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# The 1934 Chatham Colored All-Stars: Barnstorming to Championships

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# THE 1934 CHATHAM COLOURED ALL-STARS: BARNSTORMING TO CHAMPIONSHIPS

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## ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the Chatham All-Stars, an all-black baseball team from Chatham, Ontario that won the Ontario Baseball Association championship in 1934. In particular, this essay investigates the practice of barnstorming, which was significant in showcasing teams like the All-Stars and increasing their revenues. The essay argues that barnstorming was important in the All-Stars success in the Ontario Baseball Association, and that barnstorming also secured financial opportunities for many of the All-Star players. In addition, barnstorming was crucial not only to entertain communities at this time, but also to tighten relationships amongst communities. This essay highlights the widespread racism that the All-Stars, and teams similar to the All-Stars, faced at this time.

Keywords: Barnstorming, Chatham All-Stars, baseball, Negro Leagues, Chatham, Southwestern Ontario, twentieth century, Canadian history, African-Canadian history

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Sport and Canadian society are inextricably connected. In many ways, athletics shaped Canadian society by providing opportunities to people of different class, gender, race and ethnicity. The commercialization of local sports teams developed stronger communities across Canada, through highlighting local diversity and culture. As a result, athletics has provided opportunities to persons of different socio-economic backgrounds. This paper will discuss the history and local impact of the Chatham Colored All Stars, an all-black team from Chatham, Ontario. In 1934, the Chatham Colored All Stars won the Ontario Baseball Association championship. This championship win was significant in terms of breaking the colour barrier in the Ontario Baseball Association. Although teams were not integrated, the All-Stars were successful in their league, despite rampant racism and stereotypes. Their success and talent was facilitated by the practice of barnstorming, as it provided the All-Stars an environment to showcase their skills and break into the Ontario Baseball Association league.

Barnstorming was the common baseball practice of performing exhibition games in various locations. Barnstorming was also an integral part of the “small community life” during this interwar period because it provided entertainment and brought communities together when teams were in town.<sup>1</sup> Barnstorming not only promoted the talent of many teams, both white and black, but it also promoted the earliest form of integrated play. While Negro Leagues in the United States were strictly composed of all-black teams, and the majors was composed solely of white players until 1947, barnstorming provided black baseball teams the opportunity to face white semiprofessional teams.<sup>2</sup> Barnstorming during the postseason was important not only economically for black players, but also semi-professional and professional white baseball players whom sought additional play.<sup>3</sup>

In a 1978 interview with the London Free Press, former Chatham All-Stars player Wilfred ‘Boomer’ Harding noted the importance of baseball in the lives of the Chatham All-Stars team in securing a possible future. Baseball served as a “release from it all for most of us”, and he noted and if “a young

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<sup>1</sup> Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots a Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars: The Negro Leagues in Detroit, 1919-1933* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bak. *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 105.

fella didn't get himself into baseball, he generally got himself into jail".<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Chatham All-Stars, their entrance into the Ontario Baseball Association League was possible through exhibition games "all over the country".<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the team lacked resources and operated on a "financial shoestring".<sup>6</sup> From their formation in 1932 to 1934, the team successfully participated in various exhibition games, otherwise known as "barnstorming", for "up to five nights a week".<sup>7</sup> Thus, barnstorming was essential in raising enough money to pay for equipment such as bats for the team.<sup>8</sup>

For barnstormers, including the Chatham-All Stars, baseball offered supplementary income. Despite the very minimal pay, baseball provided many opportunities beyond the diamond.<sup>9</sup> Barnstorming exhibition games provided a "profitable afternoon" for many black teams based on the economic fact that whites had a larger income.<sup>10</sup> Apart from providing entertainment, the barnstorming teams provided a "rare example of black entrepreneurship".<sup>11</sup> However even following the All-Stars OBA Championship win, the club still did not have much money to supply the players, not even enough to "feed the players a big chicken dinner before a game".<sup>12</sup>

Many of the Chatham All-Star players, including Boomer Harding, topped the Chatham City League in batting throughout 1933.<sup>13</sup> Due to their commendable athletic prowess, the All-Stars received increased media coverage and larger audiences following their 1933 inaugural season. While their team name could be assumed to be in part to an "All-Star" team, the team name was very similar to many other all-black teams from this time. For example, throughout the Negro League in the United States, numerous teams

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<sup>4</sup> Ernie Miller, "Boomer Harding- One Great Guy." *London Free Press*, September 7, 1978. B18.

