

Dimensions of Living

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Play ball!

Brooklyn Athletics kick off 2014 season this Saturday

By ANTHONY LIFRIERI

This week is opening day for Major League Baseball, but they're not the only boys of summer