

# Show Some Ginger!

Huzzah for Vintage Base Ball in Texas

## Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

For Texas Rangers and Houston Astros fans, April brings the sweetest of sounds—the first crack of the bat at the new baseball season’s first home game. For a decidedly different group of fans, a new season for vintage “base ball”—as the game was spelled in 1860—sounds just as sweet...something like this:

“Striker to the line!” (Batter up!) yells the Blind Tom (umpire) to begin the match (game).

The first striker (batter) picks his favorite willow (bat) and saunters up to the dish (home plate). A few feet back stands the behind (catcher), wearing no glove, face mask, or chest protector. The striker outstretches his willow showing where he wants the apple (base ball) delivered by the bare-handed hurler (pitcher). Several encouraging cranks (fans) yell to the hurler, “Show some ginger!” (Play it smart!).

The hurler’s underhanded pitch arches to the appointed spot, then—SMACK!—a sky ball (high fly) drifts over the out-stretched bare hands of the rover (shortstop) and the midfielder (center fielder).

Ballists (players) from the striker’s nine (team) scream “Nicely struck!” (Good hit!) and “Leg it!” (Run it out!).

The apple bounds to the edge of the grounds (ball field), as the striker takes his first, second, and third, then steps on the dish, completing a four baser (home run).

“Permission to tally (score) an ace (run),” the breathless ballist asks the talleykeeper (scorekeeper), then rings the tally bell, scoring the ace.

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“Huzzah! (Hurray!)” roars the crowd.

America’s national pastime had a different ring to it 150 years ago. But for vintage base ball aficionados, the archaic jargon echoes the origins of game—a more courteous, gentlemanly amateur sport played by farmers, merchants, and soldiers for recreation and community pride. Across Texas and the nation, a growing cadre of enthusiasts preserve the ancestral game’s spirit, rules, and jargon by playing on low-key, high-fun vintage base ball nines (teams).

Last year, several nines formed the fledgling Texas Vintage Base Ball League, which coordinates games and tournaments played by 1860 rules. (Some clubs also play by 1880s rules. By the 1890s, the rules were essentially the same as today.) Although women ballists would have been taboo in 1860, both men and women, aged 18 and up, now play the vintage game.

The new league’s commissioner is base ball guru, Wendel Dickason, who studies the sport (and has formed an ad hoc team, the Cartwrights) in Cedar Hill. I caught up with Wendel last season at George Ranch Historical Park in Richmond, where he served as the Blind Tom for the annual President’s Cup Vintage Base Ball Festival. (Montgomery College in Conroe hosts the 2008 festival. See *essentials*, page **XX**.)

George Ranch proffered the perfect 19<sup>th</sup> century setting. Two historic homes—the 1899 George Ranch House and the Victorian 1880s JHP Davis mansion—served as backdrops for two grounds. Chalked foul lines met at a round, flat metal dish, and hay-filled canvas bags served as bases. Eager to play, ballists from five nines fidgeted on hard wooden benches dressed in replica period uniforms. Some tossed an 1860-style apple (somewhat larger and softer than today’s ball) or took swings with replicated bats (heavier with thicker handles than current bats).

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Dressed in a dapper red cravat and black vest with gold watch fob, Wendel photographed each team with an antique view camera (photography is his second hobby). Then he clued me in on base ball history and vintage rules.

Contrary to historical evidence, legend holds that Civil War hero Abner Doubleday invented baseball. Actually, Alexander Joy Cartwright, Jr. wrote rules in 1845 for his New York Knickerbockers Base Ball Club. These rules established the game's basic format—including the diamond-shaped field, three strikes and three outs, fair and foul territory, plus many ground rules. Cartwright also nixed "soaking," a past practice of zinging the runner with the ball to make an out. With the addition of the 90-foot base path and nine-inning game, the newly-formed National Association of Base Ball Players adopted the rules in 1860.

Base ball probably made its Texas debut about that same time. The Houston Base Ball Club organized in 1861, and during the Civil War, Union troops played the game in prisoner-of-war camps in the Lone Star State. Likewise, campaigning Confederate soldiers from Texas encountered the game and brought it home after the war.

The 1860s game differs delightfully from the modern game.

