club had been invited to compete in the European club competition, which was in its third season. The Saints had earned their place via their National League triumph in 1964. A local paper noted that O’Neil was slated to get the start against Rotterdam Sparta in what was described, without hyperbole, as “the most important game [the Saints] have ever played.”

O’Neil recalls that the Saints did have some experience of playing on the Continent. During the previous season, they had won two out of three games in a series of friendly matches in The Netherlands. The last game was an 11–0 victory in Amsterdam that O’Neil remembers to this day for the fact that the home team stopped placing the numbers on the scoreboard mid-way through the contest, so upset were they with the scoreline.

In 1965, though, a powerful Dutch side proved too much for O’Neil and the Saints, but their 12–2 loss was more respectable than the 11–0 whitewash that Rotterdam inflicted on the German representatives. A consolation encounter for the Saints with Luchtbal was more balanced, but it ended 6–5 in favour of the Belgians, which meant that the English side would return home without a win. Tony Kennedy, club secretary, commented: “We would have liked a little more success, but at least we have taken Great Britain into European competition and this can only do good for the game.”

Another stern test awaited back home, with a game against Merseyside League title rivals the Liverpool Mormon Yankees lined up for the following weekend. The Yankees were one of several notable squads of Latter Day Saints to have competed in British domestic baseball. In the 1930s, Mormon teams in London and Rochdale both claimed national titles. O’Neil was assigned starting duties and steered Stretford to a 3–1 lead after four innings but at that point was replaced because of arm trouble, possibly having been over-pitched in
Rotterdam. Calamity flipped the direction of the game, with 3 runs crossing for the Yankees when a collision between Parkes and Al Frost left the two Saints outfielders in need of treatment. Windross was the pitcher of record in what ended as an 8–4 loss.

Windross rebounded with a gem on Saturday 19 June to end the three-game slide. He struck out 14 and yielded just four hits in a complete-game 19–2 victory over the Liverpool Aces. The Stretford offence pounded out 22 hits, with O’Neil proving his two-way prowess by going 5-for-6 with a home run. The Saints were due to face the Cubs the next day but the game was called off by the Liverpool team on the Saturday. The Saints attempted to arrange another game, which was an unsurprising desire given the nature of their skid-stopping win, but they were unable to contact any team willing to play at that short notice. Instead, they would have to wait until the following Saturday, when they were scheduled to play the Bromsgrove Garringtons in an exhibition game at Longford Stadium that coincided with the Stretford pageant.

Built in the Longford Park area where the Saints had started playing back in the 1940s, Longford Stadium had been opened in 1965, primarily as an athletics track, but also hosting lacrosse and soccer matches. It was described in a local newspaper that August as already being the busiest outside London. And the Saints were clamouring to make baseball a regular fixture there. After their early days, the Stretford baseball club had moved to a small pitch in the corner of the corporation playing fields at Turn Moss, which were predominantly used by amateur soccer teams. A backstop and baseline screens were erected and taken down each year, and the team boasted a public address system. However, other National League teams had grander facilities. Hull, for instance, played at the Kingston Rovers’ rugby league stadium and benefitted not just from the enclosure and the stands but also from the changing rooms and social facilities. Even though the Saints were enjoying success on the field, the disparity in the quality of venues led to something of an inferiority complex. The residents of Stretford saw themselves as the poor relations of British baseball, and Pete Dawson – an infielder with the club and another draughtsman at O’Neil’s firm – once commented that seeing the facilities possessed by other National League teams would make the Saints feel ashamed to bring clubs to their own ground.

The Saints had presented a case to the Stretford Recreation Grounds Committee to secure use of Longford Stadium for the completion of their 1965 schedule. George Livsley, a coach and one of the founding members, even threatened moving the club away from Stretford if the matter could not be settled. The Saints’ cause was strengthened by a petition with 400 signatures, and it was felt that a big turn-out of local fans on the Saturday for
the Longford Stadium exhibition game could also be of benefit. In spite of uncertain weather conditions, a crowd of 250 assembled for the game. O’Neil was described in the press as having “impressed with the stick,” and he and his team-mates were said to have thoroughly enjoyed the occasion:

The Saints really showed their delight at being able to play on such a fine field with some excellent fielding and aggressive batting, the boundary fences being a real incentive for the big hitters.

That Sunday, against the Austin Bombers in Birmingham, O’Neil continued his fine form with the bat by collecting three hits in a win that maintained the Saints’ unbeaten start in the National League. Windross fanned six and walked one, yielding 6 runs on eight hits over the same number of frames.

On Saturday 3 July, a diversion from the Saints’ parallel league campaigns came by way of a game against the Liverpool Mormon Yankees in a knock-out competition known as the Artco Trophy. O’Neil seemed to be fully recovered from the arm trouble he experienced when the teams had met 3 weeks earlier: he struck out 10, conceding nine hits in a complete-game effort. But the Yankees profited from six Stretford errors – all their batches of scoring were built around at least one miscue – and at the same time played flawless defence of their own. The defensive disparity might have been greater, but Saints first-baseman Pete Dawson was reported to have been “a tower of strength.” In any case, O’Neil found himself being handed a harsh 5–1 loss. He had gone 2-for-3 and driven in the run in the seventh that broke up the shut-out attempt by Jones. This was the first of three games in 5 days at Turn Moss.

The next day, the Saints’ offence broke out with 27 hits against the Nottingham Athletics to gain a 26–8 National League win for Kendall, a young pitcher who would surely have benefited from O’Neil’s presence on the squad. Ridgway was the offensive standout with a 5-for-6 day, but O’Neil also starred by collecting three hits, including another home run. The third contest in the sequence of games at Turn Moss was a Lancashire Cup quarter-final against the Liverpool Aces. Windross pitched solidly and O’Neil went 3-for-5 in a 10–3 triumph.

On 10 July, when O’Neil came into pitch in the fourth inning of a road game against the Liverpool Tigers, a win looked like a remote possibility. Kendall, the Saints’ starter, had surrendered 10 runs and a continuous light rain made for conditions that were far from ideal for controlled pitching (as is the case now in British baseball, there was financial pressure to complete games using as few balls as possible). However, as was noted in the pun-friendly British sports media, the skill of O’Neil “caged” the Tigers and his team fought back from a 6-run deficit to take the rain-shortened contest 19–11 in seven frames. In the drizzle, the Saints were handed 21 free passes;
in contrast, O’Neil gave up just two in his four frames, to go with a solitary hit. His skill was again on show the following day in a tournament at Nottingham, where his performance earned him selection as pitcher for a select Great Britain squad scheduled to play an international in August. The opponents were billed in the programme for the event as The Netherlands, but O’Neil recalls that they were actually a junior national team.

The next weekend, two strong Liverpool teams awaited the Saints. On the Saturday, the Stretford squad had a third chance to open their account against the Yankees. The rivalry between the Saints and Yankees was another that O’Neil remembered with admiration decades later. In this particular instalment, not only was O’Neil on his game but he received run support and was also backed up by his fielders. In what was described as an all-round “team effort highlighted by the exceptional fielding of Pete ‘Fingers’ Dawson at second base,” O’Neil surrendered just five hits in a complete-game 8–2 victory. A local paper ran the headline “Wally blasts Yankees,” noting that:

He was on top form for this vital game and the hard hitting visitors were subdued by his stinging fast ball and good curve.

On the Sunday, the Saints maintained their unbeaten start in the National League by edging past the Liverpool Aces 9–8. The game was played at the Swinton Cricket Club as a testimonial for rugby league star Ken Gower, who had been named back in May by the Manchester Evening News as player of the year. Windross struck out 12 in a complete-game performance, and O’Neil tied battery-mate Collins for the day’s best hitter with a return of four hits, including a round-tripper, from five at-bats. Another long outing from Windross the following weekend resulted in a 9–0 shut-out at the Nottingham Saints as Stretford’s improved defensive form continued. This was illustrated by errorless play from an infield – anchored by O’Neil at shortstop – that was described in the press as having performed “exceptionally” well. “Sparky” O’Neil, as he was occasionally called (presumably with reference to his profession), also had a big day with the bat, going 4–for-5 once again.

By 1 August, a day on which the Saints sent the Hull Aces home with an 18–9 defeat, Stretford had moved to the top of the Merseyside League and opened up a three-game gap at the top of the National League northern pool. Hull lay in second place in that National League bracket, while at the other end of the table the two Nottingham teams were scrapping to avoid a cellar finish.

On 7 August, Stretford lined up for the final of the Lancashire Cup. The Saints had been eliminated from the Artco Trophy by the Liverpool Mormon Yankees, and now another Liverpool team, the Tigers, stood between them and their first
Nine Aces and a Joker

hardware of the season. O’Neil would be pitching the next day in London for Great Britain against the Dutch youngsters, and so he was limited to a brief spell in relief. Instead, Ridgway was given the start, but he proved unable to contain the Tigers and the chance of a first title of 1965 slipped away as the Saints fell 10–4.

In Crystal Palace, O’Neil showed no signs that the relief stint had caused fatigue. Although Great Britain lost the game 3–1, the right-hander struck out 11 and walked two, conceding seven hits in a performance that earned him Most Valuable Player honours and kick-started a remarkable late-season flourish. The winning pitcher for the Dutch was Rudy Doma, who was also in the Sparta team that had defeated the Saints in the European Championships. The visitors felt strongly that their pitcher, and not O’Neil, should have been named Most Valuable Player and they carried him aloft in protest. But O’Neil recalls two other aspects of his performance that suggest the award was made justly, rather than with partisanship. The first was a smart piece of fielding early in the game. A sharply hit ball ricocheted off the Great Britain first-baseman, but O’Neil, who had naturally broken from his pitching delivery towards first base, found the ball land in his path and he was able to scoop it up and win a foot-race with the batter to the bag. The second memorable moment came on the base-paths. In the bottom of the eighth, O’Neil found himself on second base with one out, having drawn a walk to lead off the frame. Great Britain had fallen 1 run behind in the top of the inning and O’Neil was determined to make it round the sacks to restore parity. He wanted to steal third and decided that deception was going to be the means by which he would achieve it. The pitcher feigned coldness by calling for his warm-up jacket to be brought on, but the battery remained wary. On the next pitch, O’Neil developed the charade by standing rooted to the bag. Then, for the next offering, he took a small lead and made a tear for third. The surprised catcher was able to make the play a close one, but O’Neil had his bag. Unfortunately for the Canadian, all the hard work came to nothing as the top of the line-up could not bring him home.

With little time for recovery, O’Neil found himself in a mid-week showdown at Liverpool’s Long Lane ground, against the Yankees. The Saints needed a win to sustain their challenge in the Merseyside League. A classic encounter unfolded as the first five frames passed without a score. In the top of the sixth, O’Neil and Pete Dawson got on base with hits and Windross walked to load up the sacks, but Yankees pitcher Jones struck out Frost to extinguish the threat. In the bottom half of the frame, an error and a single put two Yankees on base. Under great pressure, O’Neil struck out the next two batters and then induced an easily fieldable grounder to third base, but Ridgway’s throw was wild and Liverpool opened up a 2–0 lead. This is how the game finished when bad light
stopped play after seven innings. O’Neil gave up three hits and no walks while striking out 10. Jones whiffed 16.

The next pitching appearance for the in-form Canadian came that Sunday in the “nightcap” of a double-header at Turn Moss. In the opener, a 15–2 win over the Liverpool Tigers, O’Neil had paced the Saints’ offence with a 3-for-4 showing. But this was in the Merseyside League, a competition in which the Saints had already slipped out of contention. Thus, it was merely an appetizer for the second game, where a win would put Stretford out of reach in the National League northern pool. The Austin Bombers were the visiting team, and they fell 16–0 as O’Neil twirled a masterful three-hit shut-out, with 12 punch-outs and no walks.

With the National League northern title already sewn up, a 6–1 loss to the Hull Aces the following weekend was not of great importance, but it was observed in the press that the Saints displayed “some atrocious fielding” and “appeared weary after their strenuous season,” which was of concern given that the most important domestic games of the year were still to come. Gus Seddon sat down 16 Saints by way of strikes, and O’Neil’s run-scoring triple was the only highlight for the visitors. A Saints reporter noted that Hull’s Craven Park facility attracted a “fine crowd” and suggested that “if the Saints had use of a stadium of any kind they would easily pull in spectators in their thousands.” But Stretford had been unsuccessful in their attempt to gain long-term use of Longford Stadium.

O’Neil made one final pitching appearance in the National League northern bracket, being given a tricky save opportunity in a road game against the Bromsgrove Garringtons. O’Neil had earlier hit what was described as a “tremendous home run,” but this was cancelled out when the power-hitting Gower brothers, batting back to back, first sent an even bigger shot “onto the railway lines outside the park” and then followed it up with another “big clout.” O’Neil and the brothers from Bromsgrove were to share the honours at the end of the season for the most home runs in the circuit.

The Saints moved into a 7–6 lead in the top of the ninth, with O’Neil scoring one of the runs after being intentionally walked. The Ontarian entered as pitcher in the bottom of the ninth with one on and none out, but there was no hint that the home side would score as he struck out the first two batters and then picked off the runner on first to end the game. Victory over the US Navy, winners of the southern bracket, sealed a third straight National League title for the Saints and set up a national championship semi-final against the Thames Board Mills – London area league winners – in Purfleet, Essex.

O’Neil turned in arguably his finest pitching performance of the year in the semi-final. He struck out 15 batters and yielded just two hits over seven scoreless
frames in a 7–2 victory that sent the Saints through to their first national final. His performance, which also included a team-leading three hits, earned a rare baseball headline on the back page of the *Manchester Evening News*.

Before the season finale, which was scheduled for 3 October and would see Stretford return to Craven Park to do battle against the Yorkshire League’s Kingston Aces, the Saints had the task of defending their Orford Cup title in a 1-day tournament on 26 September. Fifty Saints supporters, who had travelled by coach for the event, watched their team beat the Middlesex Athletics 3–0 to set up an afternoon clash with Bromsgrove. The hosts had shocked the Hull Aces 2–1 in their semi-final. O’Neil, who had been miserly since mid-August, pitched with great command in the final and was unfazed by the ejection of his catcher “Rocky” Collins, who was reported to have “bumped and jostled the umpire” after being called out on a close play at the plate. The Saints led 2–1 and had two outs in the final frame, but an error by Parkes on a routine play put a man on second. A vivid description of what followed appeared in the game report:

O’Neil threw, the batter swung and crashed a vicious line drive which Pete Dawson was perfectly positioned to make the catch at second base [...] The next instant, the diamond erupted as the joyful Saints mobbed Pete for this superb catch, undoubtedly one of his finest [in 11 years with the club].

The veteran Barrass had thrown a dozen innings that day in pitching both games for Bromsgrove, and his side had narrowly missed a double scalp. For the Saints, who now had a second trophy for the year, attention turned to the upcoming national final.

A crowd approaching 1000 in number gathered at Craven Park for a keenly anticipated contest that determined not only the British champion for 1965 but also the European club representative for 1966. O’Neil would be duelling with the wiry figure of Gus Seddon, who had posted strike-out counts of 14 and 16 in two encounters with the Saints earlier in the season.

O’Neil scored the opening run on the contest after getting on base with a single in the top of the first, but he made two errors in the bottom of the frame and found himself in an early bases-loaded jam with only one out. However, he calmly picked his way out, as was noted in the game report from Peter Shorten, Hull manager:

With ice cold, ruthless pitching he struck out the next two batters in eight pitches – probably the best pitching of the game.
A double from O’Neil in the third brought in a runner to make the score 2–0, but a reporter noted that he was pitching “without his usual fire” and was “sensing the game slipping away” as Kingston hit back, while the Stretford infield “threw the ball about alarmingly.” The Aces, in contrast, were displaying fine fielding form, with Don Smallwood snaring five catches in the outfield; one had “a hint of greatness about it,” in the words of his manager. Ultimately, Kingston won 4–2 despite being out-hit six to five. Seddon had eight strike-outs and a walk against him. O’Neil fanned 12 and walked none.

EPILOGUE
The Stretford Saints made the national final again in 1966 and this time won, overcoming the Liverpool Aces by a score of 3–1. The club also won National League titles in 1971 and 1972. But they never got the facilities they craved in Stretford and were thus forced to move farther from the centre of Manchester, to the ground of the Kersal rugby union club. In 1973 they finished with a 5–5 record in the Merseyside League, but shortly after they faded from existence. They remain one of the great clubs of British baseball history, and their peak came when Wally O’Neil was at the helm, either as manager or as ace pitcher.

O’Neil stayed in the game for several years. In 1966, he pitched for and managed a north of England all-star team in a game against their southern counterparts, at Wilmslow rugby union club in Cheshire. O’Neil remembers having “totally mismanaged that game, not having appreciated the objective of the match owing to a mix of personal stress and the illness of a senior key organizer at the ball club.” Much unhappiness was caused on all sides, he recalls, including his own afterwards. But this was a rare blot during years of tireless commitment to baseball in Britain.

Finishing the 1966 season as the outright home-run champion in the north, O’Neil also drove in a league-best 39 runs. In 1968 he gained another Great Britain cap. But the following year it was announced at work that his division would be moving to a different site in another city as part of the fall-out from his employer’s merger with the General Electric Company back in 1967. Having worked and played baseball in Britain for 11 years, he returned to his native continent and took an engineering role in Michigan, where he would spend the final 30 years of his career. His work in England had set him up well: he is now author or co-author on approximately 30 patents.

O’Neil benefited in other ways from his extended stay in England, beyond the enjoyment gained from his involvement in domestic and international baseball. He had crossed the Atlantic in the late 1950s as a single man, but he returned to North America with a wife and two children. He met his partner at a fencing competition and had a daughter and then a son with her while they were living...
Nine Aces and a Joker

in England. They had a second son after settling in Michigan who went on to become a United States Mariner Corps officer, serving in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Their daughter clearly had a soft spot for England. On growing up she chose to return to her country of birth. She now lives in Buckinghamshire.

Today, the trusty right arm of the 75-year-old Wally O’Neil is put to good use in home-improvement projects, but up until 2010 he was still competing in high-level slow-pitch tournaments, where former Major League Baseball players were not an uncommon site. He still had the strength in his right arm to field shortstop into his 70s. But “various other parts of the body began to wear out,” he recently reflected in a wonderfully blithe manner, and it was time to bring down the curtain on the sporting career of the man from Stratford who became a Saint in Stretford.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/1965.html.

SOURCES

Baseball Courier
Baseball Mercury
Liverpool Echo
Manchester Comet
Manchester Evening News
Stretford and Urmston Journal
Stretford County Express

Baseball in Europe: a country by country history

Baseball without Borders: the international pastime
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Alan Asquith was one of a number of star pitchers from Hull’s formidable baseball scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is Asquith’s superb performances in crucial games during 1968 that gained him the nod in this book over local peers such as Tony Sewell.
BACKGROUND

Immediately before World War II, at the peak of British baseball’s popularity, Kingston upon Hull boasted enough teams to sustain a four-division amateur league. So engrained had baseball become in the life of this port on the great Humber tidal estuary that in the 1950s the sport rebounded better there from the war’s disruption than in any other north England locale. While this resurgence did not return Hull to the level it had reached at its zenith, a 10-team local league was perfectly respectable in the mid-1950s. But as the decade drew on, the number of players and clubs dwindled again, and by 1960 recruitment had become of paramount importance to prevent baseball losing its grip on Humberside forever.

One notable recruit to the Hull baseball scene at the time was a tall rookie named Alan Asquith (he appeared as “Allan” in an in memoriam notice but was consistently referred to by the shorter version in British baseball circles, a convention maintained here). Like many greenhorns, Asquith was stationed in the outfield for his first couple of years, but he impressed his team-mates on the Hull Braves with his strong arm and it became clear that his was no ordinary talent. Johnny Oldman, the Braves’ ace at that time, took on Asquith as a mentoring project and began to teach him the fundamentals of pitching. Oldman, in the view of team-mate Dave Fowlie, was a competent pitcher in his own right, served reliably by his curveball, and was highly regarded as a coach. Fowlie thought of Asquith as unusual among baseball players in being an introvert, but this was perhaps a further reason for his destiny being that most isolated of baseball roles.

Asquith was said to be a bright man and was employed as a foreman at Hull’s Metal Box company. At 6 feet plus he would have presented an imposing figure to his crew. Oldman relished the time he spent coaching Asquith, who he found to be a pleasant and easy-going man off the field, and a good pupil. The project was working, and the tutor–scholar pairing shared Hull League pitching duties. But Oldman’s was not the only eye that Asquith had caught. Executives at the East Hull Aces, Humberside’s foremost club, saw the potential of the pitcher and approached him with an offer of a roster spot. Asquith, not surprisingly, had feelings of loyalty for the Braves and thus felt a need to seek approval from his mentor for the proposed move. Oldman did not want to stand in the way of what would be a major step for his cadet. By 1966, Asquith was an Ace.

Don Smallwood – a long-serving British baseball administrator and a major figure at the East Hull club in several roles – saw the acquisition of Asquith as a vital component in the Aces’ string of successes in that era. “Alan hated defeat,” Smallwood recently reflected. “He was a very good team player and not a person who courted the limelight.”

The recruit’s impact was immediate. In 1966 he was awarded the pitching title in the northern division of the Major League, a rebranded National League. He paced the circuit with a 1.62 earned-run average and 110 strike-outs, gained while walking only 18 batters and yielding just 39 hits over 61 innings. The following season, which was a year in which the club moved from Craven Park to play at the Alderman Kneeshaw Centre (said to
Alan Asquith

have been designed against the plans for the field at New York’s Shea Stadium), Asquith retained that title and also scooped pitching honours in the two other leagues that his East Hull Aces sides competed in. The club’s cabinet lacked the most significant hardware of all, though. No Hull team had made the national final since the Kingston Aces defeated Wally O’Neil and the Stretford Saints back in 1965. Still, Humberside baseball was again boasting durable health, and Asquith was nearing his peak.

STORY OF THE SEASON

The East Hull Aces baseball club, who in 1965 fielded the national champion Kingston Aces and National League–contending Hull Aces, had by 1968 dropped “East” from their umbrella title. That season, the club nomenclature allowed for a clearer distinction between the ranking of their teams within the regional leagues. The Northern Senior Division representatives were called the Hull Kingston Aces, while a team known as Kingston B were entered into the Hull Subsidiary League and the North Eastern Regional circuit. The club’s Major League entrants continued with the simpler Hull Aces moniker.

It seemed that, from the season’s start, there was much fluidity of personnel between the teams. On 28 April, Kingston B scored 20 unanswered runs in what was a rough welcome to a Nottingham Athletic team said in the press to be starting “from the bottom with their team building.” The following Sunday, Hull Kingston Aces made heavy work of the same team, only obtaining the cushion of a 6–1 lead in the closing innings.

By mid-May, four pitchers were staking their claim to be the ace of Humberside. Alan Asquith’s team-mate Gus Seddon had conquered a strong wind to strike out 11 batters in a cup game. Keith Marshall had fanned 13 for the Hull Royals in the Subsidiary League. And, on 19 May, Asquith duelled with the Royals’ Tony Sewell in a Northern Senior Division match-up that represented the first clash of 1968 in the fierce local rivalry. Sewell pitched into the 10th inning in a complete-game performance, whiffing nine, but the Aces edged the contest 8–7. Seddon gained the win in relief of Asquith, who had logged six frames and as many strike-outs.

The following Saturday, Asquith pitched for Kingston B against the Royals and fanned 11 over five innings in a 27–2 victory. Sewell had been saved to pitch for the Royals the next day in a Major League encounter and with a fresh arm struck out a staggering 17 batters as his team overcame the Stretford Saints 6–5. On the same day – pitching on no rest – Asquith shared Hull Kingston’s mound duties with Seddon and notched up 13 strike-outs, which, in the words of a reporter, included a “series of unbroken wins” over nine batters. Added together, that was 24 punch-outs for Asquith in a little over 24 hours. This was great form to be taking into June’s European club championship.

