

HISTORY OF BASEBALL IN INDIANAPOLIS

By Kim Rogers

One of the earliest reports of baseball in Indianapolis appeared in the *Indianapolis Journal* on July 19, 1867. That's when two teams from Indianapolis, the Actives and the Western Club, the Star City Club of Lafayette, and the Washington Nationals (the most famous amateur club at the time) came together at Camp Burnside for a highly publicized doubleheader.

The Actives defeated the Star City Club 54-31 in six innings in the first game. The Nationals overwhelmed the Western Club 106-21 in nine innings of the second game. A festive crowd estimated between 5-6,000 turned out for the slugfest.

Most teams in those early years were composed of young men, most of whom belonged to men's clubs or were sponsored by one, and the games often were little more than social events.

The first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, was formed in 1869. Others followed and by 1871 the first professional baseball league, the National Association of Professional BaseBall, was organized. Fort Wayne had a team in the league and hosted the first professional game in baseball history.

In 1876, Indianapolis' first professional team, the Blues, was formed. They played at the old fairgrounds on a diamond in the middle of the race track before moving to a field on South Street between Alabama and Maryland streets.

In 1877, the Blues joined the International League, but they often played teams from the newly created National League.

The following year the Blues were admitted to the National League, but the team disbanded following the season after a disappointing seventh place finish. Professional baseball, outside of exhibition games, was then non-existent in Indianapolis for five years until 1884 when the American Association expanded from eight to 12 teams with Indianapolis on board. The Hoosiers played their home games at Seventh Street Field and, due to the city's ban on Sunday baseball, at Bruce Grounds outside the city's limits on Sundays. The Hoosiers were 3-18 by May 18, finished 29-78 in seventh place and were voted out of the league after the season.

The following year, local businessman John T. Brush entered a team in the Western League. But the league got off to a shaky start and was reduced to four teams by June 14 with Indianapolis being one of the casualties.

After a year (1886) without baseball, Indianapolis got back into the big picture again when John T. Brush purchased the St. Louis Maroons of the National League for \$12,000. The Hoosiers opened the season April 1 with a 10-4 loss to the Cincinnati Reds before a crowd of around 2,000 at Athletic Park at 16th Street and Capital. The Hoosiers went on to finish in last place at 37-89. The next two seasons weren't much better - 50-85 in 1888 and 59-75 in 1889. After three seasons, the Hoosiers were voted out of the league.

After going another two years (1890 and 1891) without pro baseball, Indianapolis again put a team in the Western League in 1892, but the league disbanded again in July of that year.

In a third try in the Western League, Indianapolis held teams from 1894-99, winning the league title in 1897 with a 93-37 record, the city's first professional baseball championship. The Western League was later renamed the American League after expanding. Teams from Indianapolis, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Kansas City, Cleveland, Buffalo and Minneapolis made up the league.

At the turn of the century, Indianapolis was managed by William H. Watkins, who also purchased controlling interest in the Indianapolis club and would go on to play a prominent role in the early years of baseball in Indianapolis. The team played at Ohio Street park at East Ohio Street and Oriental.

Indianapolis was lost in the shuffle when the American League decided to reorganize and move east to challenge the National League. Watkins scrambled to get into the Western Association with teams from Grand Rapids, Dayton, Toledo, Wheeling, W.Va., Fort Wayne, Columbus and Marion. But professional baseball in Indianapolis hit rock bottom on July 11 when the club was sold and moved to Matthews, Ind., due to rising costs and low attendance.

In 1902, Watkins landed a team in the newly formed American Association, which featured teams in Louisville, St. Paul, Kansas City, Columbus, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Toledo. Watkins believed Indianapolis needed a strong showing for fear professional baseball in the city might be lost forever. And the owner-manager delivered with a championship team, finishing in first place with a 95-44 record (.681), which to this day stands as the best winning percentage for a single season in the history of the Indianapolis franchise.



