

No Minor Accomplishment

The Revival
of New Jersey
Professional Baseball



BOB GOLON

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To Jill, Jay, and Janet,
John, Olga, Jim, and Marie,
I hope I've done enough.

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Chuck Betson, the former director of marketing and media for the Atlantic City Surf, spent considerable time with me at the Sandcastle in 2005, and John Kiphorn and Frank Dougherty of the Surf front office gave me their insights into the operation. Pete Thompson, the sports director at television station WMGM in Atlantic City, was extremely helpful in explaining to me the Atlantic City and southern New Jersey sports scene.

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Economics has never been my strong point, so I'd like to thank two experts for taking the time to explain the economics of ballpark building and naming rights to me. Dr. Michael Leeds of Temple University and Dr. Larry McCarthy of Seton Hall University, well noted and published in their field, gave me valuable insight and understanding into this aspect of the game. The noted sports business columnist Evan Weiner also has given me the benefit of his knowledge and insight on the economics of sport.

When I began this project, I had no idea how to proceed, as I had never written a book before. I needed someone with the patience to guide me through the process and with the understanding not to get frustrated with my repeated questions. I was lucky enough to find the ideal person in Beth Kressel, assistant editor at Rutgers University Press in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Beth was with me from the beginning to end, and without her, I probably would never have gotten past the proposal stage. Thank you, Beth, for all of the expertise and assistance. I could not have done this without you.

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Chronology

New Jersey minor league and independent professional clubs, in the order that they appear in the chapters:

Trenton Thunder

Mercer County Waterfront
Park
One Thunder Road
Trenton, NJ 08611

Somerset Patriots

Commerce Bank Ball Park
One Patriots Park
Bridgewater, NJ 08807

Newark Bears

Bears and Eagles Riverfront
Stadium
450 Broad Street
Newark, NJ 07102

Camden Riversharks

Campbell's Field
401 North Delaware Avenue
Camden, NJ 08102

Atlantic City Surf

Bernie Robbins Stadium
545 North Albany Avenue
Atlantic City, NJ 08401

New Jersey Jackals

Yogi Berra Stadium
One Hall Drive
Little Falls, NJ 07424

Sussex Skyhawks

Skylands Park
94 Championship Place
Suite 11
Augusta, NJ 07822

Lakewood BlueClaws

FirstEnergy Park
2 Stadium Way
Lakewood, NJ 08701

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Introduction

Like many New Jersey residents, I have been a frequent attendee at the minor league and unaffiliated independent professional baseball parks in New Jersey since their introduction to the state in 1994. I never really gave much thought as to why I've come to enjoy the experience of spending summer afternoons and evenings in this way. I wrote it off to my being a baseball junkie, and the fact of having professional baseball so close to home and accessible made it easy for me to



Sparkee, General Admission, and friends. Commerce Bank Ballpark, Bridgewater. Photograph by Bob Golon, 2005.

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attend. As the years have passed, I've noticed that the crowds at these games are much different from those at Yankee Stadium, Shea Stadium, or the Phillies' ballpark in Philadelphia. There were more kids, more young families, and more young couples in attendance. But the full impact of what was taking place in New Jersey did not occur to me until I had a firsthand experience with the baseball clubs of the state.

In the spring of 2004, while I was an adult reference librarian at the Bernards Township Library in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, our children's librarian, Antonette D'Orazio, asked me if I would put together a presentation about baseball for children. Given my interest and previous work with baseball research and history, this seemed like a fun idea. But, she added a requirement: it would have to have a New Jersey flavor and slant, as our children's librarians were interested in teaching the young boys and girls more about our state.

I said, "Sure, no problem," then walked away, scratching my head. What would I do? Most of my baseball research and the presentations that I had done at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown dealt with New York City and major league events. These stories, although entertaining, would not fit the criteria. The research presentation on the 1915 Federal League Newark Peppers and Harrison Field that I first did for the Society for American Baseball Research in 1996 would certainly fit, but it also would have reduced a room full of eight- to twelve-year-olds to tears of boredom! I fondly remember when, in the late 1950s, my father would drive me past the abandoned Ruppert Stadium in Newark. He would stop the car and tell me stories about when he would sit in the bleachers and root for the great Newark Bears in the 1930s. The Bears were, after all, a Yankees farm club. Nice memories, but I doubt the kids in Bernards Township would care that Tommy "Old Reliable" Henrich and Charlie "King Kong" Keller played for the Bears.

The story and presentation needed to be something new and fresh that the kids could identify with. It had to emphasize fun with the game instead of performance statistics and the pressure of wins and losses. But most of all, it had to be about New Jersey. It finally dawned on me that we have no fewer than eight minor league and independent professional teams currently playing in New Jersey. We could draw a big map of the state, place stars over where the teams are located, and do a presentation about our New Jersey baseball clubs, emphasizing pictures of their mascots, logos, and stadiums. I could certainly do that, but it needed to have a little something extra. I needed something fun to give to the kids.

