

# Baseball was serious business in Roaring 20s

By GLENN MORRISON

During the 1920s the American public went crazy over all types of sports. It was a hysteria which carried through the depression and subsided only by the second World War.

There were many heroes to praise; Jack Dempsey layin' 'em in the aisles, Babe Ruth rounding the bases, Red Grange sweeping the end, Earl Sande booting home the big one.

But all the hullabaloo wasn't reserved for national sports heroes. Local ones emerged from high school sports and participated in town and community leagues, which were supported by local citizens.

Morrow County was no exception. The funtime informal community league which had been playing Sunday baseball suddenly emerged as a no-nonsense top-notch baseball competition. Some of the players turned professional. "Ringers" were recruited for the county.

It's hard to pinpoint the first year that formal baseball games were being played between communities in Morrow County, but there is evidence that the community games were being played before the turn of the century.

W.S. Shiach in a book, "Histor of Umatilla and Morrow Counties," printed in 1902, tells in flowery terms of the Morrow County young men and their athletic prowess. To back up his prose, Shiach notes that a community baseball team from Heppner tied for first place with Athena in a baseball tournament held in 1901 at Pendleton.

Dutch Rietmann, a top baseballer of the 1920s for the Ione town team, says he remembers seeing his first baseball game at Ione in 1902 when the Ione town team played a team from the Willamette Valley. A picture

taken in Arlington shows that Ione did indeed have a team, and members were outfitted in matching uniforms.

Newspaper coverage of the game prior to the 1920s was inconsistent, but writeup of the games occasionally found a front page berth.

An exciting account of a game between Fairview and the Heppner town team appeared in the Heppner Herald of May 7, 1915. The long worded and somewhat humorous account praised Heppner's "Husky" Knight for some fancy and apparently controversial ballplay. The article notes "it appears that Heppner has a first class team and will soon be in shape to issue some challenges to outside teams. Ione has been angling for a series but it seems the players have not been sufficiently organized to go ahead in the matter."

Lineups for the 1915 game were: Heppner, Hayes, Hiatt, Jaynes, Raymond, Wilson, Knight, Elliott, A. Crawford and Henry Peterson; and Fairview, Griffin, Peterson, Griffin, Smith, Ball, Nelson, Bergstrom, Bates and McElligott.

But the 20s put an end to these informal tilts. The Morrow-Gilliam County League was formed and games began to be played in earnest. Another Ione player of the 20s, Ed Bristow, remembers that game wages were being earned then for the pitchers and catchers. Ed claims pitchers, which were usually brought in from outside the county, were paid up to \$35 a game. Catchers, which Ed was, received as much as \$10.

As the seriousness of the games increased towns went to great lengths to obtain good pitchers from outside the area. Rietmann remembers these "pros" being guaranteed good jobs in the harvest, and says often college boys were brought to the area to play ball while receiving top

wages in the harvest to finance their next year of school.

The April 22, 1926 edition of the Gazette-Times has an item that Fred Roberts had been signed to play for the Heppner team, and in another item on a different page it says that Fred would be working as an electrician for the City of Heppner. But this is probably just a coincidence! Also in the same issue is an ad for a boxing smoker to be held, where Fred Roberts would be heading the card.

The Heppner Herald of April 28, 1922, tells that "Zip" Moeller from Oregon City would be playing for Ione. It was noted that Moeller had played for other community teams in Morrow County.

Baseball was taken seriously in the county. Crowds of 500 people were not unusual for the big 4th of July games held each year to mark the end of the season. The competition usually began around the first of May, and the July 4th end was the result of the wheat harvest which traditionally starts the next day in the county.

The teams of the league changed from year to year, but during the 1920s there were teams from Condon, Arlington, Ione, Heppner, Hardman, Irrigon and Lexington. For a couple of the years the Heppner squad played in the Blue Mountain League which included the above teams and groups from Cayuse, Mission, Pendleton, LaGrande, Helix, Fairview, Echo and Hermiston.

Exhibition teams also came to reap the money being spent for baseball in the county. The famous House of David team played in the area as did the Slickapoo Indians of Culesac, Wis., "the finest Indian team in the World," according to local news accounts.

But the high style of play for the town teams soon ceased as the depression hit and monies previously spent on baseball were needed to stabilize the town's economy. The teams did continue, but the hiring of pitchers and public interest in the teams dropped considerably. By 1933 the league had been changed to the Wheatland League, and games in Heppner were moved from the old Gentry field to the rodeo field at the fairgrounds. This league consisted of teams from Arlington, Fossil, Blalock, Heppner, Ione and Condon. By 1934 Umatilla replaced Blalock, but the rosters

show that more local high school boys were now involved, and the players changed from week to week. The teams continued to play until the Japanese and Germans diverted their attention. For a brief period before the war a local "twilight" league was formed among the lodges and clubs as well as the local C.C.C. group at the fairgrounds. These games brought the tone of the games back down to recreational standards.

After the war a town team headed by LaVerne Van Marter had set up for a few years. LaVerne's father, "Red" Van Marter, had been manager of the team in the barnstorming days of the 20s and LaVerne remembers growing up around the town ball team. The post-war team soon died out as the previously unemployed veterans began to move on to jobs, and ball playing young men began to find less time for the diamond.

