

The Old Ballgame

Vintage Base Ball turns the clock back 120 years. BY CHARLES EUCHNER



Irony abounds wherever Vintage Base Ball exhibitions are played, with TV cameras and cell phones washing out the effect presented by the old-time rules and uniforms on display.

AS EVENING FELL ON A FIELD IN WESTFIELD, CONN., the striker stood at the plate, holding a 40-ounce club. The hurler peered into his farmer's glove, examining the stitches that formed an X on the pill. "Low pitch, sir," the striker told the umpire, who was wearing tails and leaning on a cane 10 feet off the plate. The behind was ready. The midranger reminded his teammates: "Two hands down!" The count on the ballist was five and one.

The scene was Bullens Field in late July of this year. But the Hartford Senators and the Westfield Wheelmen were playing using 1886 rules. It was Adonis Terry Day, a time to celebrate a local boy who won 197 games from 1884 to '97.

Wearing replica uniforms, players consciously spoke an archaic language and followed 19th-century rules.

The vintage game transports players to a different place, an illusion made all the more jarring considering the presence of cell phones and TV cameras. Bob Smith, a social studies teacher at South Windsor High School in Connecticut, also participates in Civil War re-enactments. And like a few other players, he sometimes competes barefooted.

Vintage Base Ball started in 1980 when two towns — Bethpage, N.Y., and Columbus, Ohio — staged exhibitions

at replicas of rural villages. More than 100 teams now play regularly, with another 50 or so meeting occasionally.

Baseball rules have evolved over the decades. Pitchers threw underhand until the late 1870s, then below the hips and shoulders, and finally, any way they chose after 1883. In the era of bare hands and small gloves, balls caught on a bounce were outs. Until 1886, batters could tell the umpire whether they wanted a high or low strike zone.

Games move quickly. Strikers cannot ask for time out. If a bat slips away on a swing, the hurler can keep pitching.

Players use bats 40 ounces or heavier and strike down on the ball, trying to hit it on the ground and force mistakes by the opposition with aggressive baserunning. Because the ball is soft and the hands almost bare, no one can throw too hard or hit too far.

Rhubarbs cost players 25-cent fines. The gentleman's rule — which states that players must reverse calls made incorrectly in their favor — applies.

Yet for all the focus on tradition, one

aspect of the vintage game is incorrect historically.

"We've attracted very few hypercompetitive types," says Bob Tholkes, who organizes a number of vintage games in Minnesota. "Is that typical for the 1860s? Probably not. There were riots and brouhahas in the 1860s because of gambling." He pauses. "As long as we can keep the gambling out of Vintage Base Ball, we'll be okay."

When ESPN broadcast a 2004 game between the old rival Pittsfield Hillies and Hartford Senators, vintage ball got national exposure. Rebel/traditionalist and former Big League pitcher Jim Bouton organized the contest to rally public support to save historic Waconah Field in Massachusetts.

Bouton sat in the stands at the Westfield game this year, wearing a bowler, a black vest and crisp white shirt.

"In this game, the players make all the plays, not the equipment," Bouton says. "The players can do whatever it takes — hidden-ball plays, quick pitching. And they don't stand in the box adjusting their batting gloves." ♦

Charles Euchner is a freelance writer and the author of Little League, Big Dreams and The Last Nine Innings, both of which were published this year.