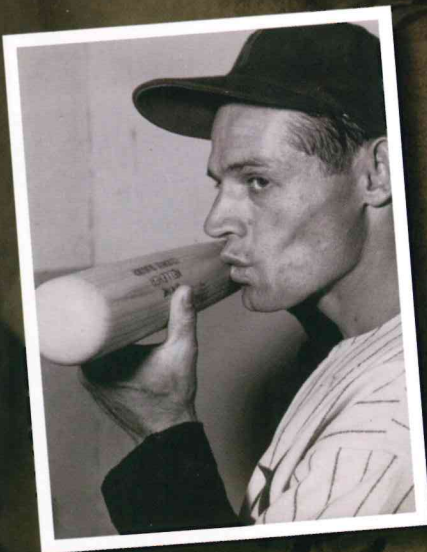
Indianapolis won the 1917 American Association pennant with a 90-63 record under manager J.C. Hendricks, then went on to defeat International League champion, Toronto, 4 games to 1 in the Junior World Series.

At the end of the 1927 season, James A. Perry purchased controlling interest in the Indianapolis franchise from W.C. Smith of Norwalk, Conn., whose family had owned at least a portion of the club since 1914. The purchase price was not made public, although it was believed to be around \$165,000. Indianapolis breathed a sign of relief with ownership of the club finally in the hands of someone local.

The season after Perry took over, Indianapolis won the league pennant with a 99-68 record under manager Bruno Betzel and then went on to defeat International League champion, Rochester 5 games to 1 in the Junior World Series.

On June 26, 1929, tragedy struck the Indianapolis baseball community when Club owner James A. Perry was killed in a small plane crash near Fort Benjamin Harrison. His brother, Norman, vowed to keep the team in the family. Norman, who ran the family's Indy Power and Light Co., wasn't the sportsman that James was, but he kept baseball in Indianapolis, quietly guiding the club for the next 13 years. Norman was behind the building of a new \$350,000 stadium at 1501 West 16th St., which was named Perry Stadium in honor of his late brother. Perry Stadium would eventually be named Victory Field, then Bush Stadium.

Frank E. McKinney, president of Fidelity Trust Co., and Indianapolis native and former major leaguer Owen "Donie" Bush purchased controlling interest of the Indians from the Perry family on Dec. 7, 1941.



4-1 for its first pennant since 1928. On September 12 of that year, The Tribe blanked Columbus 9-0 for its club-record 100th win of the season, a feat which remains the lone 100-win season in the history of the franchise.

Indianapolis took home another title when it routed Montreal 10-2 on Bush's 62nd birthday (Oct. 8, 1949) to win the Junior

World Series title. The Junior World Series title in 1949 was the city's first since 1928. In between, Indianapolis qualified for the playoffs six times, losing in the championship series four times (1936, 1939, 1943 and 1946) and exiting in the first round in 1938 and 1948.

In The winter of 1955, Cleveland Indians general manager Hank Greenberg sent a cold chill down the spine of Indianapolis baseball fans on Oct. 1, when he dropped the first hint of terminating Triple-A operations with this city. He pointed to heavy financial losses as the reason, and added he was in no position

to say whether Cleveland would sell or – worse yet – move the franchise. To make matters worse, Cleveland had offers from three other cities wishing to secure the Indianapolis franchise. Greenburg ultimately gave Indianapolis a November 28 deadline to come up with a local buyer or Cleveland was going to relocate.

Robert Kirby, chairman of the Chamber of Commerce Athletic Committee, outlined a community ownership

plan on Nov. 4. The major points were to raise \$160,000 for the franchise and secure a working agreement with Cleveland. The franchise was on the block for \$60,000. The rest of the money was needed for repairs at Victory Field and operating costs. Indians, Incorporated, hit the ground running with the hope of selling 16,000 shares of stock at \$10 a share. On Nov. 28, after being granted a 24-hour extension, the Tribe exceeded its goal with \$163,050 in shares sold. The final figure, taking into account the arrival of late mail, was a total of 6,548 shares for \$202,820 on December 5. The takeover was official on January 1, 1956, with Bush serving as club president and Kirby as vice president. Indianapolis joined the International League after the American Association disbanded following the 1962 season.