You can make a out by catching the apple on the fly *or* after one bounce—a pain-saving rule for ballists who play 1860s style, bare-handed without gloves. Hurlers pitch underhanded from 45 feet away, and the Blind Tom calls no balls or strikes (though he may do so if the striker unduly delays the game). The goal of vintage base ball is to keep the ball in play, allowing a lively game, rather than a tedious pitching duel.

No sliding into base—too undignified for 1860. No over-running first base—sometimes overruled out of concern for older, less agile ballists. And because there's only one umpire, the Blind Tom may call a play after seeking advice from ballists or cranks—old-fashioned honesty is expected.

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Wendel dutifully explained these and other rules to the small gathering of President's Cup spectators. Then each of the nines played two action-packed games. Four clubs were members of the Texas Vintage Base Ball League—the Richmond Giants (the George Ranch home club), the Conroe-area Montgomery College Saw Dogs, the Farmers Branch Mustangs, and the Boerne White Sox. A fifth club, called the Houston Revolvers, was a pick-up group of interested ballists. (Other active nines include the Abilene-area Buffalo Gap Vintage Base Ball Club, the Fort Concho/San Angelo Vintage Base Ball Club, and the Buck and Breck Vintage Base Ball Club of Irving.)

The Montgomery College Saw Dogs cinched the tournament's championship game (a 13 to 12 win over the Farmers Branch Mustangs) on a thrilling four baser by Saw Dogs slugger, "Joltin' Joe" Garza of The Woodlands. (Ballists typically assume catchy nicknames.)

The Saw Dogs grew out of a Montgomery College leisure learning class on baseball history taught by Michael "Molasses" Hickey. Three years ago, Michael and fellow ballists organized the President's Cup to demonstrate how the game once was played.

Last year's host team, the Richmond Giants, embodies local history from the 1890s. That's when a third-generation member of the George Ranch family, Bud Davis, played base ball at St. Edward's College in Austin (now St. Edward's University), then joined the Richmond community team. The Giants uniform bears the Richmond "R" in his honor at tournaments and a game held each Fourth of July at the living history site.

Two West Texas living history sites play out their own local base ball history.

Each year since the mid-1980s, Fort Concho National Historic Landmark in San Angelo has suited up cavalry and infantry re-enactors to play an 1880s-rule game. That period coincides with the fort's heyday. Garbed in replica period military clothing, the soldier-ballists

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play on perhaps the state's most historic ball field—a military parade ground dating to the Frontier West!

Buffalo Gap Historic Village, near Abilene, fields two teams formed four years ago by Bob “Bonecrusher” Wettemann, then director of McMurry University's Public History Program (now a visiting professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy). The Buffalo Gap Chips personify rural players, and the Abilene 407s role-play a city team. Their faux rivalry re-enacts an 1880s political battle in which the Taylor County seat moved from the small community of Buffalo Gap to Abilene. “Vintage base ball is about recreation,” says “Bonecrusher” Bob, “but also about having fun and exercising a love of history.”

That double-play (fun and history) proved a game winner at the Farmers Branch Historical Park. “It's been a great living history outlet for us,” explains education director Barbara “Salty” Judkins. “Our uniforms are even replicas of those worn by a Farmers Branch team in 1908.”

Vintage base ball became a “Field of Dreams” for Kristy Watson, president of the Agricultural Heritage Museum in Boerne. After discovering the sport at a living history conference, she ran an ad in the local newspaper on the notion “form a team, and they will come.” Come they did, suiting up in Boerne White Sox uniforms based on a 1914 local team (Kristy even sewed the pants herself).

One local recruit was Jay “Beans” Avers, who played ball as a younger man and, now in his 50s, wanted to revisit the sport (a typical scenario for vintage ballists). “My kids had never seen me play, so this is a good way to do that in a low-stress sort of way,” Jay told me at the end of the President's Cup. “To see the looks on their faces when I score an ace is the greatest feeling in the world.”

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Huzzah for Jay! And huzzah for all the ballists of Texas...who play for fun, recreation, and the love of the game...and who proudly show some ginger!

RANDY MALLORY of Tyler liked vintage base ball so much that he shot and produced a short video of his experience at the President's Cup. You can view it at [www.texashighways.com](http://www.texashighways.com) (Featured Video section) or on his website, [www.RandyMallory.com](http://www.RandyMallory.com).

