

BASEBALL CAN SURVIVE: HOW SEMI-PRO BASEBALL THRIVED IN WICHITA DURING THE 1930s AND 1940s

by
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The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again.

Terrence Mann (James Earl Jones) to Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) in 1989's *Field of Dreams*

In 1989, Kevin Costner portrayed an Iowa corn farmer who plowed up his crop to build a baseball field. Costner's character did this unthinkable act after hearing a mysterious voice call out to him saying, "If you build it, he will come." In the early 1930s, a Kansas sporting goods salesman by the name of Raymond "Hap" Dumont heard his own voice coming from the wheat fields of Kansas, a voice that told him to seek funding for a new ballpark and to establish a national semi-professional baseball tournament. Dumont, who already managed the Kansas State Semi-professional Baseball Tournament, attacked the new idea with gusto. The Kansas State Tournament, played on Island Park on Ackerman Island in the middle of the Arkansas River, proved to be immensely popular with many Wichitans and Dumont figured a national tournament could be even more popular. However, shortly after the 1933 season ended, the wooden stadium burned to the ground due to a careless

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cigarette butt. Since the Kansas State tournament could not be played without a stadium, Hap Dumont needed to find a way to convince the city to build a new ballpark. The idea Dumont struck upon involved promoting and organizing a national semi-pro baseball tournament.

In baseball circles, a national semi-professional tournament had been considered in New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco. The *Wichita Eagle* wrote, “A national just wasn’t possible for a number of reasons. Too much expense, failure to get genuine representation of teams from coast to coast, and an utter lack of a central governing organization were chief drawbacks in staging a national tournament.”¹ A few regionalized tournaments, such as the *Denver Post* and the *Houston Post* tournaments, proved to be successful, but a national tournament had never been tried. Dumont knew that if he could get a new baseball stadium, a national tournament could succeed in Wichita. Dumont also understood that he needed to be ahead of the curve and promote a different game than the one that Major League Baseball did.²

Dumont, the father of the National Semi-Pro Baseball Congress’s governing body and the architect of the national tournament, was a sporting goods salesman, as well as a boxing and wrestling promoter. Dumont, who was born in Wichita in 1904, grew up wanting a place in show business. After graduating from Wichita High School (now Wichita East), he ventured into vaudeville but did not make it as a comedian. He then drifted into sports writing and was the sports editor for the *Hutchinson News*. Additionally, he became involved in promoting baseball when circus employees who were in town for a show asked Dumont to find a baseball team for them to play due to the Blue Laws in Kansas at the time. Kansas Blue Laws prohibited circus show performances on Sundays, so the employees would find a team to play baseball against and then charge admission to earn a little extra money. Promoting baseball suited Dumont fine, and he warmed up to the idea by promoting more games around the Wichita area.³

The National Baseball Congress (NBC) was formed in 1931 as an umbrella organization for semi-professional baseball. Dumont also used the NBC to sell sporting goods from Goldsmith’s department store. While Dumont’s everlasting achievement is the establishment of the NBC

national tournament, among his greatest accomplishments might be persuading the city government to build a new stadium to house his grand idea in the midst of the Great Depression.

The city built Lawrence Stadium (since renamed Lawrence-Dumont Stadium) just west of the Arkansas River near the old Chisholm Trail in what was then known as Payne's Pasture at a cost of about \$125,000, a significant sum of money for the economically depressed city of Wichita.⁴ With help from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civil Works Administration (CWA) the city built a stadium that seated 6,000 fans and could accommodate an additional 2,000 standing-room-only fans. With the new stadium completed in 1934, Dumont then formulated a plan for a successful national semi-pro baseball tournament to be held in Wichita the next summer.

Baseball in Kansas, up to this point, lacked a clear, distinctive history. For whatever reasons, many of the professional teams in Wichita failed to draw fans. The interest in the game certainly thrived, but people failed to support the various incarnations of teams throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵ Dumont and his national tournament would attempt to change that.