As the Aces made final preparations for their trip to the Continent, the Royals’ pitching staff got the better of Hull Priestman twice. On the first occasion, Marshall
Nine Aces and a Joker

twirled a complete-game victory that was peppered with 16 punch-outs. The second encounter came in the opening round of the National Cup, a competition that would determine the 1968 British champions. Sewell struck out 14 batters in a 22–0 win.

In the Aces’ only previous European cup game, in 1966, they had been blanked 8–0 by the Belgian representatives. In 1968, against the German side Colt 45 in their home city of Darmstadt, Hull again gave their pitcher no run support. Asquith yielded a home run in the first frame of an eventual 7–0 loss, but he settled down thereafter and finished with 12 punch-outs. The Aces would meet a near-identical fate in the 1969 tournament, losing 9–0 to that year’s champions, Europhon Milano. It was almost two decades later when a British club next entered the European club championships.

The 1968 tour schedule, besides that European cup game, saw the Aces play two Dutch teams and another German side. In Nijmegen, against what was described as a Dutch all-star squad, Asquith struck out 13 but his Aces fell 11–5. Versus Wiesbaden, Asquith had to retire from the mound because of a sore arm, and the German team matched the result that Colt 45 had gained against the Brits. The other game was a 21–10 loss against Schiedam.

Back in England, Asquith’s arm was sufficiently healed for him to resume pitching duties, but he soon suffered another injury. Playing against Birmingham Dunlop he hurt his ankle and had to be replaced by Seddon. A newspaper report from the following week noted that Asquith was diagnosed with torn ligaments, giving the Aces cause to reassess their prospects of gaining silverware that season. Their most immediate concern was a Major League match-up with the Royals on Sunday 23 June. In that game, Seddon out-duelled Sewell as the Aces battled to a 3–2 victory. The following weekend, Seddon pitched the Aces to another Major League win, this time over the Bromsgrove Garringtons by a score of 15–6.

The first weekend of July was assigned for completion of the quarter-final stage in the knock-out competition for the British national title. Sewell sent the Royals into the semis with a solid performance against a Midlands representative. The Aces, who had been awarded a bye into the last eight, hosted the Stretford Saints and Seddon continued as pitcher. Going into the final frame Hull led 5–2, but the Saints stunned the home crowd by plating 6 runs in the top of the inning. It looked like the Royals would have to assume sole responsibility for bringing the national crown back to Humberside, particularly after the Aces gave away two quick outs and had pitcher Seddon at bat. He was not thought of as a two-way player and soon had two strikes against him, but he managed to beat out a grounder to second base and got on board. Hull were still alive, and they had begun to rally.

Next up was Dick Hammond, who singled, and behind him Brian Brook walked to load the sacks. Two of these runners scored on a John Read double, reducing the deficit to 1 run. This brought to the plate Frank Parker, who had been British batting champion the previous year with a .473 average in the National League. The fightback appeared to
be over when Parker hit an infield grounder; nevertheless, he hustled towards first base and suddenly saw that he had a chance to make it when the throw bounced in front of Stan Windross at the bag. The events that followed were described in the Hull Daily Mail:

[Windross] snatched the ball and juggled, ball and man arriving at the same time. Chief Umpire Jacklin with no hesitation called “safe” and Brook scored the equalising run. The decision caused uproar amongst the Stretford players and in the confusion Read stole to 3rd base. Next batter for Aces, Smallwood, was in position and the ball was in the pitcher’s hand. John Read went haring for home plate and took everyone by surprise to score the winning run.

Capping the comeback with a straight steal of home, Read had given the Hull Aces a reason to be jubilant, and further cause for celebration came from the imminence of Asquith’s return. He was eased back into action with a relief appearance for Kingston B on Saturday 13 July, although he still managed to pick up seven strike-outs. For the Royals, Sewell continued to look sharp as he fanned eight in a 15–6 win over Nottingham Athletic. Both pitchers were selected in the Great Britain squad for an upcoming friendly with The Netherlands.

Whether it was down to Asquith not having fully recovered from his ankle problem or because Great Britain manager Terry Warner preferred the pitching of Sewell, it was the latter who got the nod against the Dutch. The game was played at the Hull Aces’ ground, and despite the contest finishing 7–2 in favour of the visitors, the local paper described Sewell as the “star of the game,” having had “the Dutch batters tied up.”

On the final weekend of July, the Stretford Saints returned to the Alderman Kneeshaw Centre, the field where they had suffered heartbreak 4 weeks earlier in the quarter-final of the national cup competition. Perhaps anticipating another hard-fought contest, a “large crowd” was reported to have been present. Asquith was restored in the starting role and delivered six strong innings, retiring nine Saints on strikes. Seddon pitched the final three frames, striking out five, and the game finished 15–7 to the home side. The following Sunday, Asquith again registered nine strike-outs in a winning effort, this time over Nottingham Athletic in the Northern Senior Division.

Saturday 17 August was the date of a Northern Senior Division clash between Hull Kingston Aces and Hull Royals. Seddon started for the Aces to keep Asquith fresh for their national cup semi-final the next day. The Royals would not play their last-four cup game, against Nottingham Athletic, until the following weekend, and thus Sewell was given the start. The Royals hurler whiffed nine in inflicting a 5–0 shut-out on his opponents. Asquith came in to pitch the closing three frames.

The visitors to the Alderman Kneeshaw Centre that Sunday for the national championship semi-final were the Liverpool Tigers. Their most famous trip to Hull had come in 1962, when they played the Aces in that season’s national final, at Craven Park.
Nine Aces and a Joker

Parker – in 1968 the first-choice catcher – that day pitched for the Humberside team, who were playing in their first ever national title decider. Despite Parker striking out 10 and walking only four in a complete-game performance, it was Alan Williams of the Tigers who emerged the winning pitcher.

The 1968 cup clash between these two great British baseball clubs began in a thunderstorm. Asquith faced the minimum number of batters in the top of the first. Ken Dulson, who was one of two members of the Tigers’ line-up surviving from the starting nine for the 1962 final, struck out leading off. Asquith walked the next batter but then picked him off first. He sent the Tigers into field in the bottom of the first by handling a grounder back to the mound from the third man up. In their half of the frame, the Aces managed to bring lead-off batter George Jackson round to score. It was a similar story in the second inning, with Asquith retiring the Tigers in order – beginning with Hugh King, the other surviving member of the 1962 line-up – and then watching his Aces plate a second run. Again aided by a pick-off, Asquith made it nine up and nine down through three innings, while the Hull team this time scored 2 runs.

A lead-off hit from Dulson in the top of the fourth was backed up by a one-out single to reduce the arrears to 4–1, but Asquith bore down to retire 14 of the next 15 Tigers hitters. Nevertheless, the Aces were still within Liverpool’s range as the Merseysiders came to bat in the top of the ninth. This was thanks to a battling long-relief spell from Dulson in which the only run had come when Parker was driven in by Alan Wilson, Asquith’s catcher that day. Trailing 5–1, the Tigers got their lead-off man aboard to put the tying run in the on-deck circle but traded in two ground-outs to score him. With two down, King fouled off a series of offerings from Asquith but only managed to convert his show of defiance into a fly-ball that was swallowed up in right-field. The Hull pitcher wound up with 10 punch-outs in the 115-pitch complete-game win and in terms of hits against him he had only yielded that pair in the fourth frame. He had delivered a gem in the Hull Aces’ biggest domestic game of the year up to that point.

The following weekend was a relatively quiet one for the Hull Aces baseball club, with a Northern Senior Division win over the Tigers – pitched by Seddon – being their only game, but there were two significant pieces of news in the local paper that had direct implications for the organization. The first was that Stretford had defeated “Bromsgrove to end the latter’s hopes of overhauling the Hull team” in the Major League, effectively crowning the Aces as overall champions of the National Baseball League (the name assigned, in 1968, to the governing body’s entire league structure). The second piece of news concerned their opponents in the national cup final. The Royals, behind yet another complete game from Sewell, had romped past Nottingham Athletic in their semi-final. The Hull Daily Mail celebrated the course that the knock-out tournament had taken: the “all-Hull baseball final should be a thriller,” wrote a reporter.

The Aces and Royals warmed up for their national final showdown – scheduled for Monday 2 September at Nottingham’s Harvey Hadden stadium – by playing out
Alan Asquith

a 10-inning Major League contest on the Saturday immediately before. The Royals won the match, and while that had no meaningful bearing on the circuit, which had already been sewn up, it would certainly have given the Aces’ neighbours a boost going into Monday’s title decider. The two giants of Hull and British baseball truly were neighbours: they were located within a mile of each other in the eastern extremity of Hull’s urban spread.

The 1968 national final pitted against one another not just rival teams but also two of the country’s top hurlers: Asquith and Sewell. And if this was to be a pitcher’s duel it would be a genuine one, as opposed to an artefact of weak batting. When given the chance, both the Aces’ and the Royals’ offence had torn apart previous opponents that season. On the day, conditions were far from favourable for tight pitching. In the words of the Hull Daily Mail:

The 1st inning had not been completed when a heavy thunderstorm hit the stadium. The force of the storm made it necessary for the umpire to call in the players. When the game resumed both pitchers were going to be in trouble on the wet ground.

Such was the talent of Asquith and Sewell, though, that neither pitcher looked like losing a grip on the ball or the battle. Only one runner, an Ace, made it round the bases in the first three innings, and this was attributable to an errant throw from the Royals’ catcher. Another error in the fourth gave the Aces two more tallies, when they might only have had one. With Asquith holding firm, the scoreline read 3–0 as the crowd stretched any numb appendages during the middle of the seventh.

Brian Lamb drew a walk to lead off the bottom of the seventh for the Royals and after stealing second advanced to third on a passed ball. William Cornforth singled to score Lamb and bring Sewell, representing the tying run, to the plate. Asquith ran the count full against his pitching adversary but drew a swing and a miss and then quickly gained two infield pop-ups to keep the lead at 2 runs. In the eighth, the Aces capitalized on a third fielding miscue by their opponents to restore a 3-run advantage, their pitcher being the run-scorer on this occasion. In the bottom of the ninth of the most important domestic game of 1968, Lamb got on base again, this time with a one-out single. Facing a 4–1 deficit, Cornforth again advanced his team-mate, but this time at the expense of an out. Sewell came to the plate with the Royals’ fate now in his bat rather than his pitching repertoire. Asquith, on his 119th pitch, induced a pop-up back to Parker, his catcher, to beat Sewell in this encounter and the game. Both pitchers had yielded a solitary earned run and struck out seven over nine innings. Asquith, who gave up only three hits, had got the edge on the day.

The league crown and national championship both now belonged to the Hull Aces baseball club, but the month of September offered further chances for silverware. On
the day before the national final, the Hull Kingston Aces completed their Northern Senior Division schedule with a 10–2 defeat of the Liverpool Tigers. Seddon struck out a season-high 13 batters. For now they were top of the table, but they could still be caught if the Royals won their outstanding fixtures. This would force a play-off. Other opportunities to secure hardware were to be provided by the Orford Cup – a prestigious event between high-flying teams from different divisions in the National Baseball League structure – and the Yorkshire Invitational Trophy.

Hull completed their triumphant Major League campaign with an 11–6 win over Bromsgrove. Parker pitched the game in the absence of Asquith and Seddon. The victory meant that the Stretford Saints would finish as runners-up and thus qualify for the Orford Cup.

In the Northern Senior Division, the Aces’ east Hull neighbours gained comfortable wins in their remaining two games; Marshall and Sewell combined for 18 strike-outs in the latter contest. The play-off date was set for Sunday 22 September. Whenever a win was crucial, the Aces bested their Hull rival, and this was no exception. Asquith made a relief appearance in an 11–8 triumph. After an hour’s break, the Aces welcomed Nottingham Athletic to the field for the Yorkshire Invitational Trophy game and handed out a 9–0 whitewashing. Asquith again pitched in relief, fanning eight in just three innings.

The Orford Cup, a 1-day showpiece event in early October, brought the curtain down on the 1968 season. Asquith shut out the Royals 6–0 in a five-frame semi-final and then dominated the Stretford Saints in a 9–3 victory in the final. This completed a unique and historic treble for the Aces, with the latest success rounding off a season in which they had also claimed the Major League and national cup titles.

Asquith punctuated his seven-inning performance in the Orford Cup final with 10 strike-outs and was selected to receive the Allsports Shield, a trophy awarded to the outstanding player of the day. He also scooped pitching awards for the Northern Senior Division and the North Eastern Regional loop. Among those games where Asquith’s innings count could be obtained with some confidence from the Hull Daily Mail reporting or another source, Humberside’s ace of 1968 had struck out batters at a rate of approximately 11 every nine innings.

EPILOGUE

After 1968, Hull’s baseball scene remained for years the thoroughbred in the British baseball stable, but the stories of the passing seasons so often ended with a fall at the final fence. The losing finalist in the national championship was an entrant from Hull on a belief-defying 11 occasions between 1970 and 1984. Humberside’s only victories in that period came when the final was an all-Hull affair. The Royals exacted revenge on the Aces in 1970, and the Aces then made that particular series 2–1 with victory in 1972. In all, the Hull Aces played in 13 national finals; no other team, before or since, has reached double figures.
In 1970, Alan Asquith was still listed as the Aces’ main pitcher, and Frank Parker his catcher. The battery lost its charge a couple of seasons later, though, when Asquith was forced to give up pitching because of arm troubles (perhaps attributable to him being over-pitched in the crammed British baseball calendars of the late 1960s). He was described by Don Smallwood in *Baseball Mercury* as being, before his arm problems, “for years the country’s leading pitcher.”

Asquith was not quite done yet, though. In 1974, when the Great Britain national team had an opportunity to qualify for the European A-Pool Championship, national team manager Clive Megson took a gamble on Asquith’s arm and lured him back out as a pitcher. The background to the game was described by Smallwood in a *Baseball Mercury* article that, although somewhat tangential, merits an extended quotation here since it contains an example of the financial struggles that have been an ever-present and unwanted companion for the Great Britain national team programme.

The British Amateur Baseball Federation received relatively short notice that we had to play Sweden in the qualifying round[,] being drawn to play away made a tremendous effort necessary. The B.A.B.F. decided to go ahead and reserve travel facilities for a party of twelve, even before we could guarantee that twelve players would be both willing and able to pay the roughly £60 cost of the trip [over £500 in today’s money].

We decided that clubs would be asked to raise funds so that players selected would only have to meet half of the travel costs. The party was to leave Immingham for Goteborg on the Anglia Tor Line ferry on July 4th and proceed from Goteborg to Stockholm by train for the game, which was to be played on Saturday, July 6th. The trip costed-out at £54 per head. The B.A.B.F. decided that in the event of our qualifying for the championships, players who had been willing to make the journey to Stockholm would have a prior claim for places in the team to travel to Spain. The B.A.B.F. had requested Sweden to make the qualifying round a single game instead of the best of three requested by [European baseball administrators] C.E.B.A. This was in order to cut down on expenses and also the amount of time players would have to sacrifice from their employment.

As a result of tremendous efforts in fund-raising by means of sponsored walks, sponsored swims, discos, jumble sales etc., we finally decided that we would pay half-fares for a party of fourteen.

After a 25-hour sea voyage and a cross-country train journey, Asquith and his teammates arrived in Stockholm. The tiring journey had an adverse effect on the players and while Asquith kept Sweden at bay in the opening innings, Great Britain slumped to a
Nine Aces and a Joker

9–1 defeat, although even under more favourable circumstances it was acknowledged that they would have struggled.

In 1978, 16-year-old hitting talent Frank Parker – son of the Hull Aces catcher from their great team of the late 1960s – joined the Aces’ senior squad. He recalls that by that point, Asquith had become the team’s manager. Asquith would also go on to manage in the sponsored Scottish Amicable League of the late 1980s, a circuit that predominantly featured regional all-star squads. His Humberside County Bears suffered heartbreak in losing the 1989 competition’s final to the Southern Tigers by a single run.

Beyond managing, Asquith remained in the game as an avid spectator. He often attended games with his wife, Kathy, especially when his two sons, Paul and Ian, were playing. Paul did not progress past the junior game as he chose to devote his attention to rugby league, a sport that is as much a part of Hull’s fabric as the large ferry industry. Ian, on the other hand, played on to the senior level. Like his father a pitcher, Ian won club Most Valuable Player honours for the Hull Mets in 1993. This was a season in which the Mets split the national title – when rain forced the deciding game in the best-of-three series to be cancelled – and won the national knock-out cup outright.

Asquith was still comparatively young when he passed away in the summer of 2003. He was said to have suffered a heart attack while he was pottering in the garage. Among the large congregation at his funeral was his old mentor Johnny Oldman. An in memoriam notice that appeared in the Hull Daily Mail, on 6 August 2003, was signed off with the following:

Many memories of the good times – Alan Wilson and all baseball players and Friends who loved the game.

Just a couple of weeks after Asquith’s death, another member of the old Aces team passed away, this time Frank Parker, Sr. Someone present at his funeral wryly quipped that Alan was pitching on the great diamond in the sky and must have needed his catcher. ♠

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaj/1968.html.

SOURCES
Baseball Mercury
Baseball News: a news sheet of baseball
Brit-Ball
Hull Daily Mail
Nottinghamshire Guardian
For years, Cody Cain was discussed in British baseball circles almost as much for his volatile on-field temperament as for his accomplishments on the mound. However, recent efforts to piece together historical stats have revealed his two-spell pitching career to be among the very best in the modern era. It all started with a phenomenal season in 1993.
BACKGROUND

Cody Cain was born on 25 June 1968 in Denver, the mile-high state capital of scenic Colorado. His introduction to baseball came by way of wiffleball, which he began to play in the back garden with his dad when he was about 7 or 8. By then he was breathing the less rarefied air of Portland, Oregon. At this time, the city was home to an independent Single-A team called the Mavericks, who the youngster would go and watch at their Civic Stadium field.

The Mavericks were described by their pitcher Jim Bouton, of Ball Four fame, as “a collection of misfits, ne’er-do-wells, and degenerates who played ball and wreaked havoc.” Nonetheless, there was something constructive that emerged from the assorted mob. In a Society of American Baseball Research publication, Bouton recalled that Rob Nelson, a relief pitcher in his early 20s, “dreamed up Big League Chew […] in Civic Stadium,” which he described as “the only good idea to ever come out of a bullpen.” Big League Chew remains, to this day, a huge commercial success.

Seeing professional baseball at his local stadium, the young Cain began to wonder what it might be like one day to join its ranks, but for the moment he was content with the confines of his back garden. As he developed his hitting skills, he became able to drive the hollow, perforated sphere of plastic over the fence. On the first such occasion, he elatedly completed multiple circuits of the bases as his dad went to retrieve the orb. This was when he learned that the batter only gets to score once on a home run.

From wiffleball, a 9-year-old Cain progressed to his area’s little league baseball programme and immediately fell in love with the game. While not playing under the eye of local coaches, he found other ways to hone his skills. To improve the accuracy of his arm, the young Cain would spend hours throwing a ball against a large wall close to his home. The rebounds served a purpose, too, as the raw material for fielding practice. Later, the youngster progressed to throwing a tennis ball against the front steps of his house. He developed an elaborate set of rules for this game and, satisfying the hunger of his imagination by pitting teams against one another in a made-up league, would play for hours. Cain traces his later success back to the countless days he spent contentedly chucking a ball against the wall and steps.

By the age of 17, he was throwing in the mid-to-upper 80s, which was sufficient to attract the attention of scouts. He even went to a Chicago Cubs try-out in Portland one summer. Cain struck out some batters and did not allow any runs, but it was not to be. Ultimately, in the scouts’ eyes, he did not throw quite hard enough. Nor was he quite tall enough, with his growth curve plateauing at 6 foot 1. The same thing had prevented Cain from nurturing an interest in basketball that had blossomed at high school.

Cain stayed in Portland for his higher education, attending Lewis & Clark College, where he continued to play baseball. In 1987, his freshman year for the Pioneers (a nickname commemorating the trans-American explorers from whom the college took its title), he paced the team in complete games, innings pitched, and...
strike-outs. During his senior year the team enjoyed their all-time-greatest season, winning the only area championship in their history and securing a berth in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics College World Series. His team’s participation in that illustrious event is a bitter-sweet memory for Cain. Lewis & Clark were eliminated from the tournament before reaching his spot in the starting rotation, and thus the closest he got to seeing action was when he threw in the bullpen. The area final had also been a disappointment for the young hurler: he was pulled from the mound owing to problems finding the strike-zone. However, Cain could take pride from his 150-pitch complete game that had steered the team to victory back in the regional final. And he remains among the Pioneers’ all-time top 10 for career complete games and shut-outs.

On graduating, Cain showed his off-the-field pioneering spirit by moving to Taiwan to work for the Asian Sources Media Group, a technology trade publisher. He played softball for recreation and kept up with baseball news via American newspapers. When the company opened an office in the United Kingdom, Cain found out that he would be moving to London to help set it up. Like so many other nationals from the chief baseball-playing countries, Cain had assumed that there would be no baseball opportunities in Britain.

One evening, as he sat in the lobby of the American Club mulling over his impending relocation to Europe, Cain thumbed through a copy of USA Today. Among the pages was a story that transformed his outlook on the move. The article described a baseball team called the London Warriors who played in Britain. The American carefully tore out a cutting. It was his most cherished possession on the flight over.

The Britain that Cain’s plane touched down in had a baseball scene in the middle of its biggest feud for decades. It was the off-season before the 1993 campaign.

After the 1991 season – a year in which a National League was added to the British baseball set-up, with teams as far apart as London and Liverpool – a rift had emerged from disagreement over the top division’s ownership and future direction. The argument was between the British Baseball Federation’s governors and Malcolm Needs.

Needs arrived on the British baseball scene early in 1991, after the governing body had already set the new circuit in motion. According to Brad Thompson, a National League player at that time, Needs had experienced a baseball epiphany when on a trip to the United States. He witnessed a hot dog being passed down a row of spectators to the purchaser and then saw the money being handed in the reverse direction and change being passed back. He thought it unlikely that this would happen in Britain, although he wished it would; there was something romantic about the ritual to him. His epiphany gave him an appetite to build the game in Britain, and he was appointed as Chair of the National League and administrator of a leading team, the Enfield Spartans.

At the end of the 1991 season, major cracks began to appear in the relationship between Needs and the governing body. Transatlantic Baseball Review reported
that there was “war.” According to the publication, British Baseball Federation members had “been warned not to associate with Needs.” Mike Carlson – European Coordinator for a Major League Baseball administration exploring baseball’s global growth – was noted in the March 1992 *Anglo-American Sports* to have threatened to shift a proposed envoy programme from Britain to another European country if the wrangling continued. But Needs was deeply frustrated by a governing body that he perceived to be stuttering and thus, despite such warnings, moved to establish independence for the National League. He added legitimacy to his decision to retain the circuit’s “National” badge by moving across his champion Enfield Spartans and also luring over 1991’s overall runners-up, the London Athletics.

Countering the breakaway, the governing body established its own National Premier League and barred rogue teams from competing in European club competition or their players from competing for the national team (there was a rumour that Humberside stayed loyal to the British Baseball Federation only because of the hope that their players might get a chance to fill vacancies in the Great Britain squad). However, Needs had ambitious ideas for baseball’s growth in Britain, starting with a promise of prize money and ending with a vision of purpose-built stadiums. His Pritchett Construction company, which sponsored the National League in 1992, was handily placed to take on any such work.

According to Thompson, ill feeling towards the governing body was widespread, and thus when Needs announced his plans, the support was such that he could have formed a three-tier league from southern area applicants alone. In the end, the other teams drawn away from the British Baseball Federation umbrella were the Birmingham Braves, the Cambridge Royals, the Essex Indians, the Newham Blue Jays, and the Reading Royals. That year, pressure from Major League Baseball against British teams using the monikers of big-league franchises forced certain name changes. London became the Warriors, returning to a name that the team had played under in the 1980s. Birmingham, Cambridge, Essex, and Reading all changed their names too. Newham were temporarily referred to as the Jays but on moving to Croydon became the Blue Jays once more. Their history could be traced to 1949, when they were founded as the Bluejays of Dulwich. The Toronto version only came into being in 1977.

