

Characters of the Kitty League



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Victor "Deacon" Delmore was pitching for the hometown Hopkinsville Hoppers in a Kitty League baseball game against Union City. With runner George Valine in scoring position at second base, the lean right-hander was bearing down, preparing to deliver from the stretch position.

A rabbit came scampering out of right field, raced back of shortstop and headed toward the left field line. One of his infielders must have alerted Delmore because the pitcher suddenly backed off the mound, wheeled and threw wildly at the rabbit, not coming close. As the startled left-fielder raced to retrieve the ball in the far corner, Valine circled the bases.

Hoptown protested and the umpire sympathized with the Hoppers, sending Valine back to second. Union City's manager, who was coaching at first base, took issue, asking the umpire, "What rule book have you got that says anything about throwing a ball like that ... at a rabbit or anything else?" "Well, I don't find anything about it in the rule book," the umpire responded, "but the Kitty League's a character and I want it to stay this way. If a man feels like throwing at a rabbit, by damn, he ought to have a right to do it. You shut up and get yourself back to first base."

A baseball purist might question the ruling on that play, which occurred during a hot, muggy August afternoon in 1938, but the ump was right about one thing: the Kitty League had a character of its own. This paper will attempt to capture that unique character through the memories and memorabilia of three men — members in their own right of the league's vast cast of characters. Joe Dorris, retired publisher and columnist for the Kentucky New Era, covered the Hoptown Hoppers for many years and served as the team's official scorekeeper. Leo Wilson, a Kitty League historian and retired broadcaster, did play-by-play of Hopper games for radio station WHOP. And Tommy Gates, retired businessman and former Hopkinsville mayor, was a star player for the Hoppers during the league's last years.

This does not pretend to be a definitive history of the Kitty League and, frankly, what limited published research that exists is contradictory. But some background is necessary to set the stage.

It is only fitting that this story be told from a Hopkinsville perspective because, believe it or not, this city, which now seems so distant from baseball, was the heart and soul of the league from its birth in 1903 to its eventual demise in 1954. The league had no more than four presidents during the 51 years and two of them — representing all couple of those years — were from Hopkinsville.

The father of the Kitty League was physician Frank Bassett, a legendary Christian County character and longtime county court clerk. Dr. Bassett, who had umpired in the minor leagues while attending medical school and who had formed a baseball team at old South Kentucky College on Belmont Hill, decided to organize a Class D minor league to serve cities in western Kentucky, western Tennessee, southern Indiana and/or southeastern Illinois. The "KIT" initials of the participating states coined the league's name.

Joining Hopkinsville as charter members were Owensboro, Henderson and Paducah, Ky.; Clarksville and Jackson, Tenn.; Cairo, Ill.; and Vincennes, Ind. Over the years, cities came and went as the Kitty would fold and reorganize — or, as writers were wont to glean, use up another of its nine lives. Union City and

Lexington, Tenn., would later join the league, as would Fulton, Mayfield, Madisonville and, briefly, Central City, Ky. The little-known town of Portageville, Mo., has the distinction of being the only non-KIT team in the league, participating briefly during the 1935 reorganization.

Hoptown played home games at three locations over the years. The Moguls, as the team was called originally in honor of the city's famous Mogul wagons, played at Athletic Park at the current intersection of 18th and Walnut streets. East 18th Street Park is part of the old diamond, which was built prior to the railroad cut.

Later renamed the Hoppers, the team moved to Mercer Park, adjacent to Little River on what is now West Ninth Street, sometime in the late teens or early '20s. During a 1935 reorganization, Dorris recalls that Hopkinsville didn't decide to rejoin the league until just before the season started and had only a week to rebuild the rotting grandstand at Mercer Park. On opening day, he said, early arrivals were forced to get out their seats so that carpenters, who had been working night and day, could finish nailing down the wooden bleachers. Gates remembers home plate at Mercer Park being located on the site of the current Farm Bureau Building. A home run over the short right-field fence, he said, usually ended up in the river.

The Hoppers moved to a new ballfield at the end of Kentucky Avenue when the league reformed for the last time in 1946 following a furlough for the war. Kentucky Park was razed for a housing development a few years after the Kitty breathed its last.

From the beginning, the league had a reputation far and wide for being competitive and just plain rough and tumble. One historian chronicled that one season-ending meeting to divvy up the profits erupted in a fistfight. Dorris said he was at Chicago's old State Lake Theater in the '20s when he encountered two ladies arguing baseball rules. "You couldn't get away with that, even in the Kitty League," he overheard one exclaim.