Organized baseball in the 1930s consisted of the American and National League baseball teams and their minor league affiliates. A ban on African-American baseball players in organized baseball shadowed the baseball world, keeping out some of the best talent. Hap Dumont decided to tap into this talent pool by inviting some teams composed of all black players, as well as teams that consisted of both white and black players, to his 1935 tournament. Dumont also planned on inviting teams that were made up of other races as well. The departure of Wichita's minor league baseball team, the Wichita Aviators, prompted Dumont to proceed at an even more furious pace to put together the stadium deal and to further his plans for the national tournament.

One of the first orders of business for Dumont was to invite the great Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige to participate in the National Baseball Congress national tournament. Paige, who played for a Bismarck, North Dakota auto dealership magnate at the time, accepted Dumont's offer, provided the Wichitan would pay him \$1,000 to bring

his Bismarck semi-pro “colored” team to the tournament. Of course, Dumont did not actually have Paige’s “salary” at the time he promised it, but he counted on the crafty hurler to draw big enough crowds to pay the money out of the gate receipts. Paige’s Bismarck team was not the only team of color to be represented in the first NBC tournament. Four other teams composed of African-Americans entered the tournament: the Texas Centennials of Dallas, the Ft. Scott Blackhawks of Kansas, the Memphis Red Sox of the Negro National League, and the Monroe, (Louisiana) Monarchs. An American Indian team from Wewoka, Oklahoma and a Japanese-American team from Stockton, California accepted invitations from Dumont.

The field for the first NBC tournament shaped up nicely with teams representing states from various regions participating.⁶ Dumont filled out the tournament brackets with an eclectic group of teams from around the United States: Gadsdon, Alabama; Jonesboro (Arkansas) Giants; Shawnee (Oklahoma) Athletics; Poplar Bluff, Missouri; Union Circulation Co. of New York; Halliburton Cementers of Duncan, Oklahoma; Lompee, California; Phoenix, Arizona; Byron, Nebraska; Holy Name of New Orleans; Lorraine, Texas; Blue Coals of Buffalo, New York; the Eason Oilers of Oklahoma; Chicago Sheridans; the Ford V-8’s of Omaha; Oceanside, California; Jones Stores of Kansas City, Missouri; Cleveland Mills of Shelby, North Carolina; Stanzal Brothers of Waukegan, Illinois;⁷ Shawnee, Oklahoma; Patterson, New Jersey; the Wichita Wings; the Arkansas City (Kansas) Dubbs; and a Kansas All-Star team. In all 32 teams from 24 states participated in the inaugural National Semipro Baseball tournament.⁸

Wichita Eagle sportswriter Pete Lightner wrote:

By Sunday, teams will be arriving for the national semi-pro tourney. Some of the teams have booked games en route to help absorb the expense. It takes plenty of money to get those teams here. The tournament headquarters estimate that each team will spend at least a thousand and in some cases considerably more to get here and live while here.⁹

The Bismarck team piled into two cars, a Chrysler Airflow and a Plymouth Sedan, supplied by team owner Neil Churchill who owned an automobile dealership in Bismarck. Along the way, the team “barnstormed” through the Midwest, picking up games to pay for their expenses. One of these games occurred sixty miles from Wichita, in McPherson, KS. *The McPherson Daily Republic* reported:

Satchel hadn’t been used and the fans were yelling for him to take the mound. In the final inning he accommodated the spectators. He walked to the mound after waving his outfielders to the bench. He struck out the first two batters, then sent his infielders to the bench. The final out came when Britt rapped one down the center of the field, Paige snagged the ball and chased down Britt before he reached first. Bismarck defeated the Dickey Oilers 14-0.¹⁰

Paige’s showmanship, fame, and his playing ability, not to mention the press coverage, delighted Dumont. As the tournament fast approached, the city of Wichita stood abuzz about what was to take place. Pete Lightner wrote in the *Wichita Eagle*:

The tournament has been planned to give everyone a fair chance and to satisfy the visitors that Wichita is a good place to come back to. The tournament may be a permanent fixture here if it’s successful from a financial standpoint. Frankly, it will have the highest expenses of any sports event put on here in many a season. All the national sporting goods’ houses and magazines are supporting the event. It would mean a vast amount of publicity for Wichita to have it here each year. That’s what the plans are right now.¹¹

Paige went on to pitch four times in the tournament, dominating the field and setting records for strikeouts and wins that still stand, including the title game against the Duncan (OK) Cementers, which Bismarck won handily.