<sup>5</sup> Wanda Harding-Milburn, "The Chatham All-Stars: An interview with Kingsley Terrell," *Sports and Ethnicity* 7 (1985), 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Mark Malone, "'34 Legends the Class of '00': Chatham Colored all-Stars Won City's First OBA Championship." *Chatham Daily News*, Sep 02, 2000. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ernie Miller, "Boomer Harding: One Great Guy."

<sup>9</sup> Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Colin D. Howell, *Blood, Sweat and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 70.

<sup>11</sup> Bak. *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> A. E. Stirling, "Chatham's Official Program Baseball Games: Victoria Day". May 22, 1960, 8.

<sup>13</sup> "Statistics of City Leagues." *Chatham Daily News*, August 2, 1933. p 8.

adapted the “Stars” name, including Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis.<sup>14</sup> In both Canada and the United States, the barnstorming activities of black teams went largely “unpoliced”.<sup>15</sup> The lack of regulations for barnstorming teams (primarily all-black teams) could be attributed to the lack of opportunity in existent professional and semi-professional leagues. Thus, barnstorming was imperative because most black clubs did not own their own ballpark, and consequently, teams had to shift locations consistently to “rent city parks or minor league fields”.<sup>16</sup>

In order to attract a large audience, many black teams played on stereotypes and “white racial theories” that encouraged “clowning and buffoonery”.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, whites became increasingly “fascinated” with black culture, and as a result, black participation in sport certainly increased.<sup>18</sup> However, many teams appealed to the “worst racial stereotypes” despite their strong physical capabilities.<sup>19</sup> For example, several teams in the Negro League capitalized on such stereotypes, with names such as the “Ethiopian Clowns” and “Indianapolis Clowns” based on their “antics on the field”.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the outstanding athletic ability of the Chatham All-Star players, and many black baseball players at this time, seemed to assist in “discrediting ‘scientific’ theories about innate racial differences” and reduce racism in communities.<sup>21</sup> The Chatham Colored All-Stars participated in numerous exhibition games with a style similar to the “Harlem Globetrotters”, by providing entertainment and flaunting their amazing physical capabilities.<sup>22</sup> Many black teams were composed of talented athletes known for their “smooth and slick style”, and both opponents and fans respected them.<sup>23</sup> The reputation of the All-Stars preceded them as “an exceptionally good team” that was also an “attraction” in itself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dick Clark and Larry Lester, *The Negro Leagues Book* (Cleveland, OH: Society for American Baseball Research, 1994), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy M. Gay, *Satch, Dizzy & Rapid Robert: The Wild Saga of Interracial Baseball Before Jackie Robinson* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 173.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Dick Clark and Larry Lester. *The Negro Leagues Book*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 182.

<sup>22</sup> Brock Greenhalgh, “The Men of the Summer.” July 19, 1990, Sports sec.

<sup>23</sup> Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, “Boomer Harding-One Great Guy.”

In their inaugural year in 1933, the All Stars went to the finals of the local Chatham City Baseball League following their extensive exhibition play.<sup>25</sup> While the Ontario Baseball Association was certainly not the same as the Major Leagues in the United States, the Colored All-Stars made strong breakthroughs for equality in sport. Under the guidance of Archie Sterling, the Colored All Stars were admitted into the Ontario Baseball Association (OBA) in 1934.<sup>26</sup> However, this was not a seamless entry into the league. Archie Sterling eventually convinced the All-Stars to enter the Intermediate B division because he was the Chatham area's OBA convener at the time.<sup>27</sup> In order to take away from any possible bigotry, Sterling encouraged the All-Stars to change their name from the Chatham Colored All-Stars to simply the Chatham All-Stars.<sup>28</sup> Despite the backlash that was apparent upon the team's arrival, the team's athletic success proved a huge draw for crowds.<sup>29</sup>