Violence associated with the dark tobacco Black Patch wars were attributed to all the Kentucky teams except Paducah withdrawing from the new league by 1906 — one of only a couple of short periods when Hopkinsville wasn't represented. According to Filson Club historian Trace Kirkwood, the league revived in 1910 under a Vincennes man. Bassett apparently regained control quickly because the league, except for a two-year period between 1914-16, operated continuously through the 1922 season, with "the Doc" as president. He retained his leadership through various league fits and starts in the '20s, up to and including the 1935 reorganization. When he was ousted by the owners in a surprise vote at the 1936 league meeting, Doc was none too happy. Joe Dorris remembers it well because he was there:

"They were going to have the spring meeting so Doc asks me, 'Do you want to drive down to Fulton tonight?' And I says 'Yeah,' and so I got in there, he drove a 100 mph and I got down on the floorboard.

"Well, we got down there. Doc apparently didn't know anything about it so it surprised him. He had organized the league and had been president and everything, and spent all of his life's money on the league. So the first motion they made was to get'em a new president. The meeting was just under way and they elect J.E. Hannaby of Union City. And Doc said, 'Let's go home.' I said the meeting's just started. He said, 'It's over as far as I'm concerned.'"

Although Bassett retained a lifelong love of the game (Wilson and Gates remember as teen-agers that Doc attended community socials and provided free baseballs for recreation play), he never attended another Kitty League game. "He said it was because he didn't like night baseball," Dorris recalled, "but I don't think

there was a bit of truth in it. He just got his feelings hurt, and he was just like a child, you know."

Hannaby's tenure as president was brief and disorganized. The league turned in 1937 to another Hopkinsville man with experience in public office to run the show. Former Mayor Shelby Peace held the reins through 1942 when the war stopped play, supervised the 1946 reorganization and remained in charge for the duration of the league's existence.

The Kitty League produced its fair share of future Major League stars, starting with the legendary catcher and manager George "Gabby" Street. Bassett discovered Street and signed him to play with the original Moguls for a reported \$35 a month. In the early days, players helped with what needed to be done around the ballpark. They sold tickets, cleaned the grandstands and did necessary carpentry work. One of Street's duties was to spray bleachers with insecticide to kill mosquitoes. Old-timers said he would charge fans a nickel each for a personal spraying.

Street is best remembered for catching a baseball dropped from the top of the Washington Monument. But he also was an All-Star player and an even better manager. He led the famous St. Louis Cardinals "Gashouse Gang" to a World Series crown and later directed the St. Louis Browns to their only world championship — thus holding the rare distinction of managing a series winner in both the American and National leagues.

Other Major Leaguers who got their start in the Kitty included Red Schoendienst, Vern Stephens, Bob Buhl and Chuck Tanner, who gained his fame as a manager. Slugger Rudy York managed in the Kitty. And Wilson recalls watching future New York Yankee shortstop Tony Kubek toiling in the outfield for Owensboro in the early '50s.

Vern Stephens, who went on to play in the same Boston Red Sox outfield with Hall of Famer Ted Williams, hit .361, with 30 homers and 123 RBIs, for the Mayfield Browns in 1939. Those robust numbers would have been even higher except for a typically strange Kitty League play. At Mayfield's park, a power line was strung 50 feet off the ground across the infield between first and third bases. Stephens came to bat against visiting Bowling Green with the bases loaded in a game-winning situation. He took a mighty swing at the first pitch and the crack of the bat said home run. However, the towering blast struck the power line and caromed directly into the glove of the shortstop, who promptly stepped on second base to force the runner heading to third and then tagged the man coming from first for a rally-killing triple play.

Besides Gabby Street, the most famous future big-leaguer to play for Hopkinsville was Dusty Rhodes, the pinch-hitting star of the 1954 World Series who was discovered by the Hoppers while playing softball. Rhodes hit clutch homers to win two games for Leo Durocher's New York Giants in their upset of the powerful Cleveland Indians. Durocher reportedly disliked Rhodes but was forced to use him because he was the team's only left-handed hitter among the substitutes. Dusty never played professionally again following his Series heroics. It was the bottle, not lack of talent, that did him in. Not only could Rhodes hit the ball out of sight, he had a shotgun for an arm. Hopper fans recall one day when Dusty threw a ball from the base of the center field wall, some 360 feet from home plate, that cleared the Kentucky Park grandstands and landed in the parking lot.

Tommy Gates is not the only living Hopkinsville resident to play for the Hoppers. Pete Harbold was a southpaw pitcher for the '53 and '54 teams. And the recently deceased "Dancin'" Pete Peterson was a slugging star outfielder for Fulton City in

his younger days. One of Peterson's claims to fame, among many, according to Leo Wilson, was the distinction of hitting the shortest double in Kitty League history. Infields were a long way from the manicured works of art we see today; many of them were "skinned," meaning they had no grass at all. Rain-soaked grounds seldom stopped play, however, because crews merely soaked the infield with gasoline and set it afire. The result was a thin layer of crusty dirt on top of the mud. It was on such a treated diamond that Peterson took a vicious cut at a pitch only to chop the ball right in front of the plate. The resulting overspin on the baseball caused it to bury in the mud underneath the dry topsoil and disappear. While the frustrated pitcher and catcher were trying to find the submerged spheroid, Pete danced all the way to second base.