In 1993, Needs handed over day-to-day running of the renegade circuit to Tom Sims. The new chief administrator of the league, sensitive to its continuing political fragility, promised in an interview with *Transatlantic Baseball News & Review* that all enquiries from teams who might be considering a defection “will be treated with absolute confidence.”

The Reading outfit disbanded, citing financial troubles, but the breakaway league still managed to expand, thanks to the addition of teams from Waltham Forest and Bury St Edmunds.
STORY OF THE SEASON

On arriving in England, Cody Cain took out his newspaper cutting and re-read the article. There were no contact details for the London Warriors, but the name of the company where player–manager Brad Thompson worked gave him a lead. On tracking Thompson down, he was invited to join some of the Warriors for a traditional English get-together in a pub. Thompson recalls that, after a few preliminaries, the newcomer was not shy to ask where he would fit into the team. The baseball experience that Cain described was impressive, but Thompson explained that he would need to see him play before he could answer that question. The experienced team manager knew that players’ self-assessments were notoriously inaccurate and their baseball résumés often exaggerated. Today, the ready availability of baseball data on the Internet acts as something of a deterrent against such behaviour, but in 1993 the resource was not yet a thorough mine of information.

Despite Thompson’s response, Cain persisted that evening – unsuccessfully – with the topic of his role on the team. The Warriors were not about to alter their plans or expectations for the season. However, this all changed at the first practice session. Thompson recalls that, on seeing the 24-year-old play, it was instantly clear that “he had the sort of polish that one would expect from a college-trained player.” Cain was slotted into a pitching staff that included Alan Smith (see Chapter 11) and Justin Brown. Smith was born in Britain and received all of his baseball training in the country, having chosen to convert from cricket after seeing the classic 1979 British national final between the Golders Green Sox and Hull Aces, a game that went to extra innings. Brown, an American, was a shortstop with a cannon for an arm. Thompson maintains that his arm was one of the best he had seen “outside of a Major League stadium and certainly better than some inside.” Smith’s controlled pitching style was slower, and better suited to starting duties. Brown’s arm made him a highly effective closer, but he would also start some games. In 1992 he threw a no-hitter against the Reading Bulldogs.

Cain’s British debut came on 25 April against the Cambridge Knights, who were visitors to the Warriors’ home ground at Barn Elms, on the banks of the River Thames. He threw two scoreless frames of middle relief. The following Sunday he had another run-free relief spell, against the Waltham Forest Angels. While not on the mound, Cain was kept in the line-up as a position player, but pitching in relief was at variance with his expectations. He regularly reminded his team-mates that he was a starter, and they showed that they had been listening when he was sent to the mound in the first frame against the Bury Saints, on 9 May. He reinforced his point by sharing 30 strike-outs with Bury’s hard-throwing starter John Nevelle before both were relieved for the eighth. Cain was moved to first base and soon showed his fielding prowess with his role in a perfectly executed relay from the outfield that secured an out at the plate. The 8–1 victory made it three wins from three for the
Nine Aces and a Joker

Warriors. The Saints scored their only run in the first. Throughout his pitching career, Cain would find the first frame to be the toughest, and he would often be pitching harder at the end of nine innings than at the beginning. On this occasion, though, the run had been unearned.

On 16 May, Cain found himself back on relief duty. He closed out a 6–0 blanking of the Essex Eagles that had been started by Brown. The following weekend, the right-hander from Portland again featured in relief. Starting pitcher Smith had suffered a rare off-day and was pulled after two-and-a-third frames. Cain took the hill in relief as the Warriors came back to preserve their perfect start, aided by a 2-run homer from their recent addition to the pitching staff.

A month into the season, team manager and catcher Thompson had been presented with various examples of Cain’s all-round baseball talent, but he had also seen the new acquisition’s character amply illustrated. As Thompson recalls:

Cain would stomp round the field, arguing with umpires and opposing players, and barely stayed within his skin. Usually, players possessed of such attitude are their own worst enemy in their execution of the fundamentals of the game whilst under pressure and, more often than not, their actions have a truly corrosive effect on the fabric of the entire team. This was not the case with Cody. No matter how much Cody pumped himself up into a frenzy of emotion, almost without exception, he was using that emotion to channel aggression in a structured form against the opposition. As the emotion rose, his playing became ever more precise. The reason that his outwardly provocative behaviour did not have a destructive effect on the entire team was due to the presence of Justin Brown and his calm demeanour. Justin and Cody were the undoubted stars of the team; one was solid as a rock, the other as liquid as lava. Justin could achieve results on the mound that were equal to, and sometimes better than, Cody’s, but seemingly without outward emotion. It was this that kept Cody’s volcano from fully erupting as he was far from oblivious to Justin’s quiet but commanding presence.

Cain’s on-field persona was certainly gaining him attention in the local press. Larry Darbon, a journalist covering the Warriors for Time Out magazine, developed a habit of preceding the name Cody Cain with the word “volatile”. The descriptor stuck, and Cain would be playfully referred to as the Volatile American. The volatility was not simply untamed aggression, though. Cain had a deep-rooted competitiveness that, in the view of Thompson, was a testament to Gore Vidal’s dictum on success: “It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail.” As regular catcher for the Volatile American in 1993, Thompson was as well placed as anyone to detect this.
Cody Cain

An abiding image of mine is of Cody staring down to take the sign, his mitt centred to his chest and pointing slightly towards the plate, his eyes intense and his body language emitting pure focused concentration and aggression. With his undoubted abilities as a pitcher he was challenging the opposing batter both physically and personally.

On 20 June, the Warriors met their main rival for the National League crown, the Enfield Spartans. The Spartans had beaten the Athletics, a team that included a number of former Warrior players, in a three-game national final in 1991, but the outcome was reversed in 1992 when they encountered the reformed Warriors in the first year of competition in the breakaway circuit. In what was the teams’ first league clash of 1993, Cain took the hill part-way through the bottom of the fifth, charged with protecting a 4–3 lead. The opposing pitcher was someone who brought back childhood memories. Still throwing capably in the year of his 40th birthday, one-time Portland Maverick Rob Nelson was the Spartans’ front-line pitcher. Cain had not fulfilled his dreams of forging a pro baseball career, but here he found himself pitching against a Minor Leaguer he grew up watching. The pair duelled pitch for pitch, and there was no further scoring through to the bottom of the eighth. At that point, Cain allowed Enfield to load the bases with none out but a home-then-first double-play followed by a fly-out to the reliable Harry Atwood kept the Spartans off the scoreboard. Cain was relieved for the ninth, but the Warriors closed out the game to hand him the win over a childhood hero.

The season was approaching its half-way point and Cain was yet to concede an earned run. In all, the right-hander had thrown 24-and-two-third innings, yielding a solitary unearned run and a stingy three singles. He had struck out 47 opponents and walked just 10. Cain’s fierce competitiveness extended to a self-acknowledged “stat rat” tendency; he viewed the game’s numerical records as the “ultimate barometer” for individual success. The stat rat kept a close eye on the cell representing his earned-run average in the league’s matrix. It read “0.00” after nine games. Thompson remembers that Cain’s Warriors team-mates were aware of the value, but viewed it as a sign of “very good work in progress” and nothing more. The budding feat did not distract them from the basic task of winning games.

After a 3-week break from National League competition, the Warriors squared off against the Spartans again. London were leading the renegade league’s eight-team Senior Division with an 8–1 win–loss record; Enfield sat a game back at 8-and-3. The team topping the circuit at the end of the regular season would face a lower-ranked team in the first round of play-offs, scheduled for Saturday 25 September, and – more significantly – stood to gain a recuperative bye through Sunday morning’s second round into the Sunday afternoon grand final.

Staying in the reliever role, Cain entered in the fifth frame with a 5–2 lead to face Nelson once more. The pair traded zeros until the end of the seventh, at which point
Nelson was relieved. This made it seven straight innings in which the pair had duelled without a run being plated. London added 4 runs in the top of the penultimate frame and Cain completed the game for the win without a further score. In the teams’ third and final regular-season encounter, at Barn Elms on 29 August, Cain pitched the final inning of a 5–1 Warriors victory, with all three outs coming by way of strikes. In between those appearances, the right-hander added two more innings of scoreless relief to his tally, against Croydon on 15 August; he also hit a home run in that game.

On the first weekend of September, the Warriors were entertained by the Bury Saints, who had moved ahead of Enfield in the league. The visitors gained a sweep to secure the top seeding for the play-offs. Thus, the final game of the season had no significance for the standings, but it did see Cain put his 0.00 earned-run average on the line. The American had pitched several innings in a tournament the previous day, playing for a Windsor team that he had been coaching. He pitched four scoreless innings, and aided his cause with a home run, but he was battling fatigue and during the fifth was replaced on the mound. Two runs scored that inning, and one was charged to Cain. But it went down as unearned, and thus the 0.00 earned-run average was safe. His official pitching line for his 35-and-two-third innings was a 4–0 record with 2 runs conceded (both unearned) on 13 walks and a staggeringly low three hits. He walked 13 and fanned 65 for the exceptional rate of 16.4 strike-outs per nine innings. With the bat, Cain’s average was comfortably above the .300 level.

The Saturday of the play-off weekend saw London crush Waltham Forest 24–2 to advance directly into the grand final. On Sunday morning, Enfield eased past Cambridge, the fifth seed, to set up a third straight Warriors–Spartans National League final. The Warriors lost the restorative advantage of the free pass they earned, though, when inclement weather pushed the season decider back to the following weekend.

Cain was handed the start for the first genuine test of his mettle in Britain. The last baseball final that he had pitched was the area championship in his senior year, 3 years earlier. He had been unable to combat his nerves that day, with the upshot being a sudden inability to locate his pitches. The prospect of a repeat weighed on the mind of the 25-year-old, and his tension was not helped by Nelson being his mound opponent. Cain still recalls his dread of the “massive 12 to 6 curveball” and “sneaky fastball” that had stifled the London line-up on numerous occasions before.

Both teams drew blanks in the opening two frames, making it nine straight innings in which Cain and Nelson had duelled without a run being scored. That sequence was finally broken in the third inning: Cain gave himself a 1–0 lead with a home run over the left-field fence in the bottom of that frame. The pair then served up three more scoreless exchanges. Nerves had not hindered Cain, but fatigue was a problem and his speed was dropping off. He was not used to playing a season of baseball without daily practice sessions in the background, and he felt that his arm strength had significantly diminished over the course of the season.
Cody Cain

Thompson was alert to the cue for Cain’s tiring and brought in Brown for the top of the seventh. The Spartans loaded the sacks in that inning and plated a run. With the score now tied, the best Cain could hope for was a no-decision in a Warriors win. Nevertheless, as he remained in the game as a position player he could still influence its course. And this he did by driving in a Warriors run in the bottom of the seventh. There then followed an inning-and-a-half of tense, high-quality baseball. Neither team scored again and thus London were crowned champions. An article in *Linedrive!*, a fanzine for the independent league, reported that the third out in the top of the ninth was “greeted by rapturous shouts from the Warriors supporters.” Cain was named Most Valuable Player for the final.

Today, Cain shows no signs of forgetting the home run he smacked in the bottom of the third, which was his first postseason long ball in Britain. When he recently made contact with his pitching adversary from the 1993 final through *Facebook*, he playfully asked Nelson if he remembered the hit.

EPILOGUE

After a debut season in which he had thrown more than 40 innings without giving up an earned run, Cody Cain was unable to blank his first opponents of 1994 for even one frame. The second-year Warrior came in as closer after eight innings of London’s season opener; they held a 9–6 lead against their old foe the Enfield Spartans. Cain did not get out of the inning as he shipped 4 runs to not only blow the save opportunity but also take the loss. This was evidence for his view that the first inning was the toughest, and it reinforced his belief that he was first and foremost a starter. That said, the American did make an exception that season to his stance, albeit away from Britain.

Oliver Heidecker, a team-mate of Cain on the Warriors, played from time to time for his home-town team, the Cologne Cardinals, in Germany’s highest division, the Bundesliga. Heidecker persuaded the Cardinals to fly Cain over whenever there was a gap in the Warriors’ schedule. Foreign nationals were limited to three innings of pitching in a game, and thus Cain accepted the role of closer. He struggled to an earned-run average of 7.27 in the eight-and-two-thirds innings that made up his Bundesliga career, but he did pick up a save.

In Britain, Cain had returned to his miserly ways. He repaired the initial statistical damage to finish the season with an earned-run average of 1.99, and his strike-out rate was even higher than it had been in 1993, at 17.6 per nine innings. He also excelled as a hitter, posting batting, on-base, and slugging averages of .432, .537, and .864, respectively. The offensive highlight of 1994 was the lifetime-first grand slam he hit in the fourth inning of a game against Essex on 15 May. Amazingly, in the bottom of the same frame, aided by a dropped third strike, he performed the rare pitching feat of striking out four batters in an inning. In the entire history of Major League Baseball, it seems that only once have the two feats been performed by a player in the same season.
Nine Aces and a Joker

(Mike Cuellar in 1970), yet Cain managed to complete them in the same inning. While the personal highlights in 1994 pleased the right-hander from Oregon, the season was ultimately unsuccessful for the Warriors as they were knocked out of the postseason in the semi-finals by an Enfield team that went on to win the title behind Rob Nelson’s pitching (see Chapter 11). This was the last year of competition in the independent league, as 1995 brought reintegration with the British Baseball Federation. Three teams had folded during the course of the season, reducing the league to a five-team circuit. After the third withdrawal, the fanzine *Linedrive!* contained the following reflection in its editorial:

[The independent league] would now appear to have wholly surrendered [its] status as a threat to the British Baseball Federation, [which], when initially posed in the secession from the BBF, proved to be the catalyst that changed the BBF from “talk” to “do”.

The move to combine the circuits was welcomed by the fierce competitor in Cain. During his first two seasons in Britain he had been hearing how the British Baseball Federation’s National Premier League had a higher standard of baseball, and while he knew that this was not necessarily true, he had a hunger for the opportunity to prove himself against a combined pool of the country’s best talent. The proof was duly supplied in 1995 by way of a huge two-way contribution to the Warriors’ joint-best record in the 14-team top tier. Cain paced the circuit in wins (10), earned-run average (1.38), and runs batted in (38). His rate of 14.7 strike-outs per nine innings that season remains a high-water mark since reintegration. The pitcher from Portland also threw his only career no-hitter that year, in a six-inning mercy-rule victory over the Spartans on 11 June. Ultimately, though, the year again ended with disappointment for the Warriors. They lost two 1-run games in a best-of-three national final against the Menwith Hill Pirates. The Pirates were a US Air Force team and were not subject to the limit on foreign nationals that the Warriors and other domestic teams had to abide by that year. In the final, Menwith Hill were allowed to field unlimited foreigners, but London were restricted to only a handful. This major imbalance inflamed the Warriors, not least Cain, who engaged in heated discussions with a number of officials from the governing body. His protests had no immediate effect, and while they may have contributed to the British Baseball Federation dropping the limit for 1996, Cain was not around to benefit.

The American returned to his home country in January 1996, taking a job in New York for an Internet company called Icon. While there, he played modified fast-pitch softball. In 1997, Cain moved to Shanghai to run China sales for Nike. He started a softball circuit and managed Nike’s team to the league title, although they lost in the final tournament. Another jump in 1998 took Cain to Hong Kong, where he played...
in the region’s slow-pitch softball league. Developing into a power hitter, he led the league in home runs on three occasions. He was also a founding member of a travelling softball team known as the Gas House Gang, who played in international tournaments in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

In 2003, the globetrotter opted to return to England for work. He swiftly made contact with Alan Smith and was welcomed back to the Warriors. He joined his old team part-way through the season in what was developing into a sweltering summer. On Sunday 10 August, temperatures hit an all-time British high of 38.5°C (101.3°F) in south-east England, and that day Cain caught both ends of a double-header against the Brighton Buccaneers. He was well prepared for the physical challenge, having played in the draining subtropical humidity of Hong Kong.

Cain had returned to Britain with a high level of fitness, but he needed to get his arm back in shape and return his swing to baseball mode. The pitching came back relatively quickly: on 25 April 2004 he struck out 18 Bracknell Blazers over seven innings. He also hit another grand slam that year, but it was not until the following season that he truly felt that his old swing was back. That year he hit at a .423 clip and belted five home runs to fuel a .827 slugging average. At the end of 2005 the Warriors folded. They had not made a national final since 2000, when they won a record-equalling fourth British championship (not counting their two independent league crowns and a Scottish Amicable League title in 1988). Czech pitcher Alex Keprta took the loss in their last-ever game, a 6–2 defeat at the hands of Brighton in the semi-finals of the national championship.

The Warriors players who remained in the league, including Cain, moved en masse to the nearby Richmond Flames. The impact of their addition was swift, as the Flames won through to the best-of-three national final in 2006. Against a Croydon Pirates team looking for a third straight title, Cain stuttered on the mound in game one and took the loss. But the Flames came back to win the series. They also made the 2008, 2009, and 2010 national finals, which were all one-game affairs that Cain started. He was charged with the loss in 2008 (see Chapter 9) and had a no-decision in 2009, but in 2010 finally got the victory he craved. Cain gained his first win in a championship contest since 1993 with a masterful seven-inning complete game against Bracknell in which he gave up 1 run, four hits, and a walk, and struck out 12.

In Flames colours, Cain had continued to add to his list of personal achievements. On 10 June 2006, he recorded 16 punch-outs against Bracknell in seven innings. In 2008 – a year in which he also ran the league, as its first commissioner (a role that he had himself argued the benefits of) – Cain claimed one of the circuit’s newly introduced fielding awards for his work at third base and put together a solid batting season that included an uninterrupted sequence of nine hits in as many at-bats. The following year, at the age of 41, he finished the regular season with a streak of 21 scoreless innings to secure the awards for Most Valuable Pitcher and Most Valuable Two-Way Player.
Nine Aces and a Joker

During the off-season immediately after his victory in the 2010 national final, Cain crashed while mountain biking and split the long head biceps tendon in his throwing arm. This tendon is involved in the deceleration of the arm when pitching, and the injury thus severely affected Cain’s ability to throw at top speed for more than a few pitches, owing to the resulting pain. The medical advice he received was to quit the game, but for Cain this translated to seeking playing time that was away from the mound and of sufficient quantity to gain him postseason eligibility for 2011. Cain did qualify, and his Richmond team won through as top seeds. After seven innings of their semi-final against the Southern Nationals, the Flames were in control with a 5–2 lead. Cain had just hit a scorching line-drive that was plucked out of the air by Jason Holowaty’s instinctive full-stretch dive at second base. “Of all the players I had to hit it to,” Cain exclaimed as he returned to the team bench to grab his glove for what he must have thought would be another tight frame. The Nationals had a different plan for the proceedings. They stunned Richmond’s battered pitching staff with an 11-run rally in the top of the eighth on the path to an 18–6 win.

In early 2012, it was announced that Richmond would drop out of the National Baseball League, ending an eight-season run for the team and, seemingly, a 19-year, two-spell British career for Cain. For now, at least, the former ace is shifting some of his focus to fantasy baseball, a version of the game with some similarities to the imaginary leagues he fuelled with events on the front steps of his childhood house. An offer to act as pitching coach for the Great Britain Juniors should ensure that he continues to walk on the dirt of a real diamond. This will continue a commitment to the National Team programme that has also seen Cain pitch as a non-passport holder for the Seniors on several occasions.

If Cain has indeed retired, he does so as the post-reintegration career leader in strike-outs (409) and strike-outs per nine innings (12.7), with an earned-run average (2.83) that is only bettered by one player: Simon Pole. Adding in his independent league numbers gives him a total of 536 strike-outs. While putting up these unparalleled figures, his on-field demeanour has stayed the same. For proof, just check the deep cleat marks that have decorated the wooden door of the visitors’ dugout at Essex’s Town Mead field since 2010. The lava of the Volatile American has never solidified.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaJ/1993.html.

SOURCES
Linedrive!
Transatlantic Baseball News & Review
Transatlantic Baseball Review
8 – Gavin Marshall, Ace #7

2002

by MARK GEORGE

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
Gavin Marshall was the first – and is, thus far, the only – born-and-bred British player to earn a professional baseball contract in the United States. He played pro baseball for two seasons in 2001 and 2002 and in the latter of these returned to Great Britain in time to pitch, with great effect, in the national championship.
Born in Hull, on 4 November 1976, Gavin Marshall had baseball in his blood. His father, Barry Marshall, was a Great Britain national team player when Gavin was born. His grandfather, Ron Marshall, was a stalwart of the Hull club scene and managed Great Britain while Gavin was at primary school. Almost inevitably, the youngster developed an interest in baseball by watching his family. As Marshall summed it up in being interviewed for this book: “I was born into baseball.”

Alongside playing a sport more traditional to the area – rugby league – young Gavin began his baseball career at an early age, by British standards, and against much older competition:

I was seven, playing my first ever game. My dad had seen my potential and started a junior team but at the time it was under-16, which placed me in a tough situation. We were winning and it was the last inning so he thought this was a good time to introduce me to my first competitive game. My dad hid me on second base, as I could field and it was a short throw. The first hitter hit a linedrive two-hopper to the left of me so I got behind the ball and stayed low like I had been taught, only for it to hit me square on the shin and ricochet off to first base for the out. The next hitter hit a high infield fly and I called everyone off and caught it.

Unsurprisingly, the youngster from Hull made the jump to the senior level at a relatively early age, as well:

When I reached 14 my dad started a second team for the seniors so I could start playing against men, and at the age of 16 I represented the Great Britain seniors at a tournament in La Rochelle, France.

This experience of playing against older players certainly helped Marshall later in his career, when he became the first born-and-bred British player to sign a pro baseball contract in the States:

The experience was challenging but rewarding. I think this is how I survived in the States, as I was used to chasing the next level.

The youngster’s father was keen to ensure that his son’s early ascent to the national team did not make his path too easy:

When I started pitching with eight Great Britain fielders behind me I went and played for a lesser team as my dad wanted me to
experience pitching well but losing and dealing with defeat, errors and
disappointment.

As a White Sox fan and a budding pitcher, Marshall unsurprisingly chose Jack
McDowell as his favourite player. But his career was not solely focused on the
mound, as he would play shortstop, first base, and third base during tournaments
when resting from pitching appearances. In fact, Marshall had never really wanted
to be a pitcher in the first place, but his body had taken the choice out of his hands:

When I was 14, I had a growth spurt of about 7 inches and I forgot where the
floor was, which was bad news when I was playing second base.

It turned out well in the end, though, as Marshall developed an arsenal of
pitches that became his passport to the United States. He describes his fastball as
having hit 94 miles per hour, but usually sitting between 89 and 91 miles per hour.
He backed this up with a slider and, to a lesser degree, a change-up:

The slider was my strike-out pitch, and it was very effective in short-relief
situations. My biggest mistake was never developing my change-up. If you
want to really make it, you need this pitch. Everything works off your
fastball. If you are spotting your fastball, that makes all your other pitches
10 times better.

Marshall would soon be using his weaponry to strike out professional baseball
players, in the Frontier League.

The Frontier League is an independent loop that started in 1993, covering
Midwestern states as well as west Pennsylvania and southern Ontario. As teams are
not affiliated with Major League clubs, they recruit and sign their own players. At
the time that Marshall was signed, teams could have on their 24-man roster three
players with at least 3 years’ experience, a pair of 2-year players, and seven 1-year
players. The rest of the roster was for rookies, most commonly undrafted college
players or those released by other teams.

A total of 20 Frontier League players have made it to the Major Leagues and in
2002, the second year of Marshall’s stint in the independent circuit, there were five
such players on big-league rosters. Former Ohio Valley pitcher Brendan Donnelly
became part of the Anaheim Angels team that won the World Series that year;
Donnelly was the winning pitcher in game six. The Cardinals had a pair of Frontier
League alumni. Former Springfield Capitals starting pitcher Jason Simontacchi,
who would go 11–5 with a 4.02 earned-run average in the big leagues, joined relief
pitcher Matt Duff, also a former Capital, on the St Louis roster. Right-handed
pitcher JJ Trujillo, a Johnstown old boy, appeared for the San Diego Padres, and another right-hander, Terry Pearson, who pitched for Zanesville, made his Major League debut with the Detroit Tigers.