The All-Stars practice of barnstorming certainly did not limit the racism they experienced. Despite their huge crowd appeal, the team was subject to discrimination throughout their play. Bigotry was also present in both the local media and certainly the baseball diamond itself. In the local newspaper, player "Flat Chase" was nicknamed the "Kololed King of the Klout".<sup>30</sup> The Chatham Daily News, often mentioned the "yellings and antics" of opposing teams.<sup>31</sup> In an exhibition against a Detroit team that included "several of the Tigers", the Detroit manager nearly called off the game upon learning that the All-Stars was comprised of mostly black players.<sup>32</sup> However, the game continued on as scheduled once he was notified that the team also included a First Nations man, and as Boomer Harding noted in an interview, the team pretended they were First Nations "for a day" in order to continue play.<sup>33</sup>

To the surprise of many, the Chatham All Stars won the Ontario Baseball Association in only their second season in the league (1934). Throughout their season, they faced "crowds of bigots who came out only to heckle

<sup>25</sup> L. Gilbert and J. Gilbert, "If battered glove could talk: Black team saw glory and woe" *Chatham Daily News*, February 24, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Reddick, "Chatham Colored All Stars: Reliving the Winning 1934 OBA Title Drive." *Chatham Daily News*, October 5, 1987, p 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "Big Crowd Sees Stars Win Evening Contest in Eighth." *Chatham Daily News*, August 2, 1934.

<sup>30</sup> Calder, Jack. "Stars Beat Welland in Final Game." *Chatham Daily News*, September 27, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ernie Miller. "Boomer Harding-One Great Guy."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

them”.<sup>34</sup> During the All-Stars trip to the OBA Championship finals in Penetanguishene, they had read on the sidewalks “the Black Cloud is Coming’.”<sup>35</sup> The team was not able to stay overnight in Penetanguishene because of possible dangers to their safety, and was forced to stay in the nearby town of Midland.<sup>36</sup> It was clear that not only did the All-Stars need to face opposing baseball teams, they had to face the widespread racism throughout Ontario at this time. Despite their constant movement with away games, road trips had to be “planned well in advance” to ensure that local restaurants would serve them.<sup>37</sup> In addition, they were often refused from motels, and even if they were permitted, they had to arrive late at night to ensure that white guests would not know a black baseball team was staying in the same location.<sup>38</sup>

In the final game against Penetang, when the series was tied at one game per team, and umpires called the game in the eleventh inning due to “darkness”, although the game was being played at “4:30 in the afternoon” with the sun “shining brightly”.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the game was delayed, and the score was reverted, despite the fact that the All-Stars were leading.<sup>40</sup> In a 1985 interview, All-Stars player Kingsley Terrell stated that Archie Sterling, the head of the Ontario Baseball Association, and three new umpires from Hamilton were hired for the following game.<sup>41</sup> Despite this adversity, the team won the rematch on October 23, 1934 in Guelph with a score of 13-7.<sup>42</sup>

The utilization of stereotypes to develop entertaining baseball shows was not uncommon amongst all-black teams in Canadian baseball. For example, the Zulu Cannibal Giants toured the Maritimes in 1936, and they used various stereotypes associated with African tribal life.<sup>43</sup> The Cannibal Giants wore regulation pants, baseball shoes, as well as “fuzzy head-dresses without any shirts.”<sup>44</sup> They also painted their chests and faces in an attempt to present themselves as cannibals. Another team that capitalized on barnstorming

<sup>34</sup> Brock Greenhalgh. “The Men of the Summer,” sports.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ernie Miller. “Boomer Harding—One Great Guy.”

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, L., & Gilbert, J, “If battered glove could talk,” 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ernie Miller. “Boomer Harding—One Great Guy.”

<sup>40</sup> Jack Calder, “Chatham Ahead When Game was Halted by Darkness.” *Chatham Daily News*, October 23, 1934.