The inaugural tournament was a rousing success, drawing about

50,000 fans over a two-and-a-half week period. Dumont declared he made money from the event, even after he paid off Satchel Paige. The publicity and success of the NBC tournament caught the attention of two men: Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis, the Commissioner of Major League Baseball and J.G. Taylor Spink the publisher and editor of “baseball’s bible” *The Sporting News*. At the time, baseball’s minor league system could barely stay afloat and Landis saw the NBC tournament as a perfect way to scout out new talent. Spink, on the other hand, began a twenty-five year relationship with Dumont and helped the eccentric promoter preach the gospel of semi-pro baseball by running numerous articles and advertisements in his venerable sports magazine.

After the success of the first national tournament, Dumont hired a group of former major league standouts to help run the baseball operations of the NBC tournament. Honus Wagner, Tris Speaker, Ty Cobb, and Fred Clarke all accepted the promoter’s job offer to help lend credibility to the novice event. The quartet of former major league stars assisted Dumont in the day to day aspects of running a baseball tournament, and Dumont liked having their names associated with his tournament. However, by hiring these men, Dumont also accepted responsibility for their decision to decrease the participation of minorities in subsequent tournaments. It was well-known in baseball circles that Wagner, Speaker, Cobb, and Clarke were not the most tolerant men when it came to racial issues. Perhaps because of their preconceived notions of African-American ballplayers and because Satchel Paige and his teammates performed at an extraordinary level in the inaugural NBC tournament, Wagner, Speaker, Cobb, and Clarke blackballed players of color during the subsequent years of tournament play.

As with all things race-related during this period of American history, people’s attitudes changed from day to day, often contradicting themselves in the process. Wagner declared not long after the ban on African-American players was announced that “colored players are not only good ballplayers, but good drawing cards as well.”¹² This opinion did not change the fact that the NBC hierarchy did not allow integrated teams or teams made up of racial minorities to play in the tournament again until 1939.

As the decade drew to a close, the National Baseball Congress tournament succeeded because of Dumont's tireless promotion and several other factors, which included the fact that many out of work minor league baseball players needed a destination to keep their skills sharp and perhaps get noticed once again by the major league scouts. Another factor in the success of the NBC tournament in those early years was that the city of Wichita, both at the governmental and the population level, vigorously supported the tournament. As the level of baseball increased each year, and attendance rose, the city kept giving Dumont the necessary economic breaks to maintain the tournament's high level of operation. As war loomed on the horizon in Europe and the Pacific, Hap Dumont and the NBC prepared to take the next step in promoting the national semi-pro tournament to the rest of the United States and the world.

After the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on the Axis Powers. A call to arms went out across the country, with many Major League Baseball players accepting positions in the United States military. Although many of these players served in combat zones in both the Pacific and European theater of operations during the Second World War, others served in stateside positions that enabled them to continue to play baseball, albeit for military teams instead of their major league organizations. President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave Judge Landis the "green-light" to continue to play baseball in a letter shortly after the country declared war; the game rolled on just as the war effort did. Roosevelt's letter stated:

I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before. As to the players themselves, I know you agree with me that individual players who are of active military or naval age should go, without question, into the services. Even if the actual quality to the teams is lowered by the greater use of older players, this

will not dampen the popularity of the sport.

Professional baseball continued to play games, but the product suffered financially and competitively during the war years. Many ballplayers in their prime joined the military and were replaced by a hodgepodge assortment of players that included fifteen year old Joe Nuxhall of the Cincinnati Reds; a one-armed outfielder, Peter Gray, who played with the St. Louis Browns; and the former great, Jimmie Foxx, who came out of retirement to play for the Philadelphia Phillies.¹³ Enos Slaughter, who played for the St. Louis Cardinals, said of wartime baseball, "It kept the spirit of the people up, and their minds off the war. I think it made everything go along better."¹⁴