I decided to sit down and write letters to all eight of the franchises, describing what I was doing, and I asked for their help and support. I asked if they could send something; a hat, a ball, a stuffed animal, a pennant, anything that I could use as a giveaway, in return for my mentioning their generosity to the parents who would also be sitting there. As I sent out these letters, I fully expected to get what I will call “major-leagued.”

What does it mean to get ‘major-leagued?’” Getting “major-leagued” means getting the distinct feeling of fan-unfriendliness that has developed around big-league baseball ever since the contracts got larger, the advertising became more expensive and intense, the games got longer, and the postseason got a lot later at night for those of us on the East Coast. It’s the attitude of the typical player when asked for an autograph without receiving a fee at signing table or a card show. Getting “major-leagued” means only being able to afford having your family of four sit in the upper deck or the bleachers while the better seats in the lower deck are occupied by the corporate guys with the expense accounts. Getting “major-leagued” means traffic jams, screaming video screens, \$20 parking fees and \$4.50 bottles of water. And, it’s having innocent, non-income-generating requests for help—like mine for the library kids—ignored because, after all, you’re “small potatoes.” That’s getting “major-leagued.”

What took place next astounded me. One by one, our New Jersey clubs responded. The Trenton Thunder sent a beautiful autographed yearbook. The Camden Riversharks, New Jersey Cardinals, Atlantic City Surf, Newark Bears, and Lakewood BlueClaws each sent four free tickets to any remaining game in the 2004 season. Being the local club for Bernards Township, the Somerset Patriots truly outdid themselves. They sent their mascot, Sparkee, to crash our August 2004 presentation. And, Sparkee came bearing gifts: free tickets, autographed baseballs, caps, pens, refrigerator magnets, trading cards, and bobble-head dolls. The look on the children’s faces when Sparkee came into that room was absolutely priceless. And I thought, “There’s a story here. This is different from what I’ve grown used to.”

What follows is that story, the story of minor league and independent professional baseball in New Jersey since 1994, when baseball returned to New Jersey in a big way. It’s a story of dedicated owners and front-office people providing inexpensive family fun and entertainment in a safe and clean environment. It’s about players being fan-friendly and community-minded. It’s about big enjoyment and small egos. It also examines the state of the baseball industry in New Jersey, analyzing via

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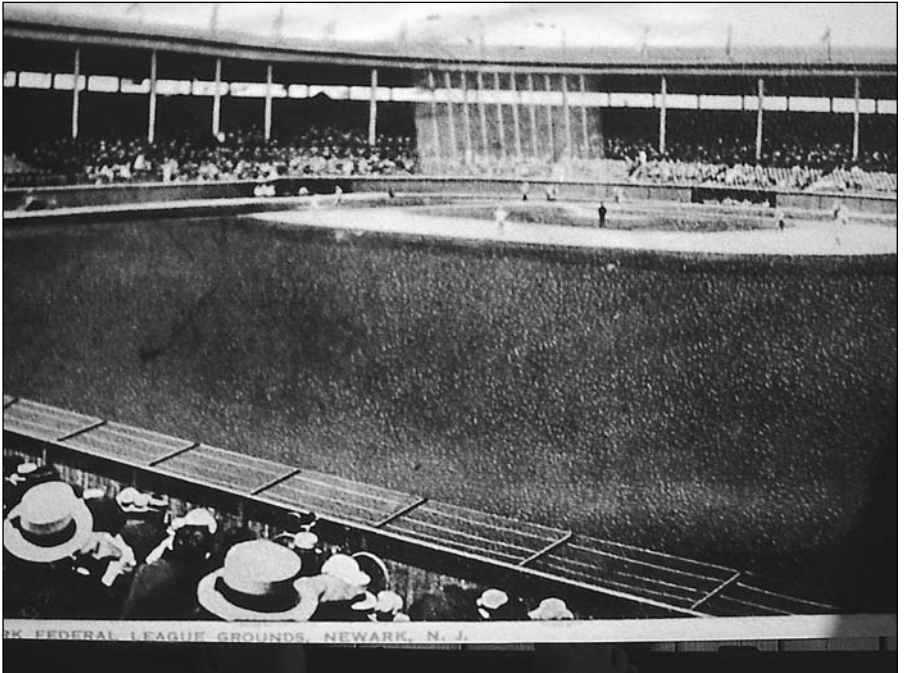
industry experts the success of some franchises and the struggle of some others.

Most of all, this book is about the people of New Jersey—rich and poor, owner and employee, player and fan—who have put this game on our New Jersey map once again, hopefully to never leave.

Baseball's Early Roots in New Jersey

It was April 1946, and New Jersey paused for a deep breath. During this particular spring, the sun seemed warmer and brighter, the air smelled fresher, the smiles were broader, and the laughter returned. Optimism replaced pessimism, and relaxation regained its rightful place in life alongside of work. World War II was over, after four long years, and it was time to have fun again.

