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Bouton gives fans a real 'old-timer's day'

By Jimmy Golen, Associated Press | August 19, 2007

Former major leaguer Jim Bouton wanted fans at his vintage baseball games to really feel what it was like to watch the sport in the 19th century.

So in addition to the old-style uniforms and pillbox caps, he had actors dressed as Keystone Cops come onto the field before a game and threaten to shut down the whole endeavor.

"They were railing that the game must be stopped," Bouton said. "Baseball cannot be played in town on Sundays."

Other "cranks" -- those are fans, in 19th century lingo -- were surprised to see the Women's Christian Temperance Union picketing against the evils of alcohol.

"We also have a gambler routine, where actors with wads of money try to talk to players during the game and they get chased off," Bouton said.

"It's much more than a vintage baseball game. It's a piece of living history," said Bouton, who won 21 games for the Yankees in 1963 but is best known as the author of the clubhouse tell-all book, "Ball Four."

"That's one of the nice things about it. It combines theater and history with unscripted sports competition. We're trying to re-create as closely as we can what it was like to watch a baseball game in the 1800s."

The Vintage Base Ball Federation -- the two-word spelling was dominant in the 19th century -- hosts its first World Series this weekend in Westfield. One year after Bouton founded the federation, the Westfield Wheelman will play in a double-elimination tournament against the Amador County (Calif.) Crushers, the Hartford Senators, and the Stars of Sheridan (Mich.).

About 500 fans will pay as little as \$5 admission to the old-time ballpark, which has a hand-operated



A hand-operated scoreboard and period attire add to the atmosphere at Vintage Base Ball Federation games. (NATHAN K. MARTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

scoreboard and barn-wood billboards with "vintage-ized" sponsor logos. To add to the atmosphere, the staff wears costumes of white shirts and dark pants with suspenders or vests and newsboy caps.

The World Series will be played largely by the rules in effect in 1886, after overhand pitching was widely adopted but before oversized and padded gloves. The hidden-ball trick and spitballs are common, it takes seven balls for a walk, and foul balls do not count as strikes.

"That's brutal if you're a catcher," said Dan Genovese, the Wheelman captain, founder, and catcher, and an author of two books about the history of baseball in Westfield. "The time period that we're playing by, you can see how the rules began to evolve.

"We know so much today. As a modern fan, we have 160 years of understanding the rules."

Genovese played baseball from Little League to college, but his career peaked when he reached the Babe Ruth World Series as a 13-year-old.

Many of the players were college and high school athletes who enjoy the competition but mostly just like to play ball; there is a rule limiting teams to three former minor leaguers each, but that hasn't been a problem.

"They're good young ballplayers," Bouton said. "I think they're enjoying the role. I think they really like not having to have winning be the only thing that matters. I just think it's more fun for them. And suddenly they're back in front of a crowd again. So they really like that part of it."

Some rules from other eras have been adopted or modified to speed up the game. Among them: The batter is out if his foul fly ball is caught on one bounce, and on a foul grounder, the baserunner must get back to his original base or he can be forced out.

That's not to mention the fact that the first World Series wasn't actually played until 1903, when NL champion Pittsburgh played AL champ Boston. However, the first interleague championship dates back to 1884, when the National League's Providence Grays beat the New York Metropolitans of the American Association.

More importantly, Bouton wanted to maintain the 1860s sensibility, before "the gentleman's game" went the way of more intense competition. Umpires must be addressed as "sir," and players are expected to be honest about whether they were out or safe, if they're asked.

"The gentleman's game disappeared in the 1860s when teams wanted to win and started hiring the roughest guys they could find," Bouton said.

Still, the modifications have drawn the ire of vintage baseball purists who complain that mixing rules from different eras taints the historic value of the demonstration.

Bouton calls the changes "harmless additions."

"It's only controversial to the historians who feel they need to play by a very strict set of rules," Bouton said. "But at the time, the rules were in flux not only from year to year but from region to region.

"We wanted to capture the spirit of an era, rather than a particular snapshot or slice.

"From the fans' point of view, they really don't care. They like the fact that the players are brought onto the field on a horse-drawn hay wagon."

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