<sup>41</sup> Harding-Milburn, “The Chatham All-Stars: An interview with Kingsley Terrell”, 111.

<sup>42</sup> “Colored Stars Slug Way to 13-7 Win Over Penetang.” *Canadian Press*, October 24, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 176.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



was the House of David baseball team, which used “ethnic and sectarian imagery” as it travelled across Canada and the United States.<sup>45</sup> The players sported long beards and hair, and spoke of the teachings of Benjamin Pur-nell at their various games in a sermon-like manner.<sup>46</sup> While this team was composed of white baseball players, it utilized the same principles of barn-storming: continuous travel and combining baseball with showmanship.

Black teams like the Chatham All-Stars filled a void for community and culture in African-Canadian communities. Such teams provided “camaraderie and social interdependence” and encouraged “racial pride and neighbour- hood identity”.<sup>47</sup> In a sense, the baseball clubs provided a different institution for black communities. For the black community, especially in Chatham, the accomplishment of black athletes in the sporting environ- ment provided the opportunity for “improving race relations.”<sup>48</sup> Baseball provided an outlet where racial discrimination could be attacked through sport and entertainment, and as a result, the Chatham All-Stars were highly celebrated in their community. Upon return to Chatham following their 1934 OBA Championship win, hundreds of residents participated in a mor- torcade celebrating the All-Stars. Mayor Issac Davis reiterated the value and importance of the All-Stars Championship win: “Chatham will win other ball championships, but we’ll always remember it was the coloured boys who led the way”.<sup>49</sup> Although the All-Stars faced hardship on and off the ball diamond, especially in other communities, they were largely celebrated and revered in their home community of Chatham.

For many of the All-Stars, discrimination was simply “part of life”.<sup>50</sup> Since there was no movement of black clubs in this period to enter the Major Leagues where more money was available, many players relied on other jobs during their off time. It is believed that many of the players could have continued in professional sports if it “had not been for the color line”.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, playing baseball provided employment and educational op- portunities that did not otherwise exist. For example, Boomer Harding, the

<sup>45</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>. Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 180.

<sup>48</sup>. Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 182.

<sup>49</sup>. Art Cartier, “The First Colored All-Star Team: Ontario Title 1934,” from *Politics and Other Games and Notes*, Volume 2. *London Free Press*: 1966. 69.

<sup>50</sup>. “All-Stars: Familiar with discrimination.” *London Free Press*, July 13, 2002.

<sup>51</sup>. Bill Reddick, “34 Champs denied opportunity in pro ball.” *Chatham Daily News*, October 10, 1984, p 9.

catcher for the Chatham All-Stars, worked as a postman in addition to his lengthy athletic career. In Harding's case, baseball offered the most athletic opportunity for black players, as most other sports remained extremely segregated and racialized. Harding was also an outstanding hockey player, however, similar to his experiences with baseball, Harding faced relentless racism. There was an incessant belief in various media outlets that sports, most notably hockey, did not have a "colour line".<sup>52,53</sup> However, Boomer Harding was turned away from semi-professional hockey teams, such as the Detroit Auto Club, a team that was part of the International Amateur Hockey League—a National Hockey League farm club.<sup>54</sup>

In conclusion, barnstorming provided opportunities to black players and black teams that may have not otherwise existed at this time. Athletics, like all other aspects of life at this time, were strongly segregated. However, the practice of barnstorming and like-exhibition games provided these teams an outlet to showcase their athletic skill, entertain their communities, and earn additional income. Furthermore, baseball and sport in general was used to debunk racist theories regarding white supremacy, as in many cases, black athletes defeated the white teams they faced. In addition, the Chatham Colored All-Stars, like many other teams also brought their community together, despite the discrimination they faced. Ultimately, barnstorming, and baseball as a whole, led to opportunities for black athletes that may not have otherwise existed at this time.

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52. Bill Matney, "Boomer Harding makes Hockey History at Olympia." *Michigan Chronicle*, November 16, 1946, p 16.

53. Lewis Walter, "Negro in Ice Debut." *Detroit Free Press*, November 12, 1946.

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