The advent of television to the county helped with the decline of the town baseball team no doubt, as Ted Williams or Joe Dimaggio could be viewed as easily as Guy Cason or Gar Swanson were in the 20s.

And so the town teams died out, leaving nothing but memories, some faded uniforms, a few pictures, and maybe a scar or two on an ageing leg.

Ed Bristow remembers that although the country was under prohibition, and still owners in the county were being harassed by the local Ku Klux Klan, liquor was still always available for ball-players after the games. Ed also claims that large sums of money were bet on the outcomes of the contests, which meant a losing team could be a financial drain on the community.

Teams were financed by local subscribers and various fund-raising functions. Gate receipts were often large enough to insure good equipment and uniforms for the team.

A notable example of the seriousness of the game happened in 1922 in a game

between Ione and Heppner. The Heppner Herald of April 22 covered the incident like this: "At the end of the seventh, Pitcher Moeller covered home plate to flag Dutch Rietmann who was coming like a cyclone from

third, and while he got his man and ended the inning, he also got Dutch's spikes in his leg leaving a gaping wound 7 inches long." The Herald went on to say, "Dutch has had similar 'accidents' in the past and while nobody believes he does it intentionally it would be mighty comforting to base runner on competing teams if he played the rest of the season in his stocking feet."

When Dutch was recently interviewed a twinkle came into his eye at the mention of the incident of 52 years ago. He remembers the incident well, and still has a type-written reminder of the play which he received the day

after the game in the mail. The note read: "Dutch Rietmann: You are a dirty German murderer at heart, you are just the same as your relatives in Germany, who cut off babies arms and legs and committed outrages on soldiers in the war, you are not fit nor decent enough to play American games, you dirty butcher, that intentional spiking of the other teams best player is your old brute trick. But see here, Dutch, we are prepared for you at Sunday a week, and the very first man you cripple, a gang of white men will sure send you to Hell where you belong, (signed) One who saw you at Ione, last

week." Other incidents like this suggests the game of baseball in Morrow County was played for blood as well as fun. There is no doubt that the

quality of play was excellent. In the middle 20s Ione had a pitcher named Curt Davis, who starred for them several years. Davis went on the next year after his last Ione game to play for the Pittsburgh Pirates, who had championship teams through the rest of the decade.

Other imported players well-remembered by those who witnessed Morrow County-Gilliam County


League games include "Cupie" Clough, Toots Montague, Fred Roberts, Roche Palmer and Rube Evans. Evans had played for the Cleveland Indians before coming down to play for Hardman.

The heavy betting on the games made the umpires

unpopular fellows. The Heppner Herald of April 22, 1923 complained, "Strikes and balls all look alike to (umpire) Blake and a little matter of ten or fifteen feet in deciding whether a runner is safe or out or whether the ball passed over the plate didn't disturb his young life a-tall."



Ione's first baseball team: 1. Forest Puyear; 2. Ralph Hymer; 3. Levi Hills; 4. John Clark; 5. John Ingram; 6. Ed Keller; 7. Hugh Currin; 8. Charles O'Neill; 9. Walt Puyear; 10. Frank Engleman. This photo was taken in 1902, from the Morrow County Museum collection.



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**Over The Tee Cup**

By R & L

It's Golden Tee time at the Tee Cup. Lowell Gribble and Marie McQuarrie each shot a hole-in-one on number 4 last week. Lowell sank his shot from the red markers on July 4. What a way to celebrate! Marie drove her single shot from the white markers last ladies' day. Congratulations to both.

The Fourth of July Flag Tournament was a big success, we hear. Dave Harrison and Monica Jones were first place winners in the men's and women's divisions, with Ron Jones taking second for men. Dave Gunderson and Vi Lanham had the long drives of the tourney; C.C. Carmichael and Bev Gunderson won KP honors. All present helped Lowell Gribble celebrate his aforementioned feat in the great tradition of golfers, adding another festive note to an enjoyable afternoon.

Gary Hunt was the big winner for Sunday play, capturing both low gross and KP on the second shot on 8. Dave Harrison shot the low net score. Fran Doherty put together the least putts; Harry McCauley had the long drive. La Verne Van Marter took KP honors on number 9.

Marie McQuarrie was, of course, the woman of the hour last ladies' day. Unshaken by her "unusual" shot on 4, she completed her round with enough skill to win low net. Bev Gunderson posted the low gross score; and a new anonymous has appeared to earn a ball for the most putts. Quite a Tuesday!

Another barbecue is slated for Saturday, July 13. A to I are the dessert group; J to Z will be the salad people this time. Tee-off time is 5 p.m. with barbecue to follow. Plan to attend—the next Willow Creek celebrity might be you.

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**ROYAL ARCH MASONS MEET AT CUTSFORTH**

The mountain meeting of the Royal Arch Masons, Chapter 26, Heppner Lodge, was held recently at Cutsforth Park.

Masons from this area and from as far away as Washington attended the all-day meeting. A luncheon of hotcakes, eggs, and sausage was served to 70 persons attending the meeting.

The outdoor conferral ceremony was performed by Pendleton Chapter 23, and the meeting ended with a steak dinner in the evening.


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