Servicemen and servicewomen lucky enough to have survived the war returned home to their loved ones. Families were reunited. Baseball, which did its best during the war to provide New Jersey and the rest of



Harrison Field, home of the Newark Peppers of the Federal League, 1915.
Photo courtesy of the Town of Harrison, New Jersey.

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the nation with a diversion from the daily news of the war overseas, was becoming whole again. Baseball clubs were being reassembled to their prewar status as players returned from the military. At Griffith Stadium in Washington, President Truman limbered up his left arm and delivered the ceremonial first pitch of the baseball season to a group of waiting Washington Senators players, the first presidential ball to be tossed since Franklin D. Roosevelt abandoned the practice during the war. Baseball was reestablishing its rightful place in the American psyche, which craved relaxation and recreation. The editorial in the *New York Times* on April 17 summed up the feeling of much of America: “The war is over. We can settle down at last and give more attention to the box scores.”

New Jersey experienced the same relief as the rest of the country, especially in the industrial cities. The war placed a burden on the people of these cities by increasing demand for their industrial output for the war effort. As New Jersey’s professional baseball teams in Newark, Jersey City, and Trenton began their 1946 seasons, the future of the game in New Jersey seemed brighter than ever as fans crowded back to their ballparks to celebrate the return of the prewar ritual of the opening of another baseball season. In Jersey City in particular, the political drums were beating, urging residents to welcome the boys back to the playing field.

Years before Bruce Springsteen acquired the moniker, “the Boss” in New Jersey could only mean mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City, who ruled with his own particular brand of political favoritism and entitlement. The Boss ran Jersey City with an iron fist from 1917 through 1947, his thirty-year tyrannical control a testament to the power of the political organization that he created. Nothing was beyond Hague’s will or influence, including driving the attendance at Jersey City Giants games. On April 16, 1946, a full-page “proclamation” from Mayor Hague ran on page 15 of the *Jersey Journal*, urging residents to “join in carrying out the purpose of this resolution to lend their aid, support and assistance in making the attendance at this opening game of the league season at Roosevelt Stadium a memorable occasion.” In other words, you had better be there! So eager were the residents and businesspeople of Jersey City to please Boss Hague that he, through his city employees, was able to sell in excess of 50,000 tickets for opening day at Roosevelt Stadium, even though the concrete-and-steel Works Progress Administration structure at the lower end of Danforth Avenue and Route 440 could only seat half that number. Opening day in Jersey City was no different in this respect, but

April 18, 1946, was destined to become a milestone in American social history as well as baseball history. The Montreal Royals, the Triple-A affiliate of the Brooklyn Dodgers, opposed the Giants on this day. The game took on the flavor of the major-league rivalry that constantly took place across the river at the Polo Grounds and Ebbets Field. As the 25,000-plus fans settled into their seats at Roosevelt Stadium, they were met by a sight that they had never seen in International League baseball—or in any white professional baseball game, for that matter. The Royals' second baseman, Jackie Robinson, took the field to become the first black player since the late nineteenth century to play in a regular-season game, integrating a sport that had been off-limits to blacks up until this time. Robinson punctuated the occasion by leading the Royals to a 14-1 rout of the Giants, hitting a home run, scoring four runs, batting in four, and stealing two bases.

Across Newark Bay, 12,928 Newarkers filed into Ruppert Stadium in the Ironbound section of the city to see the Newark Bears open their season with an 8-7 loss to the Buffalo Bisons. The Bears, the Triple-A affiliate of the mighty New York Yankees, played alongside the Jersey City Giants in the International League and typically held the upper hand over their cross-bay rivals in the standings. Both clubs struggled in 1946, with the Bears barely breaking a .500 record and the Giants finishing dead last. Little did it matter to the devotees of the Newark Bay rivalry: big-time baseball was back and ready to resume its place as a northern New Jersey summertime staple. White fans in northern New Jersey weren't the only citizens enjoying the revitalized game in 1946. Black fans, especially those in Newark, also had a reason to follow the game on a daily basis.

Despite the introduction of Jackie Robinson to white baseball in 1946, the game remained basically segregated that season, with only five blacks under contract to play minor-league ball for major-league organizations. This situation would remain the same for the next two years. Other talented black ballplayers, unable to display their skills in the major and minor leagues, were forced to compete against each other in what was known as the Negro Leagues, where some of the greatest baseball of the 1930s and 1940s was played for devoted audiences of black fans. Newark had a club of its own in the Negro National League, the Newark Eagles, owned by an ex-Camden numbers entrepreneur and his wife, Abe and Effa Manley. In 1946, the Eagles opened their season at Ruppert Stadium with the future Baseball Hall of Famer Leon Day pitching a no-hitter