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### essentials TEXAS VINTAGE BASE BALL

"Base Ball" is the 1860s spelling of America's national pastime. Accordingly, several Texas teams play by 19<sup>th</sup> century rules at games and tournaments throughout the year. Contact the following community teams for times and places. For more information, check out the Texas Vintage Base Ball League website ([www.vbbtexas.org](http://www.vbbtexas.org)).

#### ABILENE

**Buffalo Gap Chips** and **Abilene 407s** of the Buffalo Gap Historic Village (325/572-3365, [www.buffalogap.com/baseball](http://www.buffalogap.com/baseball)) play on the first and third Sundays of the month. Call for locations and times. The teams also play a game at the living history museum (located 14 mi. south of Abilene on Texas 89) on the Fourth of July. The annual Texas Forts Trail Vintage Base Ball Tournament is set for late spring 2008 (call for dates and location).

#### CEDAR HILL

The ad-hoc team, the **Cedar Hill Cartwrights**, joins other teams for a tournament Apr. 5, 2008 at the Cedar Hill Expo at Cedar Hill State Park (1570 W FM 1382, 972/291-3900). The park will also feature vintage base ball Oct. 11, 2008 during its Days of Old Celebration.

#### CONROE

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**Montgomery College Saw Dogs** (936/273-7290, <http://vintageball.woodstock.edu/>) host the annual President's Cup Vintage Base Ball Festival in September, featuring a Civil War theme.

Call for date and location.

[NOTE: WEBSITE WILL NOT WORK WITH WWW]

## BOERNE

**Boerne White Sox** of the Agricultural Heritage Museum (102 City Park Rd., 210/445-1080, [www.AgMuseum.org](http://www.AgMuseum.org)) hosts the Veteran's Cup tournament on Nov. 8-9, 2008.

## FARMERS BRANCH

**Farmers Branch Mustangs** of the Farmers Branch Historical Park (2540 Farmers Branch Lane, 972/919-8731, [www.farmersbranch.info](http://www.farmersbranch.info)) practice on the second and fourth Tuesdays and play Apr. 19, 2008 during the park's Texas History Alive! event, as well as during the park's vintage base ball tournament Oct. 11, 2008. Call for times and locations.

## IRVING

**Buck and Breck Vintage Base Ball Club** of the Estelle Heritage Society (972/721-3729, [jhart@irvinglibrary.org](mailto:jhart@irvinglibrary.org)).

## RICHMOND

**Richmond Giants** of George Ranch Historical Park (10215 FM 762, 281/343-0218, [www.georgeranch.org](http://www.georgeranch.org)) host a game during the living history center's annual Fourth of July celebration.

## SAN ANGELO

**Fort Concho/San Angelo Vintage Base Ball Club** of the Fort Concho National Historic Landmark (630 S. Oakes, 325/481-2646, [www.fortconcho.com](http://www.fortconcho.com)) plays a game on June 14, 2008 during the fort's annual Frontier Day celebration.

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### RESOURCES

--Buffalo Gap Chips & Abilene 407s--Joel Brant, brant.joel@mcm.edu;

www.buffalogap.com/baseball; and Bob Wettemann, [REDACTED],

wettemar@mcmurryadm.mcm.edu

--Richmond Giants, George Ranch, Bryan McAuley, [REDACTED],

bmcauley@georgeranch.org; or Terri Stuart [REDACTED]

--Farmers Branch Mustangs, Barbara Judkins, barbara.judkins@farmersbranch.info

[REDACTED]  
--Boerne White Sox, Kristy Watson, [REDACTED]@polonyx.com, [REDACTED]

--Montgomery College Saw Dogs, Montgomery College, Michael Hickey;

Michael.J.Hickey@nhmccd.edu, [REDACTED], <http://vintageball.woodstock.edu/> (good overall resource)

--Wendel Dickason, [REDACTED]; wendel@vbbtexas.org; www.vbbtexas.org (good overall resource)

-- Estelle Heritage Society, [REDACTED]; Jan Hart jhart@irvinglibrary.org

-- Fort Concho Vintage Base Ball Club, Bob Bluthardt; [REDACTED],

robert.bluthardt@sanangelotexas.us

--Jay Avers (White Sox player), [REDACTED]

--Re: early baseball history:

Texas Handbook Online--<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/xzs1.html>

Vintage Base Ball in Texas--<http://vbbtexas.org/>

Texas Baseball Hall of Fame--<http://www.tbhof.org>