

Oak Ridge's professional baseball teams – The Oak Ridge Bombers, part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 19, 2009)

The last *Historically Speaking* column concluded in the midst of Ted Yakimchick's column, *SPEAKING of SPORTS*. He had just chided a Knoxville sportswriter for his article covering the professional baseball team, the Oak Ridge Bombers. Now the Oak Ridge sportswriter turns his attention to the local fans and in no uncertain terms gives them much the same raking over the coals.

"Yak" concludes with, "Let this be said here and now: This column is standing behind the Bombers, lock, stock and barrel, come you-know-what and high water. The town needs a pro ball club it's to take its place with other communities in the vicinity. Towns smaller than Oak Ridge have flourished with both professional and amateur ball."

"And while we're on the subject of our thoughts on the pro ball club, here's a suggestion to those self-interested individuals who think Oak Ridge should stick to amateur baseball only. Get off the dime, fellows. This town is bigger than you think it is. Stop riding and belittling the pro club. They deserve the same chance you've had for the past four years."

Obviously there was tension between amateurs and professionals in Oak Ridge, huh.

In reading the research collected by Jack Bailey to help me prepare this story on Oak Ridge's professional baseball team, I also happened upon documentation of Oak Ridge's earliest ball team. It was a softball team.

The 1943 team sponsored by the USED Sunshine Fund was the first Oak Ridge team fielded and played in the Knoxville league. The abbreviation of the sponsor "USED" was used as if the author assumed this abbreviation needed no explanation. Unless it is the Special Engineer Detachment, I don't have a clue. Even then, what does the "U" stand for? Readers, do you have any idea?

Ted Yakimchick said the team was formed BEFORE the town was named Oak Ridge! He named the following players on that original USED softball team, "Members of the old team still at Oak ridge can be counted on one hand...Bill (Clem) Hatfield, now with AIT (I am sure that acronym meant something at the time), Benedict (Nature Boy) Rowland, now a Carbider, Frank Blakely, John Cardwell, and the writer..."

"Yak" went on to say, "That 1943 softball season definitely took its toll among the aforementioned Oak Ridgers. Hatfield hasn't played softball since then, having retired in favor of poker; Rowland has since taken to coaching girls' basketball teams; and Blakely, Cardwell and the author are barely holding up in slow pitch ball...time marches on!"

Now back to the first professional baseball team in Oak Ridge. The Bombers continued to struggle to gain acceptance and fan support. A telling indicator of the typical Oak Ridge attitude that may even remain today is found in the following observation from a newspaper column, "Just out of curiosity we asked several dyed-in-the-wool baseball fans why Oak Ridgers weren't giving more support to the Bombers.

The answers all seemed to have the same ring, which indicated there might be more truth than fiction in 'em. Oak Ridgers, says the man in the bleacher, have had nearly everything they've wanted for practically nothing all these years, and when it comes time to pay for something for a change they pull the zipper on the pocketbook." Insightful, huh!

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On June 6, 1948, the Oak Ridge Times (having replaced the Oak Ridge Journal), reported on an unusual home run, "The fence surrounding Oak wood Park will now provide a yardstick for measuring the prodigiousness of home run clouts. To the best of our knowledge and memory, the most distant blow ever witnessed at the Oakwood lot came off the bat of Ron Northey, chunky ex-Philadelphia Phillie now with the St. Louis Cards, when he appeared with the Moore General Hospital team several years ago. There used to be a scoreboard in deep right field, and the last time the Northey smash was seen it was beyond the board and still gaining altitude. Someone said the ball landed in the Clinch (river) just below the Elza railroad bridge" (Now, Jack Bailey observed that this little exaggeration amounted to a stretch of the home run distance of about two miles!)

There was another renowned home run hitter that Jack Bailey told me about when we were discussing Ron Northey. Like Ron Northey, this hitter was also a left-handed power hitter. However, he had a most unusual name, Bill "Swish" Nicholson. He was called "Swish" because of his habit of quickly swinging his bat just before the pitch.