However, one corner of society was still left on the outside looking in, black baseball players. African-American baseball players took note that the owners in the American and National Leagues preferred to hire schoolboys, the physically handicapped, and retired legends rather than black ball players who were in the prime of their careers. The hypocrisy of the baseball owners was even more evident at the end of the war, when it became apparent that African-Americans played a significant role in the armed forces fighting against the axis powers in both theaters of operations, while at the same time they could not fully participate in organized baseball.¹⁵ Dumont and George Sisler, the new High Commissioner of the NBC tournament, continued the policy they had established at the end of the 1930s, which left it up to individual state tournaments to allow teams of African-American players to compete and have a chance to move onto the national tournament in Wichita.¹⁶ Desegregation of organized baseball started right after the Second World War ended when Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey signed a former Army soldier named Jackie Robinson to a contract in August of 1945.¹⁷ Robinson then reported to the Brooklyn farm club in Montreal, Quebec, Canada for the 1946 season. But in Wichita, the NBC figureheads remained undecided from year to year, as to whether to accept African-American ballplayers or not.

While the quality of professional baseball suffered during the war years, the opposite effect happened to the National Baseball Congress and

semi-pro baseball. The placement of major league quality baseball players on military teams made the NBC national tournament even more competitive. Some members of the media suggested sports organizations shut their doors during the war, but to Dumont, that proposition seemed asinine. Dumont would have none of it, and when the Associated Press asked national sports figures to write a by-lined story on how the war effort would impact their particular sport, Dumont responded that,

Strange as it may seem, the war will not hamper one sport-sandlot baseball. While other attractions in some sports may be temporarily curtailed or canceled due to losing participants to the army and defense industries, the sandlots by the same token will benefit. This is because the vast majority of the estimated 70,000 clubs throughout the nation will represent industrial and military-camp teams.¹⁸

The people needed to be entertained and to take their minds off of the war as well as the war effort at home, which the good people of Wichita participated in by building aircraft and other materials for the war.

The level of play increased with the introduction of major leaguers in the national tournament, but Dumont figured he needed more than big name players to draw a crowd during a time where every American's dollar had to stretch even further. Dumont came up with what would amount to legendary schemes during these years. He placed a microphone behind home plate at Lawrence Stadium that would pop out of the ground so that the crowd could listen to those nasty umpire-manager arguments. Of course, an NBC official would tip off the manager and the game officials so they could maintain the proper language requirements for a family event.¹⁹

Blackouts occurred frequently during the war years throughout the continental United States. To combat that problem, Dumont came up with perhaps his most comedic innovation, baseball in the dark. Prior to an exhibition game, Dumont had the balls, uniforms, and bats all painted fluorescent yellow. What followed could only be described as wacky and dangerous. Without any lighting, the ballplayers suffered from a lack of

depth perception and could not properly judge fly balls or where their fellow teammates or the opposing players were located on the field. Dumont quickly scrapped the baseball without lights idea.²⁰

Dumont's novel ideas became even more complex and ridiculous. The NBC mastermind thought about giving the hitter the choice to run to third or first base instead of the required first base. After that, the base runner could circle the bases in either direction. This caused mass confusion when Dumont tried the plan out in an exhibition game.

Dumont's crazy ideas often never saw the playing field after their initial tryout. However, some of his ideas, which seemed extreme at the time, eventually took a foothold not only within the semi-pro system, but also with professional baseball. One example of this is the designated hitter rule. Dumont knew early on when promoting games, that offense put the fans in the seats. The introduction of a designated hitter instead of having the pitcher bat increased the offense within the game. Pitchers needed to concentrate on pitching, instead of concerning themselves with becoming better hitters. Three decades after Dumont introduced the designated hitter to the NBC national tournament, the American League installed the designated hitter rule.²¹

Dumont also experimented with umpiring during the war years. The Wichita baseball promoter was always looking for a way to grab headlines for his tournament, so it surprised no one when he brought an umpire named Luther Hayden Taylor to officiate NBC games. Taylor, nicknamed the politically incorrect "Dummy," could not speak. Taylor proved to be a crowd favorite however, using expressive sign language to call the game.²²

