

Early Baseball History in Portsmouth

Of the two major sports, football and baseball, baseball dates back further in Scioto County history. The first record of a game being played was in 1866. The two teams were the Sciotos and the River Cities. (River City B.B.C.) The River City B.B.C. played its games at Waller Woods, an area just north of 2nd Street and east of Waller Street.

In 1868, a group of men formed an association to finance a baseball club in Portsmouth. This team was the Riverside Club. Games were played in the Scioto bottoms at the foot of 4th Street.

In 1898, during the period of the Spanish-American War, Portsmouth baseball was suspended. There is no record of any team playing in the Portsmouth area at this time.

In 1899, a semi-pro team called the Navies was organized. Branch Rickey and Al Bridwell played briefly for the Navies. The flooding in the river bottoms caused problems for the Navies, and part of the season was played in Kentucky.

A ballpark was built in Millbrook Park in 1906. Many teams played in this park, including the Navies. In 1908, the field was redesigned and a grandstand was built that seated 1,000 people. The cost to update the field to a professional standard was \$6,650.

The Portsmouth Cobblers, a.k.a. Portsmouth Shoemakers, won the 1910 pennant and thus were referred to as the Portsmouth Champs by the media. Portsmouth had become a formidable team in the Ohio State League and won the championship again in 1912.

Billy Doyle, Scioto County native, was officially a scout from 1910 through most of the 1930s.

He is said to have either contributed to the discovery of or actually signed a great number of local players. He played baseball with the Navies and Shoemakers but never made the majors as a player. He also founded and ran a "Baseball School", combining tryouts with an instructional league in 1915.

Al Bridwell was a shortstop in Major League Baseball who played for a number of teams in the early 20th century, most notably the New York Giants. He batted left-handed, and threw right-handed.

September 23, 1913, the Chicago Cubs came to Portsmouth to play an exhibition game with the Portsmouth Champs (a.k.a. Shoemakers/Cobblers). At this time, Al Bridwell was playing shortstop for the Cubs. Portsmouth claimed its own by declaring that day, "Al Bridwell Day".

On the last day of the 1913 season, the Portsmouth Champs defeated the Chillicothe Babes in a double-header played at Millbrook Park. The Champs knocked the Babes out of the league and secured themselves third place. However, a controversy arose which resulted in the pennant being awarded to the Chillicothe team. The Ohio State League disbanded in 1916.

In the spring of 1935, crowds gathered in the grandstands at Riverside Park for the premiere of the new team, the Portsmouth Pirates, and the dedication of the new stadium. The Portsmouth Pirates, a.k.a. the "Floodwall Bucs", were the first baseball team in the area for 19 years. They later became known as the Panthers.

In 1937, Portsmouth was also the home of the Portsmouth Red Birds, a minor league team affiliated with the St. Louis Cardinals and a part of Branch Rickey's farm system. The Red Birds won the Mid-Atlantic pennant in 1938.

After War World II, baseball players returned to their hometowns ready to play. Connie Mack, who owned the Philadelphia Athletics, established a Class D farm team in Portsmouth. The Portsmouth A's were a part of Portsmouth history for 3 years from 1948-1950.

The Portsmouth Explorers were one of the original teams in the Frontier League, a non-affiliated minor league baseball organization. The Explorers played in the league's first three seasons, from 1993 to 1995. Finishing last in the league in attendance in 1995, the Explorers drew less than 12,000 fans for the season. The Explorers were sold and became the Springfield Capitals in 1996. (Springfield, IL.)

Portsmouth can boast of a lengthy history in baseball, and of the many that came from this area and contributed to that history.

Among them are the following:

- Harry "Dude" Blake- Portsmouth
- Billy Doyle-Portsmouth
- Al Bridwell- Friendship
- Austin McHenry- Blue Creek (started professional career in Portsmouth)
- Estel Crabtree- Lucasville
- Branch Rickey- Lucasville
- Rocky Nelson- Portsmouth
- Del Rice- Portsmouth
- Larry Hisle- Portsmouth
- Al Oliver- Portsmouth
- Gene Tenace- Lucasville
- Frank Rickey- Portsmouth
- Wayne Blackburn- Portsmouth
- Gene Bennett- Wheelersburg
- Terry Craft- Portsmouth