It was a memorable 1963 championship season for the Tribe, which secured its third straight title – including back-to-back American Association crowns in 1961 and 1962. But the Tribe was left out in the cold following the 1963 season when the IL reduced the league to eight teams. Indianapolis wound up in the Pacific Coast League where it would remain for five seasons (1964-68) until the American Association reorganized in 1969.

On June 1, 1967: Victory Field was purchased by the city from the estate of Norman Perry for \$300,000, later that season Victory Field was renamed Owen J. Bush Stadium in honor of club president Owen "Donie" Bush.

Indianapolis qualified for the playoffs five times from 1961-1978, losing twice in the first round (1961 and 1962) and three times in the championship series (1971, 1974 and 1978).

In 1982, Indianapolis finally broke through and captured its first league championship since 1963, winning the Eastern Division with a 75-61 record. The Tribe then defeated Western Division champion Omaha, managed by Joe Sparks, 4 games to 2 in the championship series.

July 28, 1983, marked another affiliation change for Indianapolis, when it was announced they had a verbal agreement with the Montreal Expos for 1984. As a Montreal affiliate, Indianapolis claimed back-to-back championships over Denver in 1986 and 1987 and overwhelmed Omaha 11-1 to capture its third straight league championship series in 1988.

In 1989, Indianapolis took home its fourth straight league title becoming the only team in American Association history to capture four straight league crowns.

In 1994, Manager Marc Bombard guided Indianapolis to the regular-season title with an 86-57 record. The Tribe then defeated Nashville 3 games to 1 in the league championship series, the fifth league title for Indianapolis in nine years (1986-94).

In the mid-90's, Indianapolis qualified for the playoffs in four consecutive seasons (1994-97), winning the league championship series in '94, losing in the championship series in 1996 and losing in the first round in 1995 and 1997.

July 3, 1996 marked the end of an era as Indianapolis fell to Nashville 14-8 in a wild final game at Bush Stadium. The ninth inning lasted nearly one hour as the Sounds scored seven runs and the Tribe came back to score four. The lights were turned out for the final time at 11:28 p.m., following a postgame ceremony that included removing home plate and taking it - via limousine - to Victory Field, the site of the new downtown stadium at Maryland and Washington streets.

July 11, 1996 was in turn a new beginning for baseball in Indianapolis as the Tribe fell to Oklahoma City 5-3 in the inaugural game at Victory Field, the new downtown stadium at Maryland and West streets, before an energized crowd of 14,667.

In 2000, The Tribe swept the table in its first year of affiliation with the Milwaukee Brewers, winning the West Division with an 81-63 record, the league championship series and then the Triple-A World Series in Las Vegas.

On July 11, 2001, A capacity crowd at Victory Field and a national television audience watched the Pacific Coast League All-Stars defeat the International League All-Stars 9-5. Outfielder Adam Dunn, then a 21-year-old prospect for the Cincinnati Reds, shined the brightest with two tape-measure home runs. His first blast, a two-run shot in the first inning, was a towering drive down the right-field line that landed on West Street, an estimated 452 feet from home plate.

Four years later, in the first year of a new affiliation with the Pittsburgh Pirates, Indianapolis right-hander Ian Snell tossed the first no-hitter at Victory Field, as the Tribe defeated Norfolk 4-0 on May 15, 2005. Snell came with one walk of a perfect game and struck out nine in recording the first solo nine-inning no-hitter for the Tribe since May 24, 1974, when right-hander Tom Carroll turned the trick at Omaha. 2005 also saw Indianapolis advance to the playoffs for the first time since 2000, claiming the wild card with a 78-66 record.

Indianapolis is still affiliated with the Pirates, heading into the 2009 season with former Tribe infielder Frank Kremlas (1993-96) returning as manager. There's more to come. •

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