Gates, who was a high school phenom at Lacy, believes he would have made it to the majors as a catcher had he not torn the rotator cuff in his right, throwing shoulder while sliding head-first into base during a minor league game. He was signed by Branch Rickey's brother, Frank, in 1946 and advanced to the Double-A level in the Brooklyn Dodgers organization, being twice invited by the parent club to spring training in Vero Beach, Fla. Only because the Dodgers released him from his contract was Tommy free to play for the Hoppers in 1950 and 1951 when he returned to Hopkinsville following his injury. Gates said Brooklyn offered him a minor league managing job. "But I was only 21 and didn't have the temperament at the time to be a manager," he confessed. Not only was he a passionate, hard-nosed player, Tommy also admits to being an inveterate umpire baiter with a propensity for being tossed out of games. However, he recalls one game in which his team was absorbing a terrible shellacking on a extremely hot, humid afternoon when, despite his best efforts, an umpire stubbornly refused to take the bait and banish him to the cool recesses of the locker room. After Tommy had made numerous loud protests, punctuated by profanity, on ball and strike calls, the umpire, while calmly brushing off the plate, informed him: "You might as well quit trying to get yourself thrown out. If I'm going to have to stay out here in this heat and call the game, you're damn well going to stay and catch it."

Gates also questions Joe Dorris' prowess as a Kitty League scorekeeper, at least during one memorable at-bat. "I hit a line drive that tore the webbing out of the shortstop's glove and one-hopped the left-field wall. Joe ruled the play an error."

Although play in the Kitty was, for the most part, competitive and skillful (Gates said Class D was at least the equivalent of today's Class A baseball), the league is remembered most fondly for its colorful characters.

High on the list had to be the late Billy Goff, a prominent Hopkinsville grocer who doubled as this city's answer to P.T. Barnum. Goff joined the Kitty League in 1936 — at the urging of Doc Bassett — as owner of the struggling former Portageville, Mo., franchise, which had been forced in midseason to move to Owensboro. When the Kitty came back after the war, Goff bought the Hopkinsville franchise. The first thing he did was tear down Mercer Park and build Kentucky Park out of the same lumber. "The old park was down behind a bluff and more people stood on the bluff to see the games than paid," Billy told Bill Ladd's "Almanac" newspaper column, "There is little future in such an operation."

So Goff controlled the whole baseball shebang in Hopkinsville — the park, the players, the equipment and the concessions. Billy was especially proud of his gaudy red and white team bus, which had a huge baseball and the team name painted on it. He drove it himself on many road trips. Billy also loved to wheel and deal players. It was Goff who talked Gates into signing with the Hoppers. Tommy said Billy paid him \$175 a month on paper and another \$600 under the table

because the hometown hero helped draw fans.

Goff was a consummate promoter, who switched to wrestling in the off-season. Leo Wilson said bald-headed Billy sported a permanent knot on his cranium — the result of a female grappler gonking him with a hob-nailed shoe, the wrestling footwear of choice during that era, while he was subbing for a no-show referee one night. It was one of Billy's baseball promotions — a wrestling bear that performed between games of a doubleheader — that produced one of Joe Dorris' favorite Kitty League stories.

"John Henry Southa (the Hopkinsville High School football coach) was managing the Hoppers. John Henry was a little slow-witted; you could talk him into anything. He asked, 'Somebody's really gonna wrestle a bear?' Well, we really don't have anybody yet, we told him, but it's usually the custom of the manager to do the wrestling. John Henry said he'd never wrestled a bear but if that was the custom, to be a good manager, he'd go ahead and do it.

"So here comes this man with this about a 500-pound bear on a chain. And so Southa and the bear met at home plate. The bear had been coached enough to know what he was supposed to do. So when John Henry got over there and started acting like this (wrestling pose), the bear knocked him 15 feet. Well, the bear was used to that being all there was to it, but he hadn't met John Southa. John Henry goes back over to the bear and he makes a flying tackle. And they began rolling around, first the bear on top and then Southa. This owner of the bear, an Italian, comes running over and starts screaming, 'That man is killing my bear; he's killing my bear. Pull him off.'

"In later years, that was one of Southa's favorite stories. He became something of a public speaker. ... He would embellish that bear story, telling everyone that the bear followed him home. I really don't think that part was true."