So how did Marshall end up pitching in the Frontier League? Firstly, his experience of college baseball in the States helped him on this path:

I started off by visiting UC Davis in California with [former Great Britain head coach] Ralph Rago. While I was there I learnt a lot but the school was very expensive. Ralph introduced me to Pat Doyle who was the head coach at San Joaquin Delta College, which is a junior college. Junior colleges were cheaper and it was a chance for me to showcase my talent and hopefully pick up a scholarship. I pitched there for 2 years and got a full ride [scholarship] to Centenary College, pitched there for a year, and transferred to University of the Pacific, again on a full ride. I sat out my first year because of surgery on my elbow, then pitched the year after, and that was my college career over.

Having proved he could pitch at the college level, Marshall would soon be signed by a Frontier League team:

James Pearce at MLB International tried to get me a try-out for an MLB team, but by this time I had been absent from the game for a year or so and when I went Stateside I wasn’t ready. I then flew to Delta College to work out and get into shape. Pat Doyle arranged a try-out with Greg Tagert, the head coach of the Dubois County Dragons. I threw a bullpen; he liked what he saw and offered me a contract pending my performance in Spring Training. Obviously I was over the moon but I still needed to earn my place in the squad.

With Marshall now having managed to sign a professional contract, what was he expecting from his first season in pro baseball?

I wasn’t really sure at first, but I soon began to think that I wanted to get rid of some of my inconsistency, which would help the team, and win a championship ring.

The opportunity of a Frontier League contract meant that Marshall would not be pitching in Britain for a while, but Marshall was eager to move to the States:

When the opportunity came to go and try out for the Dragons, I was working for Enterprise rent-a-car in England. I resigned and was on the
next plane. At the time I was single and still living with my parents and so just left. My mum and dad did come out to see me pitch during the season.

Marshall’s stint with the Dubois County Dragons started in 2001. The team was based in Indiana, not far from Louisville and on the way to St Louis. He had a 3–0 record as a reliever in his first season, and this earned his a repeat gig in the Dragons’ bullpen in 2002.

**STORY OF THE SEASON**

Making his season debut on 29 May at home to the Gateway Grizzlies, Marshall allowed a run on two hits in one-and-two-third innings, walking two batters without a strike-out. Marshall’s next appearance lasted just three batters, as he allowed 2 runs (including an earned one) in a third of an inning, taking the loss against the Evansville Otters on 2 June. Marshall would allow runs in each of his next three outings: 3 runs in four innings at home to the Rockford RiverHawks; 2 runs in a third of an inning against the Canton Coyotes; and 4 runs in three-and-a-third innings against the River City Rascals.

But Marshall settled down after this rough start, allowing a solitary run over his next seven appearances, which spanned a total of 10-and-two-third innings. In this time he allowed 11 hits, walking three batters, and struck out nine. Was there a reason for Marshall turning things around?

Baseball is a strange game and every time you go to the park you just want to perform to your best. Sometimes your best takes you on runs like this and sometimes you give up runs and lose games. The best thing about pro ball is that no matter what happens you are back at the park the next day.

Despite improving as the year went on, Marshall would not complete the season with the Dragons. He was traded to the Johnstown Johnnies in mid-July in exchange for outfielder Todd Leathers, who went on to hit .292 with a homer and 17 runs batted in from 106 at-bats for Dubois County. Marshall had an 0–1 record in 12 games for the Dragons, pitching 20-and-a-third innings and allowing 27 hits and five walks. He struck out 13 batters. Dubois County were on their way to a pennant, while Johnstown were scrapping it out among the bottom-feeders:

I had a slow start to the season but I had just started to get a bit of pop back on my fastball and put together a few scoreless innings and thought I was on my way up. So it came as a massive shock to go from first in the league to worst in the league – soul-destroying really – especially when I played a big role in the clubhouse.
Nine Aces and a Joker

And Marshall was not overstating things to say he had made an impact off the field in Dubois County. Pitching coach Brendan Sagara was certainly not going to forget the Englishman. He wrote the following about Marshall in 2001:

Over the 62 games we have played thus far, I have gotten to know the 30-or-so players who have at some point in the season taken the field for us. One character who I will never be able to forget is [...] Gavin Marshall. When Marshall arrived from Hull, England for spring training this past May, he seemed like the gentlest of souls and the finest of young British gentlemen. There was always a “please” and a “thank you” and always a “yes, coach.” [...] My first image of Gavin, post spring training, is a scary one. Just imagine a grey-haired 23-year-old ball player resting after pre-game batting practice waiting for the game to start, standing outside our clubhouse, with shower shoes, a jock strap, some eye black, a batting helmet, and nothing else. [...] When the benches cleared during our brawl at home with the Springfield Capitals, Gav made sure he ran by the stands pumping his fists to incite our crowd as he sprinted from the bullpen to the field. [...] So as the season has progressed, we have found that the best way to keep Gavin behaving, well, “normal” is to put him on the mound to pitch, where he has actually done his best Turk Wendell impersonation, silencing foes with a devastating slider during middle innings.

Despite the shock of the trade, Marshall still has kind words to say about the organisation that gave him his chance:

They are a truly professional organisation run off a small budget. It proves money doesn’t buy you results and a good manager with players who believe in each other will always be victorious.

After the move to Pennsylvania, Marshall made his Johnstown debut at home against the Kalamazoo Kings, pitching two scoreless innings to finish the game on 18 July. After another two innings against the same opposition 2 days later, this time allowing a run, Marshall collected his first professional save against Canton on 22 July with another two scoreless innings. The next trip out of the bullpen did not go as well, as Marshall allowed 2 runs (one unearned) and took the loss in a third of an inning against the Dragons.

Despite this setback, Marshall’s Johnstown career was off to a strong start. He finished July with a 1.80 earned-run average on the month and in his appearances for Johnstown had struck out nine batters in 10-and-two-third innings, allowing 10
Gavin Marshall

hits and one walk. A born-and-bred Englishman was dominating the competition in North American pro ball.

August, however, was not as memorable a month for Marshall, as three tough outings in a row undid his good work. After giving up 2 runs (one unearned) in one-and-two-third innings against the River City Rascals on 3 August, Marshall was back on the mound the following day for his third straight appearance. He again pitched one-and-two-third innings, only this time he allowed 9 runs, including the first homer he had give up in a Johnstown uniform. After a couple of days of rest, Marshall next appeared on the road against Washington, allowing 4 runs in an inning.

Happily, Marshall finished the season much more strongly. He allowed 3 runs in his final six appearances – spanning 10-and-a-third innings – and gave up nine hits, walking two and striking out nine. His final appearance of the Frontier League season for Johnstown came on 26 August and saw Marshall earn a win against the Chillicothe Paints with a scoreless inning, helping him even his win–loss record. Over 27-and-a-third total innings for Johnstown, in 17 games, Marshall went 1–1 with a save, allowing 35 hits, walking seven batters, and striking out 24. His earned-run average of 5.93 was skewed heavily by the rough start to August.

After an eventful season in pro baseball, surely Marshall would take a well-earned break?

Back in Britain, heavy rainfall in Brighton had seen the British national championship postponed from its scheduled date. The final between the Brighton Buccaneers and the Windsor Bears would instead take place on 18 September, at Waltham Abbey in Essex. And Brighton had an ace up their sleeve. Marshall returned to his home country to take the ball for the Bucs, pitching a complete game, with 13 strike-outs, in a 5–1 victory. The only Windsor run scored on an error.

Marshall had kept his team in the game. It was as late as the eighth that Brighton had taken a 2–1 lead, before they added three extra tallies in the ninth to give their pitcher some breathing room. Some aggressive baserunning from Marshall had almost seen his side snap a 1–1 tie back in the second inning, as he tried to score from second base on a ground-out back to the mound, only for Windsor first-baseman John Boyd to spot him rounding third base and throw him out at the plate. After recording the final out, Marshall was awarded the Most Valuable Player trophy. Boyd, who was Windsor’s manager, commented: “He dominated the bottom half of our order. He certainly made the difference for Brighton.”

EPILOGUE

Gavin Marshall has had quite a baseball career. After years playing the game in the United Kingdom, including appearances for the Hull Mets, Kingston
Cobras, Leeds City Royals, and Yorkshire Puddings, the right-handed pitcher earned the chance to play in the Frontier League in 2001 and 2002. The 2002 season marked the end of a respectable stint as a pro ball player. Marshall did continue to play in the Hull region, although the baseball scene in that locality was now much weaker than it had been at various earlier points in British baseball history, and thus he has not been in the national spotlight since his game-winning effort in the 2002 national final. Following Marshall’s appearance in that final, at the end of a season in which he had not appeared in any regular-season games in the league, British baseball authorities introduced a strict minimum games rule, and an even stricter variation is in place a decade on.

Nevertheless, his career was sufficient to earn him a second-round induction into the British Baseball Hall of Fame in 2010. Prominent in the electors’ mind would have been his remarkable achievement of signing a pro contract, but he also had a very strong case from his time playing in the domestic league and for the Great Britain national team. Perhaps his finest performance of all for his country came at the European Championship A-Pool in 1999. There, he dominated the competition, going 2–0 with a 1.20 earned-run average and 20 strike-outs in 15 innings.

No born-and-bred British player has yet followed in Marshall’s footsteps, but his achievement serves as proof that the progression can be made and, as such, remains an inspiration for many young players.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaj/2002.html.

SOURCES
Honolulu Star-Bulletin
The Herald (Jasper, Indiana)

www.baseball-reference.com
www.britishbaseball.org (earlier version, now offline)
www.flhistory.gofreeserve.com (Tim Perry’s website)
9 – Brian Essery, Ace #8

2008

by MATT SMITH

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Brian Essery delivered one of the all-time great one-season domestic British baseball careers, putting up a series of dominating appearances on the mound as a key piece in what was arguably one of the best British club squads ever assembled.
BACKGROUND

Brian Essery was born on 31 July 1974 in Vancouver, British Columbia, but grew up in Toronto and St Catharines, Ontario. After attending Glen Oaks Community College, across the border in the United States, he spent 3 years pitching professionally in the independent leagues. In 1995 and 1996, he played for the Welland Aquaducks in Ontario, making 27 appearances (21 of which came as a starter). He then joined Altoona, in Pennsylvania, for the 1997 season. Over six starts he compiled a 2–3 win–loss record with a respectable 4.22 earned-run average, but at the season’s end he decided to leave his professional baseball career behind and headed back to Canada, signing up with the Niagara Metros in the Central Ontario League.

Essery went on to play 11 full seasons for the Metros between 1997 and 2009 and during that period he left a permanent mark on the history of the team, which goes back to 1985. Over a 146-game career he put together a 61–23 record with a 2.50 earned-run average and, as of 2012, held 13 all-time Metros records, including the most wins in a season (13) and the best single-season earned-run average (0.53).

His achievements could have been even greater but for two factors that caused him to miss time with the team. The first was an arm injury suffered during the 2003 season that halted a run of excellence. He had been outstanding in the two previous seasons and had a 5–0 record with a 1.26 earned-run average in 2003 before his injury struck. He made a return to form and fitness by 2005, and in 2007 he picked up honours as the best pitcher in the league at the end of a season in which he threw three complete-game shut-outs.

However, his season did not end there. Essery was about to begin a relationship with British baseball that would lead to him taking a leave of absence from the Metros in 2008. In Essery’s words:

A team-mate of mine, Tim Collins, joined the Niagara Metros for the 2007 season and was an infielder for the Great Britain National Baseball Team. Having a parent born in the UK, I knew I would be eligible for the team. After speaking with Tim and Head Coach Stephan Rapaglia I was invited to New York for a try-out in June. The try-out went great and I participated for the first time in the 2007 European Championships.

Essery was the starting pitcher for Great Britain in the tournament opener against the hosts, Spain. In what would prove to be a pivotal game, he pitched five innings and conceded 4 runs as Team GB prevailed 12–8. It was a win that set the team on course for a tournament that would match their most successful in European Championship history. Essery pitched five shut-out innings and
Brian Essery

got the win against the Ukraine in his next outing, and his third start came against The Netherlands in the game that decided the championship.

The Dutch had won the tournament four straight times heading into the 2007 competition and were overwhelming favourites to win it again. Expectations were not nearly so high for Great Britain – outside of the team, at least – but their impressive performances had put them in a position where if they could beat The Netherlands, they would sensationally win the tournament and qualify for the 2008 Olympic Games.

Essery was chosen to start this all-important game. The standard of opposition that he was facing was made clear right off the bat. He gave up two hits to start the game. The second was a run-scoring single by Hainley Statia, a ninth-round 2004 amateur draft selection who has since played in two World Baseball Classics and reached the Triple-A level in the Minor Leagues. The first hit was by outfielder Roger Bernadina. Less than a year later, he would be making his Major League debut for the Washington Nationals.

Bernadina hit a solo home run in his next at-bat, and by the completion of the third inning Essery had conceded 3 runs. However, the pitcher showed his composure by holding The Netherlands scoreless over the next three frames to keep the game close. Ultimately, though, the Dutch simply proved too strong for Great Britain and they ran out victors 6–1, with another 3 runs (all unearned) being charged to Essery. Nevertheless, it was an extremely impressive championship-game performance both by Great Britain and by Essery.

Essery’s pitching was there for all to see, but his work ethic and commitment to the cause also left a big impression on those involved with the Team GB set-up. This led to a top British club side, the London Mets, approaching the right-hander about joining their ranks.

The Mets had won the 2007 British national final in their inaugural season, defeating the Croydon Pirates 7–2 and 11–1 to sweep the best-of-three championship series. They were looking to build on their championship-winning debut year and it was an opportunity that Essery grabbed with both hands:

After such a great experience at the 2007 European Championships I spoke to my wife about playing in Europe for a season. She was excited about the possibility of our three kids attending school and living in Europe for a season. Thanks to club president Neil Warne and player–coach Josh Chetwynd the opportunity arose to play and coach for the London Mets. We couldn’t pass up the opportunity to go to London for the season.
Nine Aces and a Joker

Essery thus took a break from his career as a police officer with the Niagara Regional Police and swapped the Metros for the Mets. In doing so, he set himself on course for one of the best pitching seasons in British baseball history.

STORY OF THE SEASON

The opening game of the London Mets’ 2008 season on 20 April was a re-run of the 2007 national final against the Croydon Pirates. The Mets jumped out to a 2–0 lead in the top of the first inning against Jared Uys, who could have been forgiven for thinking that a little bit of early-season rust in his first inning of 2008 would not prove too costly. If he did think that way, though, he would soon be proved wrong.

Essery struck out the first two batters he faced and retired the first four Pirates in order. His impressive start was then rudely interrupted by a home run off the bat of Pirates slugger Ryan Barwick. Essery responded by striking out five of the next six batters he faced, and he had struck out 13 of the first 20 batters before Ty Touchstone hit a two–out single in the bottom of the sixth, with the Mets leading 4–1. Touchstone would ultimately touch home plate for an unearned run and Barwick completed a strong showing with the bat by singling in the inning to cap off a 3–for–3 performance. He was the only Pirate who came out of the game with a moral victory over the opposing pitcher.

The Mets won 5–2 in the regulation seven innings, the norm in British baseball double–headers. Essery’s final pitching line in his British league debut was startling: seven innings pitched, 2 runs (one unearned) conceded on five hits and no walks, and 15 strike–outs. As Joe Gray reported at the time on BaseballGB:

> While his pitch count [93] might have prevented him going a full 9 innings, he certainly would have been coming out for the 8th. It just would have been good to know how many strike–outs he could have finished with if it was his arm rather than the conclusion of the 7th inning that brought about the end of his game.

Essery himself was pleased with his debut: “I didn’t know what to expect. They were a strong team from the previous seasons and I knew that they would provide good competition. It was great to get the first win of the season and gain confidence for the year ahead.”

Essery was not able to match his debut strike–out tally in his next appearance, which came a week later against the Bracknell Blazers, but that was in part due to the Mets’ batting line–up dominating the contest. The Mets led 5–0 heading into the bottom of the third inning before Essery, who had faced the
Brian Essery

minimum number of batters through the first two innings, gave up a lead-off walk to Henry Collins and conceded 2 runs, showing he was human after all. The Blazers’ Phil Matthews then led off the bottom of the fourth by taking Essery deep to make it 3 runs conceded, but the result was never in doubt as the game was called after six innings with the Mets leading 16–3. Essery came out of the game after five innings with four strike-outs and a second pitching win in a row.

He made it three wins on the spin in the Mets’ home opener on 4 May against the Richmond Flames. It was a double-header between two unbeaten teams, as both had won their first four games of the season. For the third straight game, Essery began by pitching a three-up, three-down first inning and his team-mates immediately showed their appreciation by pegging him to a 1–0 lead. With Michael Osborn on the mound for the Flames, Troy Kantor led off the bottom of the inning with a single, was sacrificed across to second by Callum Woods, took third base on a passed ball, and was driven home by Alex Malihoudis, a veteran of the British domestic league and national team. Osborn managed to keep the game tight, preventing London from scoring over the next four innings. This left Essery no margin for error, but that was just fine with him.

Ryan Bird reached third base for Richmond in the second inning, but Essery kept the danger at bay with two strike-outs to end the inning and no other Flame made it into scoring position over the first five innings. Richmond did score an unearned run in the sixth inning and were able to score another run off Essery in the seventh; however, the Mets had increased their lead with 2 runs in the sixth and their pitching ace rounded off the victory by securing the final three outs by way of strikes.

The Mets won the second game of the double-header 10–0, with Kantor continuing a strong start to the campaign by striking out nine batters over six innings. This left London unbeaten at the top of the division with a 6–0 win–loss record.

Essery’s winning start to his British career came under threat in his fourth appearance, but not owing to any deficiencies on his part. Croydon were the visitors to Finsbury Park on Sunday 18 May and their batters did not seem to gain any advantage from having faced Essery on opening day. Once again, the game started with a three-up, three-down inning by the Mets’ pitcher. The always dangerous Maikel Azcuy quickly broke up the no-hitter with a single to lead off the second inning, but the Pirates could not find a way to inflict any damage on Essery or the scoreboard. There was only one other baserunner allowed through the first four innings, with Essery gaining four strike-outs along the way.
Strange as it may sound, it was a Mets’ run bonanza in the bottom of the fourth inning that put Essery’s winning streak in danger. London, already ahead 2–0, scored eight unearned runs on five errors in a nightmarish half-inning for the Pirates’ defence. With the Mets leading 10–0, the decision was made to turn the game over to Ernesto Bolufer. It was an entirely sound move by the Mets to rest their ace’s arm in a game that was surely already won – not least owing to his replacement’s proficiency on the mound – but it almost backfired on Essery’s win total.

Pirates third-baseman Evan Donovan started the top of the fifth inning with a double and came around to score. That was the only run Bolufer conceded; however, it was enough to bring the Pirates back within 10 runs, which prevented the mercy rule from being incited in the middle of the fifth (the earliest stage at which it can kick in during a contest scheduled for seven innings). There is no stipulation by the British Baseball Federation that win criteria should differ from standard Major League Baseball rules, even in seven-inning games. Thus, Essery’s four innings would not have been enough for the win if the game went into a sixth inning. The Mets needed 1 run in the bottom of the frame to end the contest after five innings and preserve Essery’s fourth pitching win.

One run should not have seemed like a lot to ask for after scoring eight times in the previous inning, but when Jason Holowaty flied out to centre and Liam Carroll grounded out to the shortstop, it might have looked a long way off. Thankfully for Essery, Malihoudis came to the rescue. He singled to get on base and then scampered home from there, going station-by-station on three wild pitches by the luckless Jeff Antonik. The game was called with the Mets leading 11–1 and Essery had his fourth victory.

His fifth win came on 1 June in the opening game of a Finsbury Park double-header against the Bracknell Blazers. Essery’s run of not allowing a baserunner in the first inning of a game was snapped in style by the Blazers’ lead-off hitter, Ryan Trask. He battled back from a 1–2 count to launch a 3–2 pitch for a home run. No-one had dealt such a blow to Essery so far and a lesser pitcher might have been rattled. The veteran took it in his stride; indeed, it appeared to make him all the more focused. He struck out Ryan’s brother Michael Trask, fanned Collins, and got Matt Maitland to ground out to third to end the inning with no further damage done.

From there, Essery dominated the contest. The Trask brothers each collected a single and Marcus Simpson reached on an error, but they were the only baserunners the Blazers could muster. Essery struck out Maitland for the third time of the game to end the sixth inning, and the Mets sealed another shortened victory in the bottom of the frame when catcher Will Lintern came
home on a Carlos Diaz sacrifice fly to make the score 11–1. Despite giving up a lead-off home run, Essery had taken another win and struck out nine batters.

Lintern was catching Essery for the third time that season in the game. He would also be behind the dish for the next game, against the Flames, and then in the season finale. Lintern was in prime position to judge what made Essery so effective.

“Ess” was a joy to catch. He had great poise, an ability to locate both sides of the plate and terrific late movement on all of his pitches. We never threw any breaking balls, even though his curve was one of his best pitches. He only needed a fastball and a change-up, and most of the time just the fastball, to get guys out.

Essery used that approach to add a pair of wins to his total over the next two Sundays with more masterful pitching.

On 8 June, Essery was pitching a no-hitter against the Flames through four-and-two-third innings before he gave up a double to centre-field. As he had done in his previous start, Essery quickly regained his composure, getting Yoshi Saito to ground out to Holowaty at second to end the inning. Although the Flames managed to hit three more singles and worked another base on balls over the next two innings, they were unable to get on the scoreboard as Essery pitched six shut-out innings to lead the Mets to an 11–0 victory.

The following Sunday, Essery inflicted more misery on the Croydon Pirates as the Mets won in five innings by a score of 11–1. Azcuy went two-for-two for the Pirates with two singles, the first of which drove home Kevin Brush, the only other player to get a hit off Essery. Otherwise it was a familiar story: Essery struck out six and walked just one over six innings as his team-mates kept putting runs up on the board. Phil Clark was 3-for-4 at the plate, while Woods, George Lintern, and Alex Pike all went 2-for-3.

By this point in the season, the Mets were already looking set for the playoffs. They led the National Baseball League’s four-team southern pool with a 14–0 record, and two teams would advance from the bracket. Their next-best challengers, Richmond, had an 8–4 record (all four of their losses had been caused by London). The Mets were in excellent form with the bat and Essery was not their only pitcher dominating on the mound. His team-mate Kantor led top-tier pitchers in earned-run average and strike-outs per nine innings. Essery was not far behind him.

After Essery had secured his seventh win of the season, the Mets won two blow-out victories over the Bracknell Blazers without him on 22 June and then did not play again until 3 August. It raised the question as to whether the
Eight Aces and a Joker

break would knock Essery out of his rhythm or if it would simply allow him to recharge his batteries for the final month.

Considering his track record, there should not have been much surprise that he simply picked up where he had left off. Over two starts on two consecutive Sundays, Essery struck out 20 batters (an even 10 in each game) in 13 innings, walking only two, and allowing just four hits and a solitary run.

The Bracknell Blazers were the victims in the first game, on 3 August. Essery struck out the first four batters he faced and also finished with a flourish, retiring 11 of the last 12 hitters on the way to a 6–0 victory. London won the second game of the double-header too to improve their season record to 18–0. Qualification for the play-offs was already guaranteed.

It was the same story when the Richmond Flames were welcomed to Finsbury Park on the following Sunday. Marty Visser led off the game and was called out on strikes by umpire Geoff Hare, and Essery retired the second batter too. A pitch to the next hitter, Cody Cain, got away from the Mets’ ace and plunked him, scuppering the clean start, but he recovered by getting a ground-ball to first-baseman Josh Chetwynd to end the inning. Malihoudis put the Mets up 1–0 when he sneaked home on a time play ahead of Mark Rigby’s caught stealing at second, which ended the bottom of the first inning.

