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Karen O'Maxfield and Gary "Pops" Goldberg-O'Maxfield, driving forces behind bringing vintage baseball back to Hartford

Yesterday

Q. What's behind the effort to bring "Vintage Base Ball" from the Civil War era back to Hartford? Why now? How long of an effort has it been?

A. Vintage base ball has been played in Hartford since the 1990s but has never had a home field. A tournament over the 4th of July weekend was held in Bushnell Park for a handful of years and was popular with the public. However, there had never been any organized way of communicating to the public where and when games were played in the region. When the Bushnell Park tournaments ceased, the public was left without a vehicle through which to enjoy this living history activity.

The idea behind establishing a permanent home field for vintage base ball was conceived by three friends sitting on a patio one summer evening in 2008 drinking beer and talking base ball. We discussed what a good thing it could be to have a way to deliver games more regularly in the city. Through vintage base ball, Hartford's rich history could be illuminated; it would provide role models for youth; help to revitalize a neighborhood and promote tourism for our capitol city. Our ideal was to find a location near to where the original Hartford Base Ball Grounds was sited next to the Church of the Good Shepherd.

When we approached the Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon/Charter Oak Neighborhood, we learned that Linda Osten-a true visionary, city planner and resident of the neighborhood-cited vintage base ball as part of the economic growth within the NRZ and had it written into CSS/CON's 2007 Strategic Plan. That moved our concept from the abstract into a real possibility. We began working with CSS/CON and the City of Hartford to establish a dedicated field. We were offered an undeveloped field in Colt Park at the corner of Hendricxsen Avenue and Curcombe Street. The fly in the ointment was the nine outdated light poles that remained from when the field had been used for football practice.

Through the winter of '08-'09 we worked to find a way to get the poles removed while we began incorporating as a nonprofit organization; scheduling teams from the region to play one another; and making contact with various schools to talk about the education component of our program. The poles came down literally five days before our first scheduled game in April of 2009. Because things were touch-and-go for a while with the poles, we didn't promote during the preseason. Nevertheless, word of mouth traveled quickly once games began and before long, we had an amazing first season underway. It wasn't long before we were receiving phone calls from out of state-one fellow from Pennsylvania wanted to plan his weekend getaway around a vintage game. The program mushroomed overnight.

Q. Some of your plans include a baseball stadium at Colt Meadows that is historical in perspective and ties into plans for making the area a national park. How crucial is federal designation to your efforts? Can Vintage Base Ball thrive without the federal project surviving?

A. Vintage base ball can absolutely thrive without the designation but we're working with the Coltsville Ad Hoc Committee and Congressman Larson's office to promote Coltsville. We believe our program will provide significantly towards the "visitor experience" which is one of the requirements of a national park designation. We feel that strongly the designation will occur. When it does, to have an authentic 19th century ballfield with grandstand established within a national park would be a first-that exists nowhere else in the country.

Such a facility would also be historically accurate for the neighborhood. In 1874, a ball field with grandstands was built next to the Church of the Good Shepherd on land leased by Elizabeth Colt to Morgan Bulkeley, then the owner of the Hartford Dark Blues Base Ball Club. It seated approximately 2,000 people and was considered to be the finest ball park in the country at that time. Base ball really is part of the Colt story and is not often given a voice.

Q. What kind of corporate support do you envision for vintage base ball going forward? Do you see strong ties to the insurance industry again?

A. We see our effort as community-based and hope to have support from businesses of all sizes. There is no demographic to vintage base ball-it appeals across the entire spectrum, from young kids to seniors; women and men; all ethnic cultures. This goes for team members as well as spectators.

We would love to see a return to the model of teams from different employers that existed in the late 19th and early 20th century in Hartford: insurance, factory, banking, school, police department, fire department and others. We would welcome any business or organization that would like to form a team as part of the Coltsville Vintage Base Ball League and underwrite the cost of uniforms and equipment for their team. That would grow the program tremendously.

Q. What activities do you have planned for Vintage Base Ball this summer? Where can people go to watch games? And, how will they understand the game?

The Colt Meadows Invitational will be held on Decoration Day weekend (May 29 and 30 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.). It will feature teams from Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island who will demonstrate both 1860s (underhand pitching/no gloves) and 1880s (overhand pitching/lightweight gloves) style of play. "Babe" Ruth will make an appearance on Saturday with giveaways for kids from the National Baseball Hall of Fame; Mark Twain will toss out the first pitch on Sunday. On both days, there'll be historic talks, kids' workshops and vendors of 19th century books and base ball items. Of course, we'll have our very own Connecticut-made Handlebar Hooch, Kayo's Diet Cola, Dead Red and Pop's Pop vintage soda for sale.

Two of our league teams-the Charter Oak and the Nutmeg Vintage BBC-will play one another during Willimantic Victorian Days on June 6 in Jillson Square; on June 10 we'll be doing a vbb clinic sponsored by the New Britain Downtown District; on August 22, two 1880s teams, the Hartford Senators and the Simsbury Taverneers, will play a game at historic Muzzy Field as part of the City of Bristol's 225th anniversary; and, of course, there's a whole season's worth of games to be played at the Hartford Base Ball Grounds at Colt Meadows right here in Hartford.

At each of our games, we have a program for sale that includes rules of the era, jargon from the day and information on our teams and our historic location. The entire season schedule can be found at our website: friendsofvintagebaseball.org