Joe's list of Kitty characters is limitless. One of them was Mike Power, a player-manager for Bowling Green. During a game against the Hoppers, Power beat out a bunt but was forced to slide into first base, his false teeth falling out into the dust. Not wanting to put the soiled choppers back in his mouth, he slipped them into his hip pocket. The next batter hit a grounder and poor Mike had to slide into second. "He jumped about this high," Dorris recalls. He had been bitten by his own teeth.

Then there was Hopper first baseman Pete Pettigrew, who chased a towering pop fly that seemed to disappear in the stratosphere and lunged to spear what he thought was the ball, only to find a bird in his glove. Dorris said Hopkinsville argued that the batter should be out because Pettigrew caught what came down. However, the umpire canceled the play, saying "There's no rule about a man making an out by catching a bird." No one knows what happened to the "fowl" ball.

Red Neederhauser, who played for the Hoppers in the early '50s, was a typical pitcher in at least one regard. He worried more about his hitting than his won-lost percentage. Dorris recalls that Neederhauser had gone to bat 47 times without a hit during the season when, during a mid-August game, he "stumbled, fumbled and rolled" the ball past the pitcher and was safe on first. He wandered off the base several steps and the pitcher immediately picked him off by a country mile. When he came over to the bench, the manager asked, "Why in the hell were you just standing there as if there was something on your mind?" "There was," Neederhauser answered. "I was figuring up my batting average. What is one-for-47?"

Gates remembers Neederhauser as a wild, hard-throwing pitcher and why the Hoppers signed him. He was pitching against Hopkinsville one rainy night in Fulton when he beamed Hopper Joe DeMassey, almost killing him. While team

members were visiting the still-bleeding DeMassey in the hospital the next day, Billy Goff informed them that Fulton had released Neederhauser after the game. He asked Gates if the Hoppers should buy his contract. "I said, 'Hell yes, 'I sure don't want to bat against him.'"

The Hoppers captured one of their few pennants in 1938 and were preparing to meet Jackson in the postseason playoffs. The morning of the opening game dawned unseasonably cold and, when veteran pitcher Jesse Webb stepped outside to greet the frigid day, he pronounced the weather unfit for baseball and refused to play. When Shelby Peace informed him he had no choice, Webb responded that, by God, if he played, he would wear an overcoat. Sure enough, when he was called in to relieve midway through the game, he pitched two innings dressed like an Eskimo — presumably cooling off enemy hitters in the process.

Elmer Wedding was a Union City pitcher, whom Dorris described as a "skinny screwball left-hander, if there ever was one, with about a 1-inch waist." While fielding a bunt against the Hoppers one day, Wedding's cap fell off. He retrieved it as the batter scampered safely into first. Wedding's manager ran from the dugout screaming, "You slim-waisted SOB. Don't you know you don't have to have a cap on your head to throw a man out?"

Intelligence was never a prerequisite for a Kitty League player. Dorris said he was covering a Hopper game in Clarksville when he noticed the home team's manager, Harley Voss, who coached third, was using red and green flags to direct base runners. Asked why after the game, Voss explained simply that his players didn't know what hand signals meant.

Mental incompetence wasn't confined to the players. Sometimes it carried over to the league office. Dorris said the Kitty paid him for 10 years to prepare its schedule before Peace decided one season to save a buck — literally because Joe's fee was \$1 — and turn the duties over to Owensboro manager Hugh Wise, father of former major league pitcher Rick Wise. "About two days before the season opened," Joe recalls, "Hugh called up Shelby and said, 'You'd better get somebody to make the schedule. I've been working on it for a month. I'm way up into July and I ain't ever got Jackson out of town.'"

Dorris said that one year the league owners insisted that every team play three games at home and then three away. "I tried to tell them if you did that the teams that started on the road would never get to play each other. But they wouldn't listen to me."

It wasn't the schedule makers or managerial ineptitude that finally did the Kitty in in 1954, however. According to Tommy Gates and Leo Wilson, it was escalating player salaries, the institution of signing bonuses — which drained the money available for minor league teams — and declining attendance because of the advent of television, air conditioning and drive-in movies.

But has the Kitty purred its last? An Indiana man, Michael N. Seikal, president of The Quad States-Heartland League, announced just last year that he wanted to revive the KIT as a Class A rookie league if he could find interested cities. Gates, Wilson and Dorris all predict that Seikal will fail if for no other reason than the fact that the competitive entertainment which killed the Kitty in the first place not only persists but has magnified greatly.

They might also add that baseball itself has changed. Sanitized stadiums with domes, artificial turf, exploding scoreboards and plastic seats have replaced those fan-cozy ballparks that had individuality and charm. Greed has replaced love of the game. The 1995 Major League season is in jeopardy because billionaire owners and millionaire players can't decide how to divvy up the take. Will these negotia-

tions erupt into a fistfight? Probably not. Because like the Kitty League, America's pastime has lost its character and its characters. Baseball and the nation are the worse for it.