The Flames knew that giving the Mets any sort of lead could prove fatal and Grant Delzoppo looked to trigger an immediate comeback by singling into right-field to lead off the top of the second inning. But that proved to be a very short-lived blip for Essery. He retired the next 14 hitters, a sequence that was broken only when his normally stellar infield committed an error. With the Mets having padded their lead to 5–0 with 4 runs in the third inning, Essery came to the mound in the top of the seventh looking for his second straight shut-out. Bird was not prepared to be a part of that, though. He jumped on a pitch to drive a double into right-field, stole third base, and then sprinted home on a fielder’s choice. The shut-out was gone, but pitching rival Osborn was soon retired and Essery gladly took the win regardless.

That win left the right-hander with a perfect 9–0 record and the Mets as a team were also undefeated. A 10–0 victory in the second game of the double-header against Richmond put them on a 20–0 record with four regular season games to go. Frankly, it seemed almost inevitable that the Mets would go on and complete a perfect 24–0 season and be strong favourites to retain their national title in the play-offs. But that was before the events of Sunday 17 August.

The Mets were in Croydon, taking on the Pirates at Roundshaw. It was the final day of baseball for the Pirates in 2008 in what had been a disappointing year. They had revelled in achieving a perfect 26–0 regular season in 2007, but a
Brian Essery

bit of the sheen had been taken off by their loss to the Mets in the championship final and 2008 had turned out to be a rebuilding year for the club.

The Pirates had a 4–18 record, but manager Dave Ward’s team were not ready to simply play out the final double-header and look towards 2009. They did not just want to end the season on a positive note; rather, they wanted some revenge for the Mets’ victory in the 2007 final and also wanted to prevent their opponents from emulating their own perfect season (albeit one that had come against an easier schedule than the Mets had faced in 2008).

Of course, Essery’s pitching presented a major obstacle to the Pirates’ aim, and when the Mets jumped on the Croydon starter to score 4 runs in the top of the first inning, it looked like this game would go the same way as Essery’s previous nine starts. And yet this was not quite the same Essery as the Mets had come to expect. While he struck out three batters in the first inning, he gave up a run in the frame, then another on a solo home run by Kieran Clackett in the second inning, and then two more in the third inning as the Pirates erased their early 4–0 deficit.

George Lintern scored a run to help the Mets regain the lead in the top of the fourth. But in the bottom half of the inning Clackett took Essery deep for the second straight time to level the scores at 5–5, and then the Pirates took the lead on an unusual play, as Gray wrote on BaseballGB:

> With two outs and runners on first and second, Ty Touchstone got trapped between second and third in a run-down. Going first one way and then the next, he managed to scramble safely to third. Noticing that so many fielders had been involved in the run-down that home was now unguarded, Touchstone sprinted down the line, followed closely by the catcher, and crossed the plate for his second stolen base on the play. Touchstone is well drilled in evading the put-out on a run-down, since at school he was always asked by the baseball coach to be the runner during run-down practice with the team’s fielders.

Make no mistake: this was the Mets in a muddle. Essery was not quite on his A game and the Pirates sniffed an upset. Clark and Rigby swung into action for the Mets by hitting back-to-back home runs to lead off the fifth inning, but back came the Pirates with two more scores in the top of the fifth to put them ahead again, 8–7. The Mets were retired in order in the sixth to get the Pirates’ hitters back out against Essery, and they got runners on second and third before the London ace extinguished the threat with two outs.

This was far from vintage Essery; however, his display of customary composure in getting out of the sixth inning proved crucial. The Mets broke
Pirate hearts in the top of the seventh when they mounted a 6-run, two-out rally to take a 13–8 lead into the bottom of the seventh. The experienced Simon Pole replaced Essery on the mound and the drama continued when Brush smashed a two-out grand slam to bring Croydon back within 1 run, only for Pole to hold his nerve and get Barwick to fly out to right-field to end a breathless, exhausting, and exhilarating game.

Incredibly, the second game of the double-header almost matched it for excitement. Clackett hit his third home run of the day and Azcuy added a 3-run shot to give the Pirates an 8–4 victory that ended their season on a high. As for the Mets, despite having fully played their part in a great day of baseball, things suddenly did not seem quite so rosy. They were still on course for a fantastic season and in prime position to retain their title, yet their attempt at an unbeaten season had been undone.

Potentially more importantly, while their ace may have picked up his 10th win of the season, the achievement could not disguise his slightly off-colour performance. Looking back, Essery recalls that the game gave him and the Mets an important nudge:

I knew going into their home field that the game wasn't going to be easy. They had some good hitters in that line-up. Croydon hit me well that day. I didn't have my best stuff, but give them credit, they came to play. The day was a wake-up call for not only myself but the entire team. We had to be at our best. We weren't going to be handed the national championship.

Essery did not take to the mound in the final two games of the regular season, although the Mets were still able to recover from losing their unbeaten season by sweeping a double-header over the Richmond Flames. Rigby homered in the opener to make it three games in a row for him with a round-tripper. The results meant that the Mets finished the regular season on top of the National Baseball League South with a 23–1 record. They advanced to the Final Four over the first weekend of September, in Croydon, where they would be joined by the Flames, the Manchester Eagles, and the Menwith Hill Patriots.

London faced Menwith Hill in a single-game semi-final on Saturday 6 September and opted to rest Essery to keep him fresh for what was scheduled to be a best-of-three final. The Mets eased their way past the Patriots by a score of 15–1 and the Flames enjoyed similar success over the Eagles with a 10–3 victory. This set up the 10th straight all-southern top-tier final.

Inclement weather had set in on the Saturday and there was no let-up. By Sunday morning only one of Croydon's two diamonds was still fit for play,
creating a scheduling headache for the tournament organizers. The National Baseball League final had to be reduced to a one-game showdown and Essery was the man taking the ball for the Mets. There would be no second chances and no margin for error, but prior to Essery’s most recent appearance on the mound that would not have bothered anybody. His somewhat shaky last start against the Pirates had introduced an element of doubt to what had previously seemed to be a certain celebration. Few sports can match baseball’s cruel tendency to turn a hero into a zero in a single game and Essery’s 10-win season suddenly created pressure rather than confidence. One sub-par performance could end a memorable year with ultimate failure. Essery knew what was on the line.

I was confident in our team. We had just come off the semi-final hitting the ball hard and playing great defence. Growing up in Canada I never had the opportunity to play for a national championship at any level and I didn’t want to let my team down. Richmond was a strong opponent and I knew that I had to throw strikes, hit spots, and keep the ball down and we would be successful.

His catcher Will Lintern was similarly aware of the challenge Richmond presented, but was confident that his team would prevail.

Because of the pitching staff we had in Essery, Kantor, and Bolufer, we knew that Richmond preferred their chances in a winner-takes-all scenario rather than a best-of-three series. However, with Essery on the bump and relief coming from Kantor and Bolufer I knew all we’d need was one.

The Mets came to the plate in the top of the first inning, in overcast and blustery conditions, and did what they had done all season long. With the veteran Cain on the mound, Pole singled home Holowaty to give the Mets an early 1–0 lead. Essery missed the strike zone with his first pitch to Blair Delzoppo but battled back to get the outfielder to ground out to Pole at third base for out number one. Mike Dempsey and Cain were then retired in order to give Essery one of his patented three-up, three-down innings to start the game.

After London scored twice more in the top of the second, Essery returned to work by retiring the four, five, and six hitters in the bottom of the frame. Osborn nixed the perfect game bid with a single to lead off the bottom of the third inning, but his trip around the bases ended there as Essery simply
Nine Aces and a Joker

regrouped and retired the next three batters to make it nine outs from the first 10 hitters.

The final was broken open in the top of the fourth inning when the Mets scored four times to increase their lead to 7–0. Essery’s run of zeros ended in the bottom half of that inning when Grant Delzoppo singled home Cain, now playing at shortstop with Bird assuming the pitching role for Richmond; however, the Mets tacked on another 3 runs in the fifth inning to make it 10–1 and Essery pitched a perfect fifth to get back on track.

Essery’s final inning in the 2008 season did not quite go to plan as the Flames turned a trio of singles and a walk into 3 runs, but that was a small matter. When the Mets needed him most, Essery had more than held his end up. He finished the final with a line of seven innings pitched, 4 runs conceded (all earned) on six hits and one walk, and nine strike-outs. It was fitting that he handed the ball over to Kantor to close the game out as he had pitched brilliantly all season long as well. He struck out four over the final two innings, backing up his own 4-for-5 performance at the plate, as the Mets clinched their second straight national title with an 11–4 victory. It remains a prized memory for Essery: “That was a great game we played and one that I will never forget. I had finally at 34 years old won a national championship.”

Lintern was in no doubt about the part his battery-mate had played in such a crucial game.

It’s tough to say whether Brian’s performance in the final was the best of the season, but when you consider we were facing Richmond, in a one-game final at the end of a cold wet weekend (with no dugouts for shelter), and he threw seven innings with nine strike-outs, it’s certainly a contender.

EPILOGUE

After helping the London Mets to the 2008 title, Brian Essery returned to Canada and the Niagara Metros for the 2009 season. That year he was one of only two players from across Ontario to be selected for the Windsor Stars team that competed in Nova Scotia at the Senior National competition. He followed up his British final performance by taking Most Valuable Player honours in the bronze medal game at the event.

Essery was back in Europe at the end of the 2009 season as a key member of Great Britain’s 2009 World Cup team. He was chosen to be Team GB’s starting pitcher in the crucial first-round game against Croatia. The right-hander responded to the pressure of the task by pitching five scoreless innings. This led the team to their only victory in the round, and it was one that resulted in them
Brian Essery

achieving the considerable feat of qualifying for the second round in one of the most prestigious international tournaments on the circuit. Essery’s victory ended up as their only win of the event.

When looking back at Essery’s 2008 season with the Mets, the regular-season numbers cannot help but impress. He finished with a perfect 10–0 win-loss record, five complete games, a 1.95 earned-run average, and 76 strike-outs over 60 innings pitched. As team-mate Will Lintern put it: “There is one word to sum up Essery’s season: dominating. Every time he stepped out on the mound, you knew he was going to get the job done. Dominating fastball, dominating presence, and a dominating performance.”

What adds to the story of Essery’s season is that it almost did not happen at all, as Mets 2008 player–coach Josh Chetwynd explains:

We’d actually lined up another pitcher before reaching out to Brian. If I’d known of Brian’s interest when we were talking with the other guy, I would have chosen Brian first, but we didn’t find out about his interest until later. I’m so thankful it didn’t work out with the first guy because Brian was amazing on and off the field.

Essery left a lasting impression on all those who he played with and coached. His motivation for coming to Britain and the commitment he showed in doing so was something that Chetwynd admired greatly: “He was willing to make the sacrifice to come over to the United Kingdom with his family. I don’t think there has ever been a player to take a leave of absence from a career (not just a job, but a successful career) and come over with his wife and kids just to give back to GB baseball.”

For Essery, the pleasure was all his own.

I had a great time playing for the London Mets and living in London. Club president Neil Warne, his family, and the London Mets were great to my family. I was able to coach younger kids, coach baseball in the schools, and give something back to British baseball. I had a great bunch of talented team-mates who gave me the opportunity to be successful and win the national championship. We had a special team in 2008. Many observers have mentioned to me that they believed that the 2008 London Mets were one of, if not the best, team they had seen in the British top league. I will never forget my season and the friendships I made. That season was truly special.

It certainly was special, and that was due in no small part to the historically brilliant pitching by Essery.
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaJ/2008.html.

SOURCES
www.baseballgb.co.uk
www.baseball-reference.com
www.metrosbaseball.ca

Project COBB’s archive of official scoresheets
10 – Jason Roberts, Ace #9

2010

by MATT SMITH

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
In 2010, Jason Roberts seemed capable of pitching a complete game every weekend that his London Mets were in action and, in picking up win after win, made a run on a series of modern single-season pitching records. Not identifiable in the statistical records was his dry wit and mastery of play-off facial hair.
BACKGROUND

Jason Roberts was born on 14 May 1979 in Pontiac, Michigan. He began his career in British baseball 30 years later when he joined the reigning national champions, the London Mets. The Mets had won back-to-back British National Championships in 2007 and 2008, their first two seasons in existence, and were bidding to make it three titles in a row when Roberts joined their ranks.

Roberts, whose previous playing career included representing Oakland University between 1997 and 2001, was with the Mets for the first half of the season in 2009 before heading back to the States. He made six starts in the National Baseball League that year, during which time he had a win–loss record of 4–1 and a 2.92 earned-run average. All four of Roberts’ wins came in performances where he pitched a complete game, including his final outing of the season on 28 June against the Richmond Flames. He shut out the Flames over the regulation seven innings, giving up only two hits and four walks, while striking out seven.

The Mets finished the regular season with a 17–7 record and qualified automatically for the National Baseball Championships; however, they went into the final tournament having lost three of their final four games to be pipped to the top spot in the league by the Richmond Flames.

Although the Mets defeated the Bracknell Blazers 10–4 in their first game of the championships, they were beaten by the Flames 4–1 in their next contest and were knocked out of the double-elimination tournament when the Blazers gained revenge with an 11–7 victory. Bracknell went on to win the national title with a 16–4 victory over the Flames, while the Mets looked on, all the more determined to have a good season in 2010 and to regain their title.

Roberts returned to the team for the entirety of the 2010 season. He had made a good first impression over the course of his 2009 appearances, but few could have predicted the way in which he would add to his stats totals in 2010.

STORY OF THE SEASON

The season began at Finsbury Park, the Mets’ North London home, on 18 April. The British baseball fixture list had given London an immediate chance to draw a line under the previous season’s championship loss by pairing them with their 2009 nemesis, the Bracknell Blazers.

Jason Roberts was on the mound for the first game of the double-header and was in dominant form early in the contest. He retired eight of the first nine hitters he faced, six of them by way of a strike-out, and the Mets held a 2–1 lead after three innings.

In the top of the fourth inning, Roberts did what all pitchers hate to do: he gave up a lead-off walk. Ed Jeffrey was the hitter who benefitted from the base on balls and he came around to score to tie the game at 2–2.
Jason Roberts

British league veteran Henry Collins struck out two Mets to extinguish a run-scoring threat in the bottom of the frame and the Blazers then took the lead in the top of the fifth. Marcus Simpson led off the inning with a single and, much to Roberts’ frustration, found his way to third base on two wild pitches. The Mets’ ace struck out two in his attempt to keep the Blazers from getting ahead, but Jeffrey singled Simpson home to make it 3–2 to the visitors.

Roberts’ team-mates picked up their pitcher by fighting back immediately. George Lintern and Rob Anthony crossed home plate in the bottom of the fifth inning to restore the Mets’ lead and Roberts was not going to let it slip. He teamed up with catcher Will Lintern to end the game in style with a strike-‘em-out, throw-‘em-out double-play in a 5–4 victory. Roberts had earned his first win of the season by pitching a complete game, in which he allowed six hits while striking out 12 Blazers.

It was a sign of things to come. Roberts was back on the mound at Finsbury Park a week later, this time with the Herts Falcons as the opponents. Teams always look to get off to a bright start in a game, but this is all the more important when facing ace pitchers. If you fail to get to them early, you might not get to them at all once they settle into a rhythm.

The Falcons gave themselves a chance by turning a walk and a hit by pitch into 2 runs in the top of the first inning. But Roberts calmly brushed the first frame aside and promptly shut out Herts for the rest of the contest, giving up only three singles over the next six innings. However, the Falcons’ starting pitcher Dan Kerry held the Mets scoreless through the first three innings and it appeared that the pair of early runs might just be enough.

Unfortunately for the Falcons, and thankfully for Roberts, the Mets’ offence could not be contained. London cut the deficit in half with a run in the fourth inning and then added five more tallies over the next two frames, all while Roberts was rolling along and stopping Herts from making any sort of comeback. The game finished 6–2 to the Mets and a 9–1 win in the second part of the double-header, in which Bryan Anderson followed Roberts’ lead with a complete-game effort, meant that London started the season with four consecutive wins at home.

Game three of Roberts’ season came on 5 May against the Southampton Mustangs. The Mustangs had defeated the Croydon Pirates twice at home the previous weekend to even up their early season record to 2-and-2, and so they were in a confident mood heading into their double-header against the Mets.

Roberts and opposing starting pitcher Lee Ralph traded zeros in the first inning before the Mets opened the scoring with 2 runs in the top of the second. The Mustangs responded with 1 run in the bottom of the inning but, while the Mets were able to keep their scoring sequence going with two further tallies in the next inning, that was as good as it got for Southampton.
Roberts shut out the Mustangs over the next five innings. His dominance included three consecutive innings (the fourth, fifth, and sixth) in which he retired all three batters in order as part of a spell of 10 consecutive batters that he sat down. Five of those 10 went the way of a strike-out and Roberts would end the game with eight punch-outs to his name; he retired 13 of the last 14 Mustangs he faced. Opposing pitcher Lee Ralph led Southampton’s batting line-up with two hits, but his team-mates could only muster two more combined and he had to accept the loss as the London Mets completed a 13–1 victory.

The wins kept on coming for Roberts over the next two games. On 9 May, against the Croydon Pirates, he allowed 3 runs over five innings while fanning six and giving up only four hits. The Mets’ batting line-up plundered the Pirates for 13 runs in four-and-two-thirds innings and that was enough for the game to be called on the 10-run mercy rule, with London winning 13–3. Croydon managed only five more hits in game two, against Anderson, and fell to another heavy defeat. The Pirates left the field feeling that they had barely had an opportunity to hit the ball in the double-header and so some of the players trudged off to London’s only batting cages, at Northwick Park, for some extra-curricular work.

The Essex Arrows provided a much stern test the following Sunday, fighting the Mets for the full seven innings and proving that Roberts was not going to have things all his own way. He conceded six runs on eight hits and allowed six walks; however, he was able to whiff eight Arrows and kept the Mets in the game as they ultimately prevailed by a score of 10–6.

That victory meant that Roberts had come through the first five games of the season with a perfect 5–0 win–loss record. He had gone the distance in all five starts, striking out 38 batters over 33 innings while conceding 15 earned runs. It was an impressive run, but this was only the beginning for the Mets’ ace. His next three starts would be quite remarkable.

On 23 May, the London Mets travelled to RAF Feltwell in Norfolk to take on the Mildenhall Bulldogs. The Bulldogs had started their debut year in the National Baseball League in impressive fashion with four straight wins, but they had lost four in a row since then and the Mets were on a roll. Roberts started the opening game of the double-header and he pitched the full seven innings for yet another complete-game victory. Although he did allow 10 hits, only two were for extra bases (both doubles) and he struck out 10 hitters as the Mets won the game by a score of 8–4. They then took the second game 10–7 to make it 10 wins on the spin and improve their season record to 11–1.

That record was good enough for the Mets to top the circuit heading into the first-ever National Baseball League “Summer Classic”, a special event, on Saturday 5 June, that formed part of the league schedule. Rather than playing the usual round of four double-headers, the eight teams headed to Grovehill
Ballpark in Hemel Hempstead for a packed day of baseball comprising four nine-inning games.

The Mets were last up on the day, against the Richmond Flames. Jason Roberts and Cody Cain were the starting pitchers and they had to wait until just before 5:25 PM for the home plate umpire to shout “play ball” for their game. It had been a long wait and it would turn into a longer evening.

The London Mets led 5–0 after the first two innings and Roberts had opened up with two relatively comfortable frames. However, rain was falling in Hertfordshire and two batters into the top of the third inning all concerned had to run for cover as thunderstorms hit the area. With limited shelter available, as is typical at British baseball facilities, many players and spectators crammed into cars parked in the area directly behind the backstop and waited with the engines and heating turned on. Half an hour passed before the teams could resume play and when they got going again Roberts found his control failing him. He walked three of the first four batters he faced – the other reaching on an error – and the disrupted half-inning ended with the Flames having scored 3 runs.

The Mets hit back in the bottom of the fourth inning as Daniel Williams and Phil Clark came around to score before Kyle Hickson hit a solo shot that made it 8–3, but Roberts uncharacteristically gave those runs straight back in the bottom half of the inning. He struck out Michael Osborn to begin the frame but then gave up three hits and three walks as the Flames pulled back to within 2 runs.

After a quiet sixth inning, Roberts struck out the side in the top of the seventh (in between an error and the ninth walk of the game) and the Mets’ offence carried that momentum through the seventh-inning stretch to add a pair of insurance runs to their advantage. The Flames’ Robbie Unsell got one of those back by turning a lead-off walk into a run in the top of the eighth inning to make it 10–7 and Carlos Manchino, pitching in relief of Cain, sent the game into the ninth with the same scoreline by striking out two Mets and stranding two baserunners.

That left Roberts protecting a 3-run lead in the top of the ninth inning. With two out and two runners on base, Cain came to the plate as the potential game-tying run. By this point, the light was fading badly, and it looked like the game might be suspended (in fact, home plate umpire Petter Nordwall was not prepared to let the game go beyond this batter). Cain peered into the dusk. Roberts reared back and got his opponent to swing through strike three, which brought the contest to a close with watches showing the time as 9.15 PM. Remarkably, it was Roberts’ 200th pitch of the game.

Eight days later, Roberts was back on the mound for the Mets, against the Bracknell Blazers. The Blazers’ starting pitcher, Matt Maitland, struck out the first two Mets hitters before Anthony reached base via a walk. Two stolen bases and an error by the catcher allowed Anthony to give the Mets a 1–0 lead, but Maitland
ended the inning with another strike-out, suggesting that a pitching duel could well be on the cards.

That was put in doubt when Roberts allowed the first three Bracknell batters to reach base in the bottom of the first inning, two via singles and one on an error by the third baseman. Roberts fanned Maitland with the bases loaded before Brendan Cunliffe drove in the Blazers’ first run on a sacrifice fly. Another fly-out brought the inning to a close and the Mets would have been relieved that they had limited the damage to a single run, but the fear was that Roberts’ slow start was a response to his Herculean 200-pitch effort last time out.

Those fears were comprehensively dismissed, though, as the Mets’ ace held the Blazers scoreless over the remaining six innings. Roberts perhaps did not have his very best stuff, since Bracknell were able to get at least one runner on base in every inning; however, only Ryan Trask was able to muscle the ball into the outfield and both of his two well-hit efforts ended up safely in the right-fielder’s glove. In the second and the sixth inning, Roberts rallied from letting the lead-off man get on base by retiring the next three batters, both times getting two of the three by way of a strike-out.

The lead-off hitter, Michael Trask, would get on base with a single in the seventh inning as well. But, by then, the Mets had a 7–1 lead, and Roberts was not about to let that go to waste as he quickly retired the next batter. Although the younger Trask brother did get to second base, following another single, he advanced no further as a strike-out (number 11 in the contest) and a pop-up closed out the game.

Over his last three starts Roberts had pitched 23 innings. During this period, he had logged 31 strike-outs to take his season total – through his first eight starts – to 69. Just as importantly, every one of those eight starts had resulted in a complete-game victory for the pitcher. Now that he was over half-way through his probable maximum of 15 regular season starts (afforded by the schedule featuring 13 double-headers and two single games), players and fans alike could begin to browse the British baseball records online and wonder if Roberts might just be on course to add his name to some distinguished company.

There was little stopping him over his next two starts. On 20 June, Roberts pitched six shut-out innings against the Herts Falcons. The Falcons were unable to get a hit off him until there were two outs in the third inning and Roberts then held them hitless over the next two frames before Herts batted two on board in the sixth inning. Those two baserunners were left stranded, though, and the Mets scored 3 runs in the bottom of the sixth to make it 11–0 and end the game one inning early. Roberts then sat back and watched his team-mates amass 30 runs in five innings in the second game of the double-header as the Mets retained their place at the top of the National Baseball League over the Bracknell Blazers with a 15–2 record.
Jason Roberts

London’s offence continued to punish the opposing pitchers a week later; this time it was the Southampton Mustangs who were the victims. The Mets scored 14 runs in five innings and, despite allowing his first home run of the season – off the bat of Oscar Sierra – Roberts held the Mustangs to 2 runs over that period to secure another mercy-rule victory. It marked Roberts’ 10th victory of the season, tying him with Cody Cain (London Warriors, 1995), Ian Bates (Croydon Pirates, 2004), and Brian Essery (London Mets, 2008) for the modern-day record for pitching wins in a season. That meant his next start gave Roberts the opportunity to create some pitching history. Fittingly, the Mets’ next game was part of the second special event of the season. This time, the eight teams headed to Roundshaw, in Croydon, on Saturday 3 July.