Another interesting note about the Bombers was the manager, Hobe Brummitt. He sparked the ire of fans and often seemed to be into it with the umpires. In Newport, fans threw pop bottles at him. It was said that none of the other teams' players or the other Mountain States League cities had any love for ole Hobe. He had been active in baseball for 25 years when he came to manage the Bombers.

An example of Hobe getting thrown out of the game, and then even out of the ball park happened when Umpire "Red Russell was said to have "added color to the game" when in the seventh inning he ejected Bomber manager Hobe Brummitt from the ball game. The trouble all started when catcher Fernandez caught a pop foul and when relaying the ball to Pinky Doyle, dropped it. Umpire Russell made the decision that Fernandez dropped the ball and the batter was not out. Russell tossed Brummitt off the playing field and later out of the park.

By June 9, 1948, barely three months after the team officially came to Oak Ridge, news had it that the Bombers, even while leading the league, might pull out of Oak Ridge because of "financial difficulties." Read that "low gate!" The largest audience to see them play was 800. Oak Ridge then had a population of 35,000 and was the largest city in the Mountain State League.

By June 10, 1948, while not yet officially revealed, the scuttlebutt on the street had it that the Bombers would be leaving Oak Ridge even before another home game. They were rumored to be transferring to Hazard, Kentucky, a town with a population of only 15,000.

When officially announced, Bombers President bob Broome explained, "Our gate receipts have been far below the minimum required to support a professional baseball team...and we felt justified in making this move."

Broome further commented that he knew the team would have a tough time in Oak Ridge as the amateur clique had tried hard to keep them out of Oak Ridge and also Oak Ridgers had a background of four years of free, or dirt cheap, at most, admissions to athletic events at Oak Ridge. So he was not surprised that the effort to bring a professional baseball team to Oak Ridge had not succeeded in the long run.

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Old "Yak" laid into Oak Ridgers in his column of June 18, 1948, when he said, "The plight of the Oak Ridge Bombers is a good example of what governmental subsidy leads to. The Bombers, as a free enterprise movement, can't compete with the Santa Claus parties the Government is sponsoring at Oak Ridge in order to keep the A-bomb makers contented. Perhaps if the baseball team remained at Oak Ridge, there would have come a Government plan to pay the Oak Ridge 'fans' regular wages for nine innings and time and a half for all extra innings, and double time for Sunday games. Oak Ridgers then would fill the park."

Thus ended the first attempt to bring a professional baseball team to Oak Ridge, but it was tried again a few years later with a team named the Oak Ridge Pioneers...Ah, but that is yet another *Historically Speaking* story!

Before we get to the Oak Ridge Pioneers, I want to tell you about a modern-day Oak Ridge Bombers team. When part one of this series was published last Wednesday, Greta Ownby sent me an e-mail telling me about this team saying, "They are an adorable group of nine year old boys (yes, one of them is my son!). We named this tournament/travel team the Oak Ridge Bombers in honor of the team you wrote about in today's column."

So, next week I will tell you that story and then we will look at the Oak Ridge Pioneers.

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Hobe Brummitt as pictured in the Oak Ridge Times of June 6, 1948

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An Ed Westcott image in The Oak Ridge Times of March 11, 1948, records the decision to take the Oak Ridge Bombers to Hazard, Kentucky. The original caption read: "They don't work here anymore. Bill Luttrell, treasurer, Eddie friar, vice president, and Bob Broome, president, with the pen, are shown making final arrangements to move their Bombers, pro baseball team, from Oak Ridge to Hazard, Kentucky. The reason for leaving was given as lack of support from the fans. The team will not play in Oak Ridge again. (Times photo by westcott)."



Baseball card featuring Ron Northey, power hitter who played an exhibition game in Oak Ridge and knocked the longest home run in memory at Oakland Park, later Yearwood Park.