Still another experiment in umpiring involved a woman named Lorraine Heinish, who hailed from Wisconsin. Dumont, who never passed up an opportunity to capitalize on the "craze" of the moment, noticed that the song "Rosie, the Riveter" was popular and decided the NBC tournament needed to hire a woman umpire. He called her his "WUMP," short for woman umpire. Heinish worked the bases for two evening games at the start of the tournament and received favorable press coverage from both local and national outlets, but soon faded into obscurity. In 1988, the National League scouted and considered using

Pam Postema, a minor league Triple-A umpire to work some games, showing once again that Dumont was ahead of his time.²³

In spite of all the gimmicks and pageantry that Dumont tried to lure fans to the ballpark, the actual game of baseball is what made the NBC tournament extremely successful during the 1940s. The male population of the United States during these years belonged to more cohesive units, such as industrial factories, the United States military, and civil work programs. Thus, the war years saw the emergence of industrial-based teams, military teams, and Civilian Conservation Camp (CCC) teams in which a wider range of the male populace could participate in a higher level of baseball. In fact, the level of play achieved such a level of proficiency that professional baseball scouts attended the tournaments on a regular basis, a practice that continues to this day.

Dumont's innovations and promotions proved to be popular with the fans. From 1935, the first year of the tournament, until 1945, the tenth anniversary, Dumont's profits soared from \$19,000 to \$36,000.²⁴ With each passing year, the level of competitive baseball also increased. However, to ignore the external forces that surrounded the world and their impact on the national tournament would not be honest. The addition of major league caliber players certainly helped draw fans in the 1940s. Dumont's genius coupled with these events helped semi-pro baseball in Wichita survive the depression years and flourish during the subsequent war years.

NOTES

1. Bob Broeg, *Baseball's Barnum: Ray "Hap" Dumont & The National Baseball Congress* (Wichita, Kansas: The Center for Entrepreneurship at Wichita State University, 1989), 34.
2. Organized baseball consisted of the American and National Leagues and all of their Minor League affiliates. Unorganized baseball consisted of semi-professional baseball and amateur baseball.
3. Dale Mullen, "Ray Dumont, Wichita Baseball Promoter, Dies," *Wichita Beacon*, July 4, 1971, 1.
4. Jeffrey L. Tully, "New Deal Construction Relief Projects: Wichita, Kansas, a decade of change" (M.A. Thesis, Wichita State University, 1994), 46.

5. The teams that came and went in the Wichita area prior to the 1935 establishment of the NBC tournament were: the Braves (1887), the Eagles (1896), the Jabbers (1905-07), the Jobbers (1908-13), the Witches (1914, 1917-1920), the Wolves (1915-16), the Izzies (1921-26), the Larks (1927-28), and the Aviators (1930-33).

6. Broeg, 43.

7. A team completely made up of nine brothers.

8. Pete Lightner, "Raymond Dumont Announces Field for National Nines," *Wichita Eagle*, July 31, 1935, B1.

9. Broeg, 43.

10. Kyle McNary, "Satchel Stages A Show," North Dakota Baseball History/Pitch Black Negro League site, <http://www.pitchblackbaseball.com/northdakotabaseball.html>. [accessed October 19, 2005] 2000-01.

11. Broeg, 43.

12. Harold Seymour, Ph.D., *Baseball: The People's Game* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992), 285.

13. James A. Percoco, "Baseball and World War II: A Study of the Landis-Roosevelt Correspondence, <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/sport/percoco.html>. October 31, 2005 [accessed October 31, 2005].

14. Mondore.

15. Ibid.

16. George Sisler replaced Honus Wagner as commissioner after the 1938 tournament. See Broeg, 62.

17. "Jackie Robinson Breaks Baseball's Color Barrier, 1945," *Eyewitness to History*, <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com>. (2005).

18. Ibid., 93.

19. Associated Press, "Semi-Pros to Let Mr. Fan in on all 'Beefs' at Games," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1940, 20.

20. Broeg, 13.

21. United Press, "Semipro Baseball to Experiment with Old Problem," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1940, 14.

22. Broeg, 98.

23. Ibid., 98.

24. Broeg, 101.