London caught a break before they even set foot on the diamond as the Croydon Pirates sprung a surprise by beating the second-place Bracknell Blazers 12–11. The loss put Bracknell on a 15–3 record and gave the 17–2 Mets a chance to increase their lead at the top of the league with a win against the Richmond Flames. All the elements were in place for a perfect day for Roberts and his team. But if a script had been written, the Flames had clearly decided that a re-write was necessary.

Richmond’s hitters jumped on Roberts early. Two singles and a walk loaded the bases to start the game and the number four hitter Ryan Bird cleared them with a double, which put the Mets down 3–0 before a single out had been recorded. The Mets’ ace dished out two walks to load the bases again but a Cain pop-up to the first baseman ended the inning with no further damage done.

Roberts came out for the second inning with the intention of erasing the first frame from his memory and starting again; however, he gave up two further tallies in that inning. When the normally potent Mets offence was blanked again in the bottom half of the inning, it appeared as though Roberts would have to wait for another day to get that historic 11th win. Appearances can be deceptive, though, and that was very much the case on that day in Croydon.

The Mets’ hitters started to chip away at the Flames’ lead and Roberts settled into the game, retiring Richmond in order in both the third and fifth innings, before his offence launched a 6-run assault in the bottom of the seventh inning to take a 10–5 lead that was padded by a pair of additional runs in the bottom of the eighth. Roberts closed the 12–5 victory out by retiring the two–three–four hitters in order in the top of the ninth; he fired 158 pitches in the contest. It had looked unlikely after two innings, yet the record-breaking 11th win of the season was secured, ensuring that the special event truly lived up to its name.

With the modern-day single-season wins record already broken and four scheduled starts still to come, Roberts had several other potential records in sight. Each pitching win from now on would set a new mark and if he could pitch complete games in his final four starts he would better Ian Bates’s modern-day
record of 14 complete games in a season. Also within reach were Don Knight’s strike-out record (129 in 1995) and Matt Gilbert’s innings-pitched mark (106.2 in 2001), although the Mets’ tendency to win games on the mercy rule, before the full seven innings were complete, had the potential to scupper those plans.

On Sunday 18 July, the Mets returned to Croydon for a double-header against the Pirates. They scored 7 runs in the top of the first inning to realistically put the game beyond the Pirates’ reach before they had swung a bat in anger. Roberts gave up a run in the second inning but other than that he was dominant, striking out seven batters over five innings; the game was called two innings short of the regulation with London leading 11–1. Croydon’s Conor Riffle had gone 2-for-2, but the team had managed only one other hit.

It was the same story a week later, only this time it was the Essex Arrows who were on the wrong end of a mercy-rule defeat. Roberts struck out nine batters on this occasion, five of them consecutively, over the five innings. Not content with simply doing it on the mound, he also took advantage of an opportunity to swing the bat (the Mets had generally used a designated hitter in place of the pitcher in their batting line-up) by hitting a solo home run to lead off the second inning.

The shut-out left him on course to equal the record for complete games in his next start, which would be against the Mildenhall Bulldogs, and to break the record in his final start of the regular season, against the Richmond Flames.

The Bulldogs arrived at Finsbury Park on 8 August still in contention for a play-off spot despite their 6–14 record. They had the potential to play the role of spoilers as their record was deceptive of their ability: several of the losses had come via forfeits that were due to the military commitments of their US Air Force personnel.

Roberts held the Bulldogs scoreless through the first three innings, facing only one batter above the minimum. The Mets scored once in the first and then plated 4 runs in both the second and third innings to build a commanding 9–0 lead before the Bulldogs bit back with 2 runs in the fourth (both unearned) and another in the fifth. That was as generous as Roberts got and the Mets sealed a 13–3 victory in the bottom of the inning.

Roberts had pulled level with the record of 14 complete games in a season. The run of games truncated on the mercy rule had thwarted his attempt at the innings-pitched record, and the strike-out high-water mark now looked to be beyond him (he had 113 on the season, 16 behind the record). However, he did have one shot at taking sole possession of the record for complete games, and one final win would make it a perfect 15–0 season.

The postseason was already looming large as the Mets and Flames met on 15 August. While the Mets had secured a top-two finish and automatic qualification for the National Baseball Championship, they wanted to be able to carry their good form into the finals with a positive end to the regular season.
Meanwhile, the Flames still needed a win, or maybe two, to make sure of third place and home-field advantage in a championship qualifier.

Not for the first time, the Mets’ offence took away much of the suspense by scoring 5 runs in the top of the first inning. Roberts did give up a double to Cain in the bottom of the inning, but that was all the Flames could manage and the Mets then added 4 runs in the top of the second to quickly take the game away from Richmond.

Roberts had a cushion, but he did not really need one. He allowed a pair of unearned runs in the fourth frame and a couple of runners made it into scoring position in the later innings, but when he took the mound in the bottom of seventh inning he had a 10–1 lead to protect, and history beckoned.

Matt Spaulding grounded out to the second-baseman to start the inning, Tetsuro Shinkawa flied out to centre-field, and Robbie Unsell then bounced a ball back to Roberts for him to gather and then toss to first base to complete a three-up, three-down frame. The record-breaking 15th complete game was in the books. Richmond did win the second game of the double-header to take something away from the day, but there was no doubting that Roberts was the story. He had accomplished something no pitcher had done before in the modern era of British baseball. In truth, though, as long as he had stayed healthy, it seemed that there was little chance he would have failed to pitch a complete game in any of the final contests of the season. After he had ridden the thunder-triggered break in the Summer Classic and returned to complete a 200-pitch game, it looked like the only thing that could get him off the mound was a cry of “that’s the ball game.”

What was most remarkable was his new single-season wins mark. Records in sport generally progress by small increments, but Roberts had added 50% in one go. Roberts’ achievement was more in the realm of Bob Beamon’s famous jump at the 1968 Summer Olympics, which advanced the long-jump record by over half a metre.

The Mets, powered by Roberts’ historic success, finished the regular season in first place in the National Baseball League with a 24–4 win–loss record. That was only part one of their mission to regain the national title and, unfortunately for them, part two did not quite go to plan.

The double-elimination National Baseball Championship started well enough for London as they beat the Southampton Mustangs 8–2 in their opening game, on Saturday 4 September. The win came on the back of a somewhat quirky no-hitter. Reid Wilson walked seven and hit two Mustangs, but he struck out 11 batters along the way and completed the regulation seven innings without giving up a hit. It was the first postseason no-hitter in the modern era, according to available records.

The Richmond Flames got the better of the Mets in their next game by a score of 8–2, Anderson taking the loss on the mound. Thus, Jason Roberts was handed
the ball for London the next day against the Bracknell Blazers in a repeat of the 2009 elimination match. The Mets could not risk saving him for the final.

It was a war of attrition between Roberts and his opposite number, Henry Collins, rather than a pitching classic. The pair battled away, matching each other pitch for pitch, and the two teams could not be separated after nine innings. Then, in the 10th inning, Ed Jeffrey took Roberts deep to centre-field for a solo home run to give the Blazers an 8–7 lead. Collins blanked the Mets in the bottom half of the inning to seal the victory and to leave the Mets lamenting a second consecutive elimination match loss against the Blazers in 2 years.

How deflating this must have been for Roberts, after his record-breaking regular season. He had pitched in two seasons for the best team in Britain (going by the regular-season record) but had not made a national final. Shortly after the end of the campaign, rumours surfaced that he was going to call an end to his playing days.

**EPILOGUE**

The Mets did not even reach the National Baseball Championship in 2011, failing to make it to the final event for the only time in their first five seasons. On a scorching late-summer day, they lost a tense single-game qualifier at Finsbury Park to the newly founded Southern Nationals. What added to the tension was that the Nationals’ pitcher that day was none other than Jason Roberts. The Nationals’ management had talked Roberts into continuing for at least one more season. While he could not repeat his incredible regular-season performance from the previous year, he gladly traded personal success for a team triumph. He took to the mound in relief of talented youngster Jamie Ratcliff in the final against the Lakenheath Diamondbacks and secured the final three outs as the Nationals won the British championship.

Roberts has briefly seen National Baseball League action in 2012, but it is reported that eye problems threaten to keep him off the field.

Will he return to the diamond in Britain? There are certainly many who hope so. His dry wit and deep knowledge of the game make him a welcome presence in any baseball dugout and his pitching skills would grace any mound. ♠

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

For additional information relating to this chapter, including a game-by-game pitching log, visit [www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/2010.html](http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/2010.html).

**SOURCES**

- www.baseballgb.co.uk
- www.britishbaseball.org
- www.ougrizzlies.com
CHARLIE WONOSKI’S 1937 SEASON

Charles Wonoski was born in 1912 in a community of immigrants from Poland, Russia, and Lithuania in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the United States. While still a child, his family moved to the small town of Holliston, 25 miles west of Boston, the state’s largest city. Holliston was a town with a reputation for solid baseball and basketball town teams from high-school to semi-professional levels. There were veteran players, coaches, and always enough players to form teams. Young Charlie’s church also encouraged athletics by hosting basketball and baseball teams. The youngster soaked up everything they had to offer at school and at the church league, and he had enough talent to take him beyond the small town courts and diamonds. His abilities caught the attention of the athletic department at St Mary’s High School in Milford – a school where athletic skill was valued equally to academic prowess – and he was enrolled there on a full athletic scholarship. The faculty there steered him on towards Providence College, with another athletic scholarship under his arm, but the academic side of education was never his strong point and so he walked away, returning to the ball fields and basketball courts around the Holliston–Milford region, where he carved out a living in semi-pro leagues.

In 1937, while Wonoski was playing basketball, as was his usual winter routine, a scout from England happened to be in attendance at a game, and although he was not looking for basketball talent, it was pointed out that Wonoski was a baseball phenom and might be what an English team would appreciate. Wonoski, always up for an adventure, accepted the offer. The southpaw pitcher sailed on the Laconia, spent a week in Liverpool, and then moved on to Leeds, where he would strut his stuff before the English baseball fans while sporting that city’s uniform in the Yorkshire Baseball League. A childhood friend of Wonoski, a journalist named Michael Callahan, followed his progress as a professional player in England in 1937 and published reports in the Daily News (Milford). On 16 June, for instance, he penned the following:
Nine Aces and a Joker

The Leeds Oaks are rated as the outstanding team in the Yorkshire league and it was not long before Wonoski started helping them to maintain their reputation. In his first game he went right to work and pitched a no-hit, no-run game, fanning 17 batters. [...] In their home games, Leeds averages about 5000 spectators a game. The Yorkshire Loop is comparable to the Boston Park League, with just a shade to the faster side, according to Wonoski, and the teams are composed principally of Canadian players, although there are one or two Americans scattered throughout the league. [...] To date, Wonoski has pitched six games, winning all of them, and every game found him blanking his opponents. [...] Charlie’s first impressions of England were not so favorable, but after becoming accustomed to their manner of doing things, he has come to like his surroundings greatly. Autos are considered a necessity here, but according to Wonoski, one has to be in good circumstances to drive a car where he is located. For a while he wasn’t able to get used to their mode of living, and when four meals a day were included in the bill of fare, it kept him guessing, with breakfast, lunch, tea and supper being crowded into a short space of time. Knowing Wonoski’s tendency for taking advantage of every opportunity of indulging in a repast, it is judged that he suffered no ill effects from the extra meal.

In an article written on 13 July, Callahan reported that, up to 26 June, Wonoski had won 11 games and lost none, having had just 3 runs scored off him. The report also provided a digest of Wonoski-related press clippings from the British media, and these included the following:

An outstanding figure in Yorkshire baseball is Charlie Wonoski, owing to the success he has attained as pitcher for the Leeds Oaks team, for his opponents failed to register a single run off him in 47 innings, during which time he had no fewer than 93 strikeouts.

Yorkshire league games gave place to the first round of the N.B.A. cup yesterday. Having won the Yorkshire cup, Leeds Oaks went on to win their first round of the National cup... their opponents were City Sox (Bradford) and Wonoski’s brilliant pitching was again a feature of the game... he now has the remarkable record of 100 strikeouts.

Features of the Leeds Oaks advance to the finals of the Yorkshire cup at the expense of the Maroons was the pitching of Charlie Wonoski, who shut out York and equaled the English baseball record with 23 strikeouts.
Several days later, Callahan brought readers news of a development in Wonoski’s plans for after the end of the British baseball season, in the form of a contract offer to play rugby in London, although he had no experience in the sport:

He has just about a week after the termination of his baseball contract to affix his signature to the rugby contract for the season starts on September 1. This leaves him in rather an “in-and-out” predicament, for he wants to return home for a month and by so doing may lose an opportunity for climbing up a few more rungs in the ladder of success in English sports. He has already skyrocketed in popularity and is regarded as the outstanding personality in baseball across the pond, and we are eagerly awaiting news of the decision he makes in this matter.

That news came on 18 August, and was relayed via the following report:

Wonoski has been enjoying great success in England and is conceded to be the best twirler to don a suit or wear a pair of spikes in English competition. A complete record of Wonoski’s activities is at present unavailable, but an effort is being made to obtain a complete statistical report from the Leeds management. Before many more weeks have passed, Wonoski will have left English soil to return to America at the expiration of his contract with the Leeds Oaks team. He was offered a contract to play Rugby, but after giving the offer due consideration, he decided to embark for home the latter part of this month. Considerable “red tape” would have to be unraveled again to permit him to join the ranks of the rugby players, and although the offer looked very remunerative on the surface, it was really not worth all that it appeared to be, and would hurt his chances of being included in the Leeds baseball roster again next season.

Also contained in Callahan’s report was an example of Wonoski’s guile on the field:

Wonoski is still up to his old tricks, judging from a clipping, which appeared in one of the London papers. The Leeds Oaks were playing the Wakefield Cubs, who were not real contenders in the cup race, being tied for fifth place, but were just pestiferous enough to be bothersome. An excerpt from the write-up offers the following: “We then had the highlight of the game. Wonoski was dashing for home, when the pitcher received the ball, he was only about six yards away from Wonoski, and Charlie slowed down as if resigned to his fate. The pitcher started walking towards Wonoski confident of tagging him, but Charlie stopped and then
when the pitcher was nearly up to him made a sudden dash to make home. This move completely surprised the Wakefield man, and Wonoski was given a wonderful ovation for the way he “sold the dummy.”

On 25 August, Callahan wrote that his childhood friend was returning home on the steamer Samaria for 2 months before returning to England to play soccer with Leeds United, primarily as a goalkeeper. Among Wonoski’s luggage was a trophy commemorating his equalling of the league strike-out record and setting of a high-water mark for shut-outs in the circuit. His failings had been few but generally came in crucial games. For instance, he was bested by Max Wilson in the top-of-the-table clash with Hull in the Yorkshire loop (as mentioned in Chapter 3). He was also charged with the loss as his Oaks fell out of the National Baseball Association Challenge Cup at the semi-final stage. His team-mates were reported to have made four fielding errors as Leeds allowed the Oldham Greyhounds to turn a 4–2 deficit into a 5–4 victory. Wonoski homered twice in the contest.

But Wonoski did not sail back to England to play soccer or baseball. The 1938 season saw rules put in place to restrict the importing of players by limiting the number of foreigners on rosters (this is described in more detail in Chapter 4). After returning to Holliston and appearing in a few baseball games before the end of the 1937 season, Wonoski picked up basketball again, joining the semi-pro Framingham Collegians. His life took a different turn in 1938, as he went for something completely different: he got married. He moved to Boston, found work in his father-in-law’s dry cleaning establishment, settled down to some sort of domestic tranquillity, and joined the Hoyt’s Pals baseball team in Cambridge. His playing time was limited, as his pitching arm had suffered during his time playing in England, and it looked like his playing days were over. But a year of limited time was beneficial: his baseball career, such as it was, did not end here. He may not have been able to pitch like before but he could still play first base.

Life was good, and baseball again beckoned in 1939 when his pals in Milford contacted him, and suggested he join them for a season of baseball in Canada, with the New Waterford Dodgers of the Cape Breton Colliery League. Michael Callahan covered the story in the Daily News on 15 May and remembered Wonoski’s English adventure in describing him as “the jolliest heave-ho who had ever tossed up a bally sphere in the Auld Country.” Decades later, Wonoski’s New Waterford team-mate Henry “Tate” Bodio reminisced about the trip to Cape Breton: “What a trip it was. We brought our wives along too, and it took several days to make it all the way up there. With Charlie along, there wasn’t a dull moment to be had.”

The Cape Breton season opened on 27 May, and Wonoski was on the mound where he turned in a 7–0 shut-out against the Sydney Mines team. He ended the season with a 9–6 win–loss record from 132 innings, in which he yielded
130 hits, 50 runs, and 38 walks and notched up 62 strike-outs. Facing the Sydney Mines team again in the play-offs, their memorable season came to a crashing halt when they lost their final game, 5–1. As he had hoped at the end of his year in England, Wonoski wanted to return to Cape Breton in 1940, but the looming war crisis slackened interest in the league, and it became a concern whether the circuit would continue if the war was still in progress. All of the Americans in the league were forced to accept substantial losses in their salaries owing to the effect on the exchange rate of the decline in Canadian currency. Charlie Wonoski returned home to his job at the cleaners, celebrated the birth of his daughter Carolyn, and contemplated offers from teams in the Boston Park League.

On 29 September 1941, Wonoski was at work at the cleaning establishment in Cambridge. While tinkering with a problem on a naphtha tank, there was an explosion. Charlie suffered extensive second- and third-degree burns to his face, neck, torso, arms, and legs. The accident occurred a year before Boston’s notorious Coconut Grove fire, a disaster from which doctors learned improved treatments for burn victims. Charlie had none of that going for him, and he died on 13 October at the age of 29. He was remembered in Holliston and Milford as the kid with outstanding athletic ability who handled a basketball like no-one they saw before, and a southpaw who played baseball with legendary skill and reckless joy. Callahan often said that we would never see such a memorable athlete again.

FRANK PETRUCCI’S 1948 SEASON

The Thames Board Mills baseball club (commonly referred to by their initials) formed in 1936 and quickly became one of the country’s leading outfits in the partial resurgence of British baseball after the war. In 1947, they defeated the West London Pioneers 10–6 in the Southern Counties Baseball Association Cup Final behind the pitching of a Canadian named Frank Petrucci, a recent addition to the team. He was said to have been “born with a Baseball mitt on” in the match programme. The programme also described the profession of the teams’ players:

The “board-makers” come from Purfleet on the River Thames, twenty miles from London. They work hard just as they play hard, making board from Waste Paper. Most of the Country’s food is packed in Thames Board Mill’s products. They go in for board making in a big way; amongst their six huge machines is the largest in the world, needing 2000 tons of Waste Paper in a week which is turned into board for cardboard boxes, packing cases, building board, etc.

In 1947 TBM had to be content with regional success as there was no national championship. That would change in 1948, as the season schedule incorporated
the first British championship since Halifax had defeated Rochdale to win the title in 1939. TBM’s campaign was followed closely by the Essex & Thurrock Gazette. A warm-up game for the season, on the second weekend in April, showed that the Purfleet team would certainly be in the reckoning. They inflicted a 13–2 defeat on the Essex Nationals – a newly formed team in the Barking area of London – thanks to a dominant performance from Petrucci. He gave up a solitary hit while fanning 19 and walking just two batters.

On the last weekend of April, TBM experimented with their pitching options and handed “Curly” Harman the start against Ford Sports, a works team from the large automotive site at Dagenham, in Essex. In the second inning, Harman’s opposing pitcher hit a grand slam to bring the Ford run tally to five. In came Petrucci and the TBM’s fortunes changed. They sailed to a 23–9 victory, and Petrucci helped his cause by hitting a home run.

TBM opened their London East League campaign on 8 May with another game against the Nationals. Petrucci was not as miserly as he had been back in April, as he gave up eight hits and four walks, but he did strike out 17 en route to a 19–5 win. The following weekend, stiffer opposition was presented by a trip to Albany Park in north-east London to play the Enfield Cardinals. A crowd of 1000 was reported to have assembled for the game between the previous year’s league winners from Purfleet and runners-up from Enfield. Petrucci pitched the former to a 7–5 triumph. Ford Sports were the next TBM victims. They managed to plate 4 runs from Harman’s three-inning start, but thereafter were totally shut down and fell 12–4. Petrucci pitched in relief and gained the win.

TBM completed their May fixtures with a game against the Hornsey Red Sox. The Hornsey club was founded by Doug Cowling in 1935 and named in honour of the famous club from Boston. Cowling later wrote to Boston Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey to tell them about the tribute and not long after received a letter from Yawkey and manager Joe Cronin accompanied by a suitcase full of Major League equipment. They were one of the few British teams to continue playing through the war and were no pushover in 1948. TBM were able to make short work of them, though, thanks to Petrucci’s pitching. With Geoff Hughes catching him, he shut out the Red Sox for seven frames. The final score was 11–3 in TBM’s favour and Petrucci finished with 10 strike-outs. He was actually bettered by Hornsey’s American hurler Smith, who twirled his way to 11 strike-outs, but the crucial differentiator was that the Canadian conceded only four hits to the American’s 12. Among the TBM batters, Hughes fared best, having a 3-for-3 day. The victory kept TBM at the head of their circuit, a game ahead of the Cardinals, and they had now beaten four of their five divisional rivals. The remaining team was Fondu, a newly formed works team from a cement company. Their profession offered much scope for wordplay, stuck as they were at
the bottom of the table with an 0–3 record. This came courtesy of the undesirable run differential of 6 for and 102 against.

Fondu were TBM’s next opponents and Petrucci did not pitch, perhaps owing to anticipation of an easy victory and the opportunity for rest that this offered. Ashwell was used instead and Fondu did not disgrace themselves, putting up 9 runs to their opponents’ 18. The TBM offence was paced once more by Hughes, who went 5–for–6.

With half of the league schedule completed, Petrucci had registered 53 strike-outs, but Lyle Smith of Enfield led the rankings with one more to his name. After his rest, Petrucci pitched three straight nine-inning complete games in the league. On 13 June, the Purfleet side made it six from six in the league by sneaking past the Nationals 8–7. Their record became seven from seven with a 6–2 victory at home on 20 June over Enfield, who had brought 120 supporters. Petrucci led the batting with a 2–for–3 day. The Cardinals’ pitcher Smith and his battery-mate George Stopher were said to have lacked support in the field. Smith, who was Petrucci’s main challenger in the strike-out rankings, was reported to have quit the sport before the end of the league schedule.

Petrucci’s trio of games was completed on 30 June with a masterful shut-out victory over Ford Sports. The only respite for the car makers during a 17-run TBM barrage came while Bill Dawber was pitching. Dawber, who impressed TBM by quietening their bats for two innings and also sat among the top names in league hitting statistics, shortly afterwards found himself in the colours of the league leaders.

On the weekend of 10–11 July, TBM completed their London East League schedule. The Saturday saw Petrucci fan nine Hornsey hitters in pitching TBM to an 8–2 victory in a game rearranged from 4 July. The Purfleet squad then made it a perfect 10 in the league by overcoming Fondu 22–3 on the Sunday.

If TBM were to have a shot at national success, they would first need to establish themselves as the champion side of the Southern Counties Baseball Association. This body oversaw TBM’s London East League as well as a parallel London West League, which featured the Eltham Dodgers, South London Giants, Surrey Lions, Surrey Tigers, Wembley Pirates, and West London Pioneers. The last of these was the team that had been defeated by TBM in the previous year’s Southern Counties Baseball Association Cup Final, and they won their division in 1948, dropping just one of 10 games.

The Pioneers played home games at Wormwood Scrubs park, opposite the famous prison of the same name, and they would host TBM on 25 July in a one-game play-off to establish the team that would advance from the region to the last-four stage of the national championship. In a preview of the regional championship decider, the Pioneers headed east on 18 July to take on TBM in the pool stage of the southern area league cup. West London’s Lee Ridenhour out-duelled the TBM
pair of Harman and Ashwell, striking out 20 compared with 12. The Pioneers ran out 20–10 winners. In the more important contest, on 25 July, TBM reversed the outcome, out-scoring the West London outfit 8 to 3.

Thus, TBM would represent the Southern Counties in the national championship semi-finals. The national governing body, who were known as the Baseball Association, also oversaw the North-West Counties, Yorkshire, and Midland Counties areas, and each of these regions sent a representative forward to the last four. This format for establishing a national champion, coupled with the choice of regions, was used into the early 1950s and regained favour between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s.

After a 2-week break in the calendar to allow for works holidays, TBM travelled to the Midlands to play the Birmingham Beavers in their national semi-final, on 15 August. In front of 4500 spectators, Petrucci pitched solidly for eight innings, giving up just a pair of hits while striking out seven, and TBM carried a 4–1 lead into the ninth. It was here that the Canadian showed his first real signs of weakness that season, with nerves, fatigue, a partisan crowd, or a combination of the three disrupting his radar. He walked the first three batters in the inning – making it eight in all for the contest – to put the go-ahead run on base, and he was relieved by Harman. A walk and a balk brought the Beavers within 1 run and ensured a tense finish. Harman dug deep and a force at home, a strike-out, and a long fly-out secured TBM's spot in the national final.

The other semi-final had a different complexion. The Liverpool Robins hammered the Brooklyn Giants of Hull 15–1. The Robins were representatives for the North-West Counties, a loop that boasted several famous players from other sports, including soccer players Ted Sagar and Jackie Grant, of Everton Football Club, and the Australian cricketer Ray Lindwall, who was said in *Sport Weekly Magazine* to be a “pitcher of the highest order.”

The national championship decider was set for a 6:15 pm start on Saturday 21 August at Bellefield, the Robins’ home field. Among the parks that provided the landscape for Merseyside’s post-war baseball revival, this venue had seen the “most marked” improvement in crowds, in the words of the *Liverpool Echo*. Bellefield, it reported, was “an ideal ground where a batsman is not handicapped by rules which are necessary on other grounds, because of limited space.” In the final, Petrucci kept the game close for three innings, but in the fourth Liverpool piled on 8 runs to pull out to a 10–0 lead. Dawber took over pitching at that point and limited the Robins to three further tallies, but TBM were unable to plate a single run.

Petrucci had buckled and been broken on the national stage, but the southern area league cup competition offered him a chance to finish the 1948 on a high note. TBM qualified for the secondary final in the knock-out phase of the competition. Their opponents would be the Surrey Tigers and their ace pitcher Joe Durling,
who had led the London West League in wins that season. Petrucci rode a 4–1 lead into the ninth but again looked like he would be overcome in a big match-up. The Tigers brought a run home and loaded the sacks, but Petrucci raised his game to fan the side – giving him 13 strike-outs in the contest – and gain some more hardware for the Purfleet team.

The Canadian hurler compiled a 9–0 record in helping TBM win the Southern Counties Baseball Association league title. He whiffed 123 in 74 innings, while walking 21 and giving up 53 hits, and was without a peer in the London East League. His catcher, Geoff Hughes, had also excelled statistically: he paced the loop with a .581 batting average and 10 extra-base hits.

Petrucci remained with TBM at least through the start of the next decade. It was reported in Baseball (in Britain) Monthly that the Canadian was suffering from a sore arm early in 1950. There were some fears that he would be prevented from “repeating his previous fine performances.” But “after a spell on the bases,” it was noted, he came back “to show he has retained his old skill.”

The peak period of TBM’s success was still to come. They won back-to-back national titles in 1959 and 1960, but Petrucci was no longer on the roster by that point. In the second of those victories, the losing nine were the Tigers, a team from the same city as the Robins. The delayed revenge on Liverpool was enabled by Petrucci-like miserliness: the final scoreline read 6–1.

**TERRY WARNER FOR GREAT BRITAIN IN 1967**

Terry Warner was born in London, on the Old Kent Road, on 21 April 1927. At the age of 40 – possessing many years of experience in the post-war London baseball scene, including the securing of national championship honours with Thames Board Mills – he was selected for the Great Britain team that travelled out to the Belgian city of Antwerp to play in the 1967 European Championships. This represented the country’s debut in the event, but Britain’s chances of success were greatly helped by the absence of Italy and The Netherlands, perennial European powerhouses, who had pulled out of the region’s baseball federation before the tournament.

In their opening contest, England overturned an early 4–0 deficit to beat Spain 10–4, but they fell to Belgium 10–2 in their second game. Up third were Sweden, and manager Ted James sent Terry Warner to the mound for the crucial clash. In a gutsy display, he limited Sweden to 2 runs through eight innings but was lacking run support. Trailing 2–1 in the ninth, England finally got their offence going as John Brining homered to give them a 3–2 lead. Warner remained on the mound to gain the final three outs without further damage. He finished with 14 strike-outs to his name, suggesting that he had sailed through the game with ease. However, the other elements of his pitching line reveal the fighting nature of his complete-game effort. Over nine innings, he gave up 10 hits and walked five.
Nine Aces and a Joker

England went on to beat West Germany, which ensured a second-place finish. This is a result that the country is yet to better but did match in 2007. Their success in 1967 depended heavily on Warner’s gritty outing against the Swedes.

Fifteen years later, Warner again found himself in national team colours on an Antwerp mound, but the circumstances were quite different. He was in the touring party for the 1982 North European Cup as a non-playing coach. However, limited pitching depth, which was exacerbated by injuries sustained during the tournament, led manager Ron Marshall to entice Warner out of retirement. At the age of 55, he kept Great Britain in the game against France until the fifth inning, when the opponents broke open a tie by tallying 8 runs. Two years later, in a role to which he was now more accustomed, Warner enjoyed his finest managerial achievement when he skippered the Croydon Bluejays to a national title. This rounded off a long, varied, and successful career.


ALAN SMITH’S PITCHING CAREER BETWEEN 1985 AND 2007

Alan Smith was born in Barking, London, on 27 August 1950, and – as noted in Chapter 7 – received all of his baseball training in Britain. He chose to convert from cricket after seeing the 1979 British national final, in which the Golders Green Sox bested the Hull Aces in extra innings. Smith’s cricket background provided him with a decent arm and transferable hand–eye coordination skills, but catching with a glove, instead of bare hands, proved to be a little challenging at first.

In 1980, Smith was among the founding members of the London Warriors, a team that mixed a group of talented players moving on from the Golders Green Sox with an assortment of newcomers to the league. The Warriors quickly established themselves as front-runners on the national stage – winning British titles in 1981 and 1982 – and played until the end of 1985, when the team was put on ice. After 1985, Warrior blood – including Smith’s – continued to flow through British baseball’s Sunday league as a core of players moved first to the Cobham Yankees (1986–88), then to the Sutton Braves (1989–90), and on to the London Athletics (1991), before again playing as the London Warriors from 1992. With the Warriors reformed, Smith went beyond his playing commitments to serve as the club’s chief administrator for 14 years. Smith had also played during the Warriors’ temporary return as a competing team in the Scottish Amicable semi-pro league of 1987–89. During this period, the Warriors had assembled as a regional all-star team, playing on Saturdays in what was a competition run in parallel to the main league.

Back in 1980, as a complete rookie, Smith had to fight hard for playing time, especially since the ex-Golden Green Sox players were almost all seasoned Americans.
Short stories

He began in the outfield and then switched between first base and centre-field for a number of seasons. Smith’s first appearance on the mound came in 1985, but he did not become a regular pitcher until 1989, which was the first season he went past the mark of 50 innings twirled in the league. For the following 13 years he was a mainstay on the mound, clocking up win after win with controlled, canny pitching. Highlights came in 1997, with a career-high 9–4 record, and 2000, with a career-low 3.07 earned-run average. In both of these seasons the Warriors won the national championship, the latter of which represented the fourth time they had won the main annual competition run by the official governing body. This tied them with the Hull Aces and Cobham Yankees for the most successful dynasty in British baseball history.

Although the number of innings that Smith was throwing in a season tailed off after 2002, he was still getting some time on the mound up until the end of 2005, when the Warriors folded. There was one final outing for Smith, in 2007. This was for the London Mets, a team that had inherited the Warriors’ Finsbury Park home, where Smith continued to do groundskeeping work.

Going by available records, Smith racked up 78 regular-season league wins over more than 770 innings on the mound. No other pitcher has come close to these figures in the modern era of British top-tier baseball, and those 78 victories were stacked up against just 28 losses.

By his own admission, Smith’s style of pitching meant that he would never record a particularly high number of strike-outs and would always give up a relatively high number of hits, although he did manage to scatter them to contain the damage. In light of this, Smith’s philosophy on the mound was to minimize other opportunities for batters to get on base. To that end he was hell-bent on pitching as accurately as he could, thus limiting wild pitches, hit batters, and walks. The statistics reveal that he achieved this with great success: among pitchers with at least 100 innings recorded in the top tier since 1995, Smith’s rate of walks per nine innings, to cite one example, is an unparalleled 1.81.

Beyond domestic successes, Smith also pitched for Great Britain. In the European Championship A-Pool in 1991 he made relief appearances against France and Belgium. Later, he rejoined the Great Britain set-up, serving as General Manager between 2004 and 2010, in a period of the national team’s history in which they matched their best-ever showing at the Euros, with a silver medal in 2007, and won through to only their second-ever World Cup (the first was the 1938 event described in Chapter 4).

TONY KURAMITSU IN THE 1987 NATIONAL FINAL

During the early part of the 1987 season, 14-year-old Tony Kuramitsu was playing for the Oxshott Orioles, a feeder team for the Cobham Yankees within the Surrey Baseball Association. The quality of his pitching and hitting for the Orioles saw him promoted to the Yankees during the year, and – despite his youth – he was entrusted
with pitching duties for the national final against the Southglade Hornets. The Hornets had earned their place in the final by brushing aside the Enfield Spartans, a team that the Yankees had finished 2.5 games back of in the regular season.

The 1987 final was played at The Oval, one of cricket's premier grounds, and Kuramitsu turned in a sensational all-round performance. He went 3-for-3 at bat, scored half of the Yankees' 6 runs, and spun a two-hit shut-out with nine strike-outs to one walk. No other pitcher in the game’s British history is known to have achieved or bettered a two-hitter in a national championship decider. And Kuramitsu did it at the age of 14.

In 1988, the youngster pitched four-fifths of the London Warriors’ innings in their victorious Scottish Amicable campaign, striking out 131 batters at a rate of exactly two per frame and finishing with an earned-run average of 2.88. He also struck out 43 batters in 29-and-a-third innings playing for Cobham in the Sunday league. This was his last year in British baseball. It is believed that he returned to his native Japan, where he sadly blew his arm out a few years later.

**BRIAN THURSTON’S STANDOUT PERFORMANCES DURING 1992**

Brian Thurston was one of the premier pitchers in Great Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, playing domestic baseball on Humberside and representing the national team on numerous occasions. Arguably, 1992 was his finest season on the mound.

He pitched the Humberside Mets to a national league title, and a second-place finish in the B-Pool of the European club competition. For Great Britain, he picked up two wins and two saves at the European Championship B–Pool as he struck out 28 and walked just three over 23 innings, posting a 1.17 earned-run average. Arguably, though, his finest individual performance of the season came in the final of the national knock-out competition, a tournament that was run in parallel to the main national competition. He held a strong Nottingham Hornets line-up hitless in a 14–0 seven-inning mercy-rule victory.

Thurston became the third pitcher enshrined in the British Baseball Hall of Fame when he was announced as a member of the third class of inductees in 2011.

**ROB NELSON’S 1994 POSTSEASON**

In 1994, Rob Nelson turned in back-to-back spells of stellar long relief that enabled the Enfield Spartans to finally win the independent league crown that they had come so close to in the previous two seasons (a background for Nelson and the independent circuit is provided in Chapter 7). The second spell was particularly heroic, not only because it was in the final but also because it followed an unpleasant occurrence for Nelson early in the game.

In 1992 and 1993, the London Warriors had swept aside Enfield in the best-of-three independent league final. In 1994, the two heavyweights met at the semi-final stage.
Nelson took the mound mid-way through the sixth inning, with the Spartans trailing 5–2. All the reliever could do was check the London scoring and hope that his teammates would rally. He started by ensuring that the Warriors added no further runs in the sixth. In each of the next two frames, the Spartans plated a couple of runs while Nelson kept London quiet. In the top of the ninth, Nelson laid down a sacrifice bunt to score Oscar Marcelino, who had led off the inning with a triple. The Warriors went into the bottom of the ninth facing a 7–5 deficit but managed to get two men on base with one out left and the power-hitting Oliver Heidecker at the plate. Nelson rose to the challenge and struck his opponent out on a sharp-breaking curveball.

In the final, Enfield faced the Waltham Forest Angels. Early in the game Nelson was stung by a wasp and suffered swelling in the right side of his face. The disfigurement began to subside reasonably quickly, which was fortunate because the Spartans’ starter only lasted three innings. Nelson took the mound for the fourth and this time Enfield were 5–3 down. As he had done against London, though, he effectively staunched the run-scoring and waited patiently for a rally. The Spartans took a 6–5 lead in the sixth and extended the margin to 3 runs in the top of the eighth. There was no further scoring and Enfield secured the title that had evaded them twice before. Nelson finished with six shut-out innings to his name.

**The Croydon Pirates’ Near-Perfect Sweep on 13 August 2006**

During 2004 and 2005, a frosty rivalry between the Croydon Pirates and Brighton Buccaniers – two of south-east England’s most formidable teams – had become glacial. In the first of those years, Croydon swept a stunned Brighton in a double-header on the regular season’s penultimate weekend to seize the last play-off spot from their competitors in sea crime. The Buccaniers hosted that year’s national finals, where they watched Croydon emerge as overall champions. In 2005, the two teams won through to the championship series, which this time took place at Croydon’s Roundshaw Playing Fields. The Pirates swept the series, taking game two in extra innings on a Jeff McDonald walk-off homer on the main diamond, which was later named Dave Ward Field in recognition of the club’s long-serving general manager.

By 2006, the Pirates had established themselves as the dominant hand of the rivalry. Brighton slipped out of existence at the end of the year, and in the final game between the clubs – on 13 August – Byron Cotter threw a six-inning perfect game for Croydon to complete a double-header sweep. The contest was scheduled to go seven frames, but the Pirates moved out to a 10-run lead in the bottom of the sixth, triggering a mercy-rule truncation. Cotter, a right-hander from Philadelphia in the States, was making his first visit to the mound in 5 weeks. He struck out nine in his 75-pitch complete game.

In the opening game of the double-header, Ben Percey – a hard-throwing righty from Sydney, Australia – had come close to a perfect game of his own. Percey entered the game in dominant form against Brighton: he had signed off his last outing by retiring
Nine Aces and a Joker

11 of the last 12 hitters. He continued this run with a one-two-three first inning, but before he could return in the second the game was halted by rain. (The contest looked like it might be called after what was a torrential downpour, but Petter Nordwall, chief umpire, wisely chose to give conditions a chance to improve.) Percey was as gritty as he was skilful – only in the harshest of conditions would he don a jacket for baserunning, for instance, when hitting as the pitcher. Thus, after a delay of over an hour, he chose to warm up again and return to the mound. With two outs in the bottom of the fourth, Percey was still perfect, and a softly hit grounder looked like it would keep the streak going. However, the Pirates’ second-baseman was unable to get across to the ball. While it was not charged as an error, there were other infielders in the league who could have converted it into an out. This single and a subsequent hit batter were the only damage to Percey’s pitching line in a seven-inning shut-out that was peppered with 14 strike-outs. He pitched with great control throughout the game and it thus seems plausible that the beaning might have been revenge for an earlier misdemeanour in the teams’ rivalry. This would not have occurred if the no-hitter was still on.

Amazingly, in the previous double-header between the teams, played on 11 June that year, Adam Lemke also threw a six-inning perfect game for the Pirates. With 17 outs logged, Lemke ran the count on Niklas Grundstrom to three balls and no strikes, but he came back strongly with two strikes, and the next pitch was hit directly to infielder Charlie Caskey, who threw to first to end the game. Brighton did not once get the ball out of the infield in the game and Lemke finished with 11 strike-outs. Besides Cotter’s and Lemke’s, the only perfect game in post-1995 top-tier records is Dean Stoka’s seven-inning effort for the Windsor Bears, which came against Croydon on 3 August 2003.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For additional information relating to this chapter, including photos of the pitchers, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaj/shorts.html.

SOURCES

Baseball (in Britain) Monthly
Cheshunt & Waltham Mercury
Croydon Advertiser
Daily News (Milford)
Essex & Thurrock Gazette
Liverpool Echo
News Sheet
Sport Weekly Magazine
Stratford Express
12 – Ben McGrath, the Joker

1977

by JEFF ARCHER

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
See overleaf
Nine Aces and a Joker

Baseball history is not just about star performers and record-breaking seasons. It also encompasses the personalities of the game. The Nine Aces have not lacked dynamism and flair, but it seemed that the book was one colourful character short of being perfectly rounded. This is where the Joker comes in. When the need arose to add extra colour to a book on British baseball history, there was arguably no-one better to undertake the writing assignment than Jeff Archer, author of Strike Four, the warts-and-all account of his experiences as a British baseball player, manager, and organizer between 1975 and 1980. It so happens that the player who gave Jeff the greatest headaches of all during his time as a manager also happened to be a reasonably effective pitcher who rose beyond his ability in 1977 to deliver a “defining season.”

The Joker’s chapter differs from the others in several respects beyond the central character not being a traditional ace. First, Archer’s team, who in 1976 were national runners-up, were playing independently from British league competition in 1977. Second, the author is a first-person character in the narrative. Third, the source is simply the author’s recollections, as opposed to a mixture of interviews, newspaper articles, and artefacts. Lastly, as a result of scant materials having survived from the era, it has not been possible to perform rigorous fact-checking in the editing process. As such, the chapter is set aside from the others, but its place in the book as a whole is no less important.

In the spirit of baseball’s most famous warts-and-all account, Ball Four – and so that Jeff had the scope to portray McGrath’s as accurately as he felt he could – some post-watershed language has been used to recount the stories in the chapter. You have been warned.

Finally, while the official chapter title follows the pattern used for the rest of the book, its unofficial title is that which Jeff originally submitted: The Joker was Wild: Ben McGrath’s improbable 1977 season.
By May of 1976, my baseball career was in full swing and the future looked bright. Just a year prior, after moving to England from the United States, I had been the player–manager of the Crawley Giants. It was a wonderful season and I had fun participating in British baseball, despite the culture shock of the way baseball was administered and played in the country. When the season ended, I was elected president of the Southern Baseball League. Within a couple of months, I had recruited four new teams for the league and the sport seemed to be gaining in stature.

For the 1976 season, I entered my own team in the Southern League: the Spirit of ’76. The team was named after its sponsor, a firm in Kensington that sold American sports clothing for fashion wear. I chose not to play because I had recruited a competitive team for the league and prior sports injuries made playing a painful experience. I was also beginning to promote baseball in general in Britain and playing would add even more to my expanding duties.

Times could not have been better. My team won its first couple of games and the overall mood in the league was one of optimism because the sport was growing rather than declining. But, as is usual in life, when everything seems to be running smoothly, something happens to turn tranquillity into chaos. It was now my turn to experience occurrences that would turn my baseball participation into something that resembled a combination of a Charlie Chaplin film and the *Three Stooges*.

During midweek before our game against the US Navy London, who had a formidable squad, an umpire told me about an American first-baseman who was the son of a US Navy captain and lived in Greenwich. I was always looking for new talent and I got the player’s name and phone number from the umpire. On paper, the name Ben McGrath seemed innocuous, but names and words can be deceiving. Just before hanging up, the arbitrator said, “He’s a good player, but he’s a little crazy.” I did not see any problem in this because, in my experiences, I had been involved with some eccentric ballplayers.

I called McGrath and he was eager to join my team. I gave him the address of the field in Richmond and he said he would be there on time. Unlike many Americans living in England, he was familiar with British public transportation and could find his way around.

As usual, I arrived at the ball field on Sunday well before game time. However, this was the first time that I could recall since I had been involved with the sport that someone was already on the field when I showed up. I got out of the car and saw an 18-year-old kid doing push-ups. Then, he began running wind-sprints. As soon as he saw me, he ran to my car and said, “Let me help you with the equipment, sir.” He ran to the field with a bag laden with bats, balls, gloves, and catcher’s gear.
I gave him a uniform and pointed him in the direction of the changing rooms and he ran to them. Shortly after, he emerged from the building and ran to the field. This kid never stopped running.

I hit him some ground-balls and saw that he was a very good first-baseman. Then, I made a few throws to him from the shortstop and third-base position, some intentionally in the dirt, to see how he could handle them. He scooped every low throw with ease. What’s more, he could stretch almost to the point of doing a ballerina-like split. I was thinking that this would be our new first-baseman. Being left-handed was another asset. He had an advantage over a right-handed first-baseman in throwing to second base to start a double play if a ground-ball was hit to him, as well as in thwarting a sacrifice bunt attempt that was placed down the first-base line. As the other players began to arrive, he approached each with an outstretched hand and the greeting, “Hi. I’m Ben McGrath.” The players reciprocated and told him their positions. Soon after that, he was asking for someone to hit him more ground-balls even before the infield drill began.

I started to think that maybe the umpire’s assessment of McGrath was wrong. All I saw was a good player with an incredible amount of enthusiasm.

The opposition began to arrive and took batting practice. Game time was approaching, yet my starting pitcher was not there. I freak out when players show up at the last minute, so I was pacing back and forth. McGrath came to me and said, “I can pitch, sir.” I told him to warm up. It now looked like my starter would not be at the field for game time. He had not called me to say he would miss the game, so I was somewhat confused. Later in the week, I learned that his father got lost while trying to find the field. The pair were typical of many Americans who lived in England; they could not find their way around. I offered to meet them at Richmond train station, but the father told me that it would not be necessary and he would find the field. He rode around Richmond for 2 hours and never arrived.

I watched McGrath warm up. He was not bad at all. His fastball was not overpowering, but he had a decent slider and a funny knuckle-curve that he could throw from the overhand and side-arm positions, and he had pinpoint control. After he warmed up, I told him that he would start the day’s game.

In the top of the first, McGrath ran to the mound. In those days, the pitcher normally walked to the hill while the other players ran to their positions. McGrath got the side out in order. He was cutting the corners and fooling the batters with his off-speed pitches. Also, he threw what appeared to be a sharp-breaking sinker. But, it was another pitch that I quickly learned was part of his repertoire: the spitball.

McGrath ran back to the bench and one of the US Navy player’s wives hollered something to him. It was just normal fan banter and nothing abrasive. McGrath stopped, looked at the assemblage of players’ wives sitting behind the team’s third-
Ben McGrath

base bench and hollered, “Shut up you whores. I’ll shove this bat up your ass.” Then he calmly sat down on the bench. Everyone was shocked. I spoke to him and asked what that was about and he told me that he gets so involved in a game that sometimes he comes out with a tirade against fans or players. I suggested that he not repeat his performance. He said he was okay and it would not happen again.

We won the game 3–2. McGrath was masterful on the mound working the batters. But, after the game, he screamed at one of the Navy players and began to walk toward their bench. Two of our players grabbed him, each one pulling him by an arm while his heels were planted in the ground and furrows appeared as he was being dragged off. “You’re mine, you cocksucker,” he hollered at one player. “You too, motherfucker,” he proclaimed to another. In future games, the same two players assumed the task of dragging McGrath off the field. I was in a stupor. Now I knew why the umpire had said that he was a little crazy.

After McGrath had changed and returned to the field, he was placid and friendly. I was no psychiatrist, but I identified a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde personality. In uniform, McGrath was a wild man. In civilian clothes, he was mellow and thoughtful. If he saw one of the opposing players off the field, he would run up to him and shake his hand and pat him on the back. An incident shortly afterwards confirmed my theory. While playing against my former team, the Crawley Giants, McGrath hollered at a player and threatened to cut his balls off. He was not provoked and I asked McGrath why he intimidated him. He answered, “Because he has a different uniform than us.”

Normally, I would have gotten rid of someone like McGrath, but he performed duties, day and night, for my baseball promotion. He delivered items to various media publications for me, went all over London putting up promotional posters, and performed any duty I asked. His efforts in this area were equivalent to those of about five regular people.

Everything came to the boil during my team’s first game in the London Twilight League, a night circuit that played several matches a week at Rosslyn Park rugby union club. The league was about a week old and we were drawing more fans each game. In Spirit of ‘76’s inaugural contest in the league, we were scheduled to play our old nemesis, US Navy London. I sat down with McGrath in the locker room and explained, “Look, we have paying customers here and they are right next to the field. The politics of even getting this league started were almost insurmountable, so please don’t throw a horror show.” He promised me that those days were behind him. As humans are prone to do, I suffered from the suspension of disbelief.

McGrath kept to his word for four innings. At the time, the score was 0–0. This game would go right down to the wire. The fans were beginning to become more vocal as they realized that they were a part of a baseball game. British fans were
mostly subdued, but they picked up the nuances of fandom and the atmosphere was great.

Someone on the Navy team called McGrath a “chump.” He went berserk. For some reason, that word inflamed him more than any other in the English language. He began to walk to the third-base bench of the Navy team, right in front of the fans who were seated only a few feet behind, and hollered, “We’ll see who’s a chump.” Immediately, the same two players who always dragged McGrath off the field intervened. As he was being hauled off the field, he screamed every obscenity in the English language, plus those he knew from foreign languages, at the Navy bench. A couple of hundred people heard every word.

When the game ended, I kept McGrath away from the Navy players. Once the two teams left the field, I relinquished my hold on him. I went into the clubhouse for a couple of minutes, knowing that I would be lambasted by some fans about McGrath’s actions. I stuffed my pockets with complimentary tickets for future games, free food vouchers, and cash. I would do what it took to keep the fans happy.

When I emerged from the clubhouse, I saw a surreal scenario reminiscent of The Twilight Zone. McGrath was surrounded by fans asking for his autograph. I was dumbfounded. No fan asked for autographs of the other players. Then, an elderly man approached me and asked, “Are you in charge here?” I meekly said, “Yes.” There was no-one else around I could blame, so I had to stand and take my medicine. He spoke with a grumble and said, “I’d like to talk to you about,” then he paused as he looked at the program and continued, “that number 15, the first-baseman.” My hand instinctively went to the pocket with cash. When he re-started what I perceived to be a complaint, he said, “I’ve never seen so much enthusiasm from any player of any sport in my life. I will be coming back because he alone is worth the price of a ticket.”

I went into the clubhouse and sat down. Nothing made sense. I thought maybe I was in a dream and soon I would wake up.

The next day, McGrath called me and said, “Coach, I’ve got some bad news.” I couldn’t conceive of what he called “bad news.” I thought maybe he might have had a brother who was as crazy as he who wanted to play. Then, McGrath said, “I just got word that I’ve been accepted at the University of Maryland in Munich. I have to leave tomorrow.” I was relieved. I might have lost my best drawing card, but I could now manage baseball again without fear of a riot breaking out. I came to the conclusion that Ben McGrath would be an asterisk in the history of my baseball career.

**STORY OF THE SEASON**

For the 1977 season, I made a deal with the Wasps rugby union club for use of the field for an international baseball season. Wasps was much closer to my house.
Ben McGrath

and all games would be played during the day on weekends. The schedule would primarily consist of 2-day competitions against the same team. In this way, I could get the most out of hosting a foreign club team and they would be able to play two games before making the trip back to their home countries.

By then, I had assembled a team superior to that of the previous year. I had a good pitching staff and added some offensive power to the line-up. One thing was very settling: there would be no McGrath. But, my contentment of not having the wild man around for the season was a delusion.

In April, as we began our pre-season practices, I was happily drinking a cup of coffee at my house and reading the morning newspaper. The phone rang and the voice on the other end stated, “Hi, Coach. This is McGrath.” I asked where he was calling from because I assumed he was still in Munich. He said, “Greenwich.” Then, I thought he must be home for spring break. He continued, “I got kicked out of college. They said I was socially unacceptable. I’m ready to play.” I took his number and said I would call him back.

Now, I had a choice to make. The pros and cons ran through my head. Despite his erratic behaviour, he still was, in my view, the best defensive first-baseman in the country. At the plate, he was a good contact hitter who was hard to strike out. He rarely hit the long ball, but he could spray hits to any part of the field. And, he was a superb bunter.

I called him back and he was excited about playing an international schedule. When I mentioned his behaviour, he said those days were behind him and that he sorted out some mental issues he was dealing with.

For a couple of weeks before the season, McGrath went all over Wembley and Harrow putting up posters of the baseball schedule at Wasps. He showed up to the field and helped me get it in shape for baseball. Things looked good.

The season began and McGrath played first base and hit second in the line-up. He did not utter one word of antagonism to the opposition. In fact, he intervened in an argument between my third-baseman, a former player at Michigan State University, and someone on the opposing team. It was getting heated and McGrath ran and got between them and broke it up. He told them, “C’mon guys. This is a baseball game and there’s no need to start this kind of stuff.” In one season, he had turned from a one-man wrecking crew to a mediator. But, as in the past, I soon learned that as soon as everything is going right in British baseball, something occurs to reverse the situation.

One of my pitchers was injured, and so I had to use McGrath on the hill for one of our two weekend games. During a game that was running smoothly against the Golders Green Sox, he became the perpetrator of an incident that was even new to me. Over my years of playing and coaching, I thought I saw everything, but McGrath reverted to his old unpredictable self.
Nine Aces and a Joker

He was pitching in the fifth inning and, during his wind-up, a player from the visiting team, sitting on a bench on the third-base side of the field, shouted something to McGrath. It was normal baseball chat and nothing objectionable. McGrath, a left-hander, was in the middle of his wind-up and he turned 90 degrees and threw the ball right at the team's bench. It hit a piece of corrugated metal hanging from the roof and all sorts of pieces of scrap metal came tumbling down.

The umpire called McGrath and me for a conference at the side of the plate. “Why did you do that, McGrath?” he asked. McGrath stated, “He said something to me.” “What?” asked the umpire. McGrath replied, “I don’t know. He just said something.” The umpire told him that he should eject him from the game but he would let him remain if he did not repeat any of his old antics. As McGrath walked to the mound, I turned to the umpire and asked, “Hey, ump. Was that a ball or a strike?” He told me, in three different languages, to perform an act of sexual self-gratification that defied the laws of physics.

We won the game, giving McGrath his first victory of the season. After the contest, he went to the opposing players and shook their hands. They were dumbfounded. About an hour before, he caused a portion of the roof of the stadium to come crashing down on them, yet he was now offering congratulations on playing a good game. My reprieve from his antics was short-lived.

One thing I did notice about McGrath was that when he was pitching, he was less prone to outbursts. In the Golders Green game, other than the pitch in which he missed the plate by 50 feet, he was quite calm. This fact would soon come into play.

After our July trip to Wiesbaden, Germany, where we played a double-header against the defending European US Army champs and lost two close games, my pitching staff was devastated. Two pitchers, one in the US Air Force and the other a son of an American serviceman, notified me that they had to leave Britain. One was given a quick change of orders and the other’s father was offered an early retirement from the Air Force. My other starting pitcher, Dave Draper, who had struck out eight and walked none over five innings of relief in the 1976 British championship final, still felt soreness from an arm injury that he had suffered early in the season. He could play, but not pitch. So, it looked like McGrath, my fourth pitcher, would be seeing a lot of time on the mound. Draper played first base on the days that McGrath pitched and caught during the games McGrath played first base. I was worried because my pitching staff had been depleted and we had the most intense part of our schedule ahead of us.

Funny things happen in baseball and from early July until the end of the 1977 season, when we played our last games in Paris in September, McGrath carried the team. His tantrums were much less frequent and he kept winning ball games,
sometimes against superior talent. With his assortment of off-speed pitches (and his spitball), combined with uncanny control, he subdued the competition. From the time he became our staff’s number one hurler, when his record was 1–1, to the end of the season, he did not lose a game.

First, he beat the US Marines from Paris with a shut-out. Next were the Seattle high school all-stars. The wins kept coming and coming. Each team said the same thing about him: he did not look like he had got anything, but he kept batters off guard and it was hard to hit the long ball against him. He won as many games as my three best pitchers combined: one who led us to the British championship finals in 1976; one who was the star pitcher in the championship game; and the other a 17-year-old lanky left-hander who had been clocked throwing at 84 miles per hour, a speed equivalent in those days to a first division American university hurler or even a Single-A Minor League pitcher. The mind boggles.

At the end of July, we had to move prematurely from Wasps because the groundskeeper said that baseball was ruining the field for rugby. What began as a fiasco that could have had us suspending our season turned out to be the best break we could have received. The US Navy London and the US Air Force at Uxbridge shared a real baseball field and I made a deal with them in which we would be able to play on the field at West Ruislip any time after 30 May each year. Their own leagues – kids baseball and adult softball – played from the beginning of April to the end of May. They were quite happy to have a group use the field and perform the upkeep for 4 months.

With the field change, McGrath became even more confident. At age 19, he assumed the team leadership in a manner that players usually do not until a much later stage. And most of the players were older than he was.

The victories kept coming as McGrath beat a couple of British clubs, a visiting Venezuelan team, and the US Air Force team from Alconbury. By now, we had quite a following of kids who made their way from Wasps to Ruislip. McGrath was a hero to them, kind of a cult figure. They loved his eccentricity and he had quite a fan club. He earned this reputation by not only performing on the mound or at first base, but also working with the kids after the games for an hour or so, teaching them the sport.

There was a score to settle when the Wiesbaden Eagles visited us at Ruislip towards the end of the season. They had beaten us twice in July in Wiesbaden in two close games. Now, they would be coming to Ruislip and I wanted to walk away with at least one victory, despite our lack of depth in the pitching staff. In Germany, I used our two best pitchers against them when the staff was still intact.

We had two very close games at Ruislip. We lost the first contest 6–4 but won the Sunday game 4–3. There was an unlikely and absurd story behind the Sunday win.
Nine Aces and a Joker

On Saturday evening, the Wiesbaden team stayed at my house and the next-door domicile. They preferred to be crunched together on the floor and stairs rather than each having a place of their own at someone else’s house. Most of the Wiesbaden team visited a local pub, but they kept their heads and only had a beer or two because they knew they had to play the following day and then drive back to Germany.

By midnight, most of the players had arrived at the two houses and slept wherever they could find a place. At about 1:00 AM, I made a head check and came up one short. McGrath, who accompanied the Wiesbaden players, was missing. Then, I heard a groan from behind a cabinet. There was McGrath curled up and in obvious pain. Also, he was drunk as a skunk. It took a while for him to make himself understood, but finally he said, “I got hit by a fucking bus. It ran over my foot.” Then, he passed out.

All night, I could hear McGrath periodically go to the toilet and vomit. The following morning, I was going to write McGrath off. The only problem was that he was our starting pitcher and if he did not play, I would have to use the same pitcher who gave up 14 runs to Los Doctores, a visiting Venezuelan team that we had beaten 15–14. So, a few Wiesbaden players and I picked up the comatose McGrath and threw him in the back of my car.

When we reached the field, McGrath went to sleep behind the first-base dugout. He woke up occasionally to vomit. I told him he was in no condition to play, but he said he would be ready. I pencilled his name in the starting line-up. Just prior to the game, I told him it was time to warm up. He told me that he did not want to warm up and when it was time to take the field to wake him up and point him in the right direction. When the moment came, he staggered to the mound and took a couple of warm-up tosses. Miraculously, he got out of the first inning yielding only 1 run. Then, he began to sober up. He pitched brilliantly and we won 4–3. After the game, we went out for a Chinese meal using money that we won from a few Wiesbaden players who said they would beat us by at least a half-dozen runs. McGrath’s appetite was back to normal, but he could hardly walk because of his previous encounter with a London bus.

By now, McGrath had won 11 games and suffered only one loss. Our record was 20–8, which meant he had won more games than the rest of the staff combined. It was an open secret, though, that as the season progressed he threw more and more “funny” sinkerballs. McGrath always arrived early for each game and had two equipment bags. One had his baseball gear and the contents of the other resembled those of a medical doctor’s bag. He had all kinds of bottles and tubes of slippery substances, such as Ben-Gay and Vaseline. He also used to rub liniment all over himself and he smelled like a hospital emergency room. Most of the time, his product of choice was the Vaseline; however, he occasionally used
other substances to see if they worked better than the old standard. When he put his uniform on, he placed the Vaseline in various areas of his uniform, such as inside the waistband of the pants, under the brim of his cap, and on the cloth logo of his glove. No-one could see the Vaseline and he was a master at loading the ball. The oddest aspect of this is that no umpire ever caught him doctoring the ball. The hardest part of a pitcher including a spitball in his repertoire is the concealing of the substance, not the actual throwing of the pitch.

To cap the season off, we travelled to Paris in mid-September to play two games against the French national team. I was aiming for a split. McGrath was the only real pitcher who made the trip. In game one, I used an outfielder who defected to Spirit from the Alconbury team after we played them. He was a great hitter, one of the best I had ever seen in amateur baseball, but he was not an effective pitcher. He knew this, but he could get the ball over the plate and hope for the best.

We played our Saturday game at one of France’s top bicycling stadiums. The edge of the outfield was slanted to accommodate cyclists and the French players laughed at us because we lacked the special shoes that they wore to be able to manoeuvre around the angled territory. There was also a sewer behind the makeshift backstop. It was the only game in my career that had a ground rule stating, “Anything in the sewer is a dead ball.”

We lost the game 12–5. It could have been worse. But an incident occurred that inflamed the French team and set the table for a very tension-filled contest the following day. McGrath was called out on strikes on a pitch that was at least three feet outside. He did not appreciate the umpire’s decision and he threw the bat at the umpire, hitting him in his right shin, and was kicked out of the game.

The venue for our Sunday game was a disused garbage dump. It smelled pretty bad and many seagulls hovered over refuse stacked behind the outfield fence, where the dump was still in use. This did not bother me or any of the players. Most were used to playing in less-than-ideal conditions.

The first person I met at the field was the first-base umpire from the Saturday game. He was fuming. He was swearing in French and kicking his equipment bag. I asked him what was wrong and he blurted: “Zay stole my forking glove. Zee forking cucksorkairs stole my forking glove. Eet must have been a French cucksorkair who stole my forking glove. And she was a good one: a Weelson.”

After I stopped laughing, I asked him why he was denigrating the French so much. He explained that he was an American who moved to Paris when he was 12 years old and he spoke French like a native, but had lost much of his ability to speak English. In addition, he gave me a warning that the French team did not appreciate McGrath’s throwing the bat at the umpire and were not in a good mood. I then told him that McGrath was our starting pitcher. He said, “Oh sheet.”
Nine Aces and a Joker

There was no levity during the game. Tension was thick. McGrath did what he was supposed to do: pitch. He was pitching the best game of his life and the French did not get a baserunner until the seventh inning. By then, we had a 7–0 lead. Our late acquisition from Alconbury had hit two monstrous homers and driven in 5 runs. Tension was building, not only because of McGrath’s actions the day before, but also because we were beating zee merde out of them.

During the game, the French side were subdued, except for one loudmouth. He was berating our players and hollering at McGrath, who ignored the taunts. Then, in the eighth inning, he went to argue with the umpire. When he returned to the bench, McGrath hollered to him, “If you come to the plate today, asshole, I’ll hit you right in the fucking head.” The French team immediately stood up and pointed to McGrath.

Sure enough, in the bottom of the ninth, the loudmouth pinch hit. When he got near the batter’s box, McGrath pointed to his head. I called time and went to the mound. I explained to him that we were outnumbered about 100 to one and it would not be a good idea to throw at the batter. McGrath said nothing. He just stared at the batter. When I left the mound, I did not know what to expect.

The batter was left-handed, as was McGrath. Instead of crowding the plate and challenging McGrath, he stood well back in the box. McGrath took an exaggerated wind-up and threw a slow slider away from the plate. The batter swung and missed by a couple of feet. McGrath threw two more identical pitches with the same result. Then, he confidently walked off the mound with a one-hit shut-out under his belt. His team-mates congratulated him, but the French team were on their feet. There could be trouble. I walked to the mound while the French squad looked at me and then pointed to the team’s manager, Olivier Dubaut. I asked him to come to the mound. When he arrived, I extended my hand and he reciprocated. The tension subsided, but there was no idle chat among the players of both teams. A spokesman approached me and was very helpful in giving me directions on how to get out of Paris by the most expedient route. We took his advice and were on our journey back to England in less than 5 minutes.

The 1977 season for Spirit of ’76 was full of surprises. Some were good and others not. But, in one of my most bizarre seasons managing baseball, a first-baseman who was slated only to pitch in an emergency, or if we had a big lead, took matters into his own hands and compiled a 12–1 record, beating a number of excellent teams, some that outmanned us at several positions.

EPILOGUE

After Ben McGrath’s incredible 1977 season, he returned to the United States. I thought I would never see him again. But circumstances prevailed that
prompted me to call him and ask that he come to England for a portion of the summer of 1980. In the past, he always called me.

In 1980, I had various programmes running. The kids who were part of the youth programme from the beginning kept pestering me by asking, “When are you going to bring Spirit back?” I decided to form a good adult team for international play at West Ruislip and on the Continent. The new team was the London Ducks.

While I was getting the 1980 season in order, I approached the Hillingdon Council for a grant for kids’ baseball. They allocated me a budget for a playground programme. I needed a couple of instructors and one came forth immediately: a player from Brockport State University in the United States. He wanted to spend the summer in England. Then, against all my common sense, I thought of contacting McGrath and asking if he would be interested. When I called, he brought me up to date. He was unemployed and at one time spent a month as a guest of the Rhode Island Department of Mental Health. He wrecked a car when he hit a wall head-on and was deemed insane by the authorities. He was still the same. Quickly, he committed to come to England. It was a way for him to evade bill collectors who were pestering him.

The Ducks played their entire home schedule before taking a 3-week tour of Belgium and Germany. McGrath joined us just before we left for the Continent. I had two excellent pitchers on the trip, but a few position-player starters were not able to take 3 weeks off, so I did not take my best team. McGrath would play first base and pitch only to give the two starters a rest. In Europe, we played against touring South African teams, German teams, and US Air Force and Army teams. We also played at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), in Belgium, against a team consisting of employees from the United States and their kids. In a short time, we played a lot of games and the players were quite tired, but we kept our schedule and even picked up competition along the way. McGrath pitched an occasional inning or two, allowing our two top pitchers’ arms to recover.

We finally were to play our last game of the tour, in Germany, against the Frankfurt Giants, who were frontrunners at the time in the country’s leading circuit, the Bundesliga. We were out-matched at many positions and my players were suffering from fatigue. Also, the two pitchers were dragging their arms. I told McGrath that he would start the game and try to keep the score reasonable. He had not started a baseball game on the hill since his shut-out victory against the French national team in 1977. I was not expecting much.

It was déjà vu all over again. McGrath put the side out in order in the first inning and began to get back his pinpoint control and his unorthodox “sinker.” After six innings the score was tied 2–2. I was amazed that we were still in the game. It
Nine Aces and a Joker

was an overcast night and there was a constant drizzle. The umpire changed balls frequently. Then, in the sixth, he asked McGrath to throw him the ball so he could put a new one in play. After the umpire caught the ball, he shouted, “Holy shit. I’ve got grease all over my hand.” He then rubbed his hand on his pants and threw McGrath a new ball. What the umpire called grease was in fact Vaseline, the catalyst for McGrath’s sinker, also known as the spitball.

The first pitch McGrath threw was hit about 450 feet down the left-field line. It was rising as it left the park, but it was about 5 feet foul. The ump walked to the front of the plate, took a new ball out of his bag, and threw it to McGrath. Then, he took his mask off, laughed, and hollered, “You didn’t have time to load that one up, did you?” He put his mask on and continued his duties, but he never warned McGrath about throwing a spitter. McGrath did not throw a dry pitch for the remainder of the game.

This was the last game for the London Ducks. We were battered from our schedule and traveling, but we walked off the field with a 4–3 victory against the best team we faced all year. This was all thanks to McGrath and his “sinker.” It was the last game McGrath ever pitched in his life. He went out a winner against a vastly superior team. His victories against the French national team in 1977 and the Frankfurt Giants in 1980 should stick out in the annals of amateur baseball. When we returned to London, the team disbanded and McGrath began his work on the playground programme.

McGrath eventually went back to the United States and settled in San Diego, California. He quickly found a softball league, where he attained an umpiring position. Within 5 years, he was the head of an umpire’s association in San Diego and taught many new arbitrators the requisite skills. Today, he is still an umpire in San Diego and is well respected throughout the county. He has come full circle from a madman on the field to the person who has to halt the erratic actions of others. Some of the players he calls games for are descendants of those for whom he first put the mask on some three decades ago.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For additional information relating to this chapter, visit www.projectcobb.org.uk/NAaaJ/1977.html.
13 – Acknowledgements

FROM JOE GRAY
Sincere thanks to the following for giving their time in being interviewed: Cody Cain; Dave Fowlie; Johnny Oldman; Wally O’Neil; Frank Parker, Jr (via Dan Parker); Don Smallwood; Brad Thompson; and Vince Warner. In addition, thank you to Jackie O’Neil for fielding my speculative trans-Atlantic phone call and kindly putting me in touch with her distant cousin Wally. I am also grateful to Colin Allan, Graham Rumble, and Alan Smith for their research assistance. Finally, the invited authors are all deserving of much gratitude, for without them this simply would not exist.

FROM HARVEY SAHKER
Thank you to Max Wilson, Jr, who helped the author of the chapter on his father. And a big thank you, also, to Matt Smith, who provided research assistance.

FROM JOSH CHETWYND
Much gratitude goes to Harvey Sahker, Mark George, and Matt Smith for their excellent research, which helped tremendously in this effort. Thank you as well to Kristine Morrison, John Prescott, and Buck Jones for agreeing to be interviewed for this work.

FROM MARK GEORGE
Brendan Perkins, Sports Editor at The Herald (Jasper, Indiana), was kind enough to send through a series of stories on Gavin Marshall from his time in the Frontier League. Miles Wolff kindly obliged in pointing out hidden-away, game-by-game pitching data for the league. And Tim Perry also deserves thanks, as he independently provided direction to those pitching stats and offered other help through his role as unofficial historian for the Frontier League. Thank you also to Gavin for being interviewed.

FROM MATT SMITH
A very big thank you to Brian Essery, Josh Chetwynd, Will Lintern, and Jason Roberts for their time in being interviewed and providing additional details for the chapters. A huge debt of thanks is also owed to the volunteers who serve as official scorers in British baseball. Their diligence made it possible to consult detailed accounts of all of the relevant pitched games, a luxury not often afforded
Nine Aces and a Joker

to researchers of British baseball history. Finally, thanks go to Joe Gray and Mark George for their wise words and humour during the research trips in London.

PICTURE CREDITS
Project COBB photograph archive (including shots by Walter Keller [of Brian Essery] and Martin Stabe [of Gavin Marshall]).
In what is a truly international effort, contributing authors include Harvey Sahker (Ontario, Canada), Joanne Hulbert (Massachusetts, USA), Josh Chetwynd (California, USA), Jeff Archer (California, USA), Mark George (Kent, UK), and Alan Smith (Auckland, New Zealand). Additional research assistance was provided by Graham Rumble (Queensland, Australia), Colin Allan (East Yorkshire, UK), and Joe Gray (Hertfordshire, UK).

Praise for What About the Villa?, Project COBB’s first book:
“dazzling accumulation of research” that demonstrates “superb scholarship” — *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game*

In *Nine Aces and a Joker*, leading British baseball writers come together to provide an engaging tale of the sport’s history in the country by focusing on standout pitchers’ defining seasons. Beginning with John Reidenbach in 1890 and running through to Jason Roberts in 2010, nine “Ace” pitchers and a less conventional standout — the “Joker” — are put under the spotlight. In addition, several other star pitchers are featured in a short stories section.

Project COBB is a chartered community of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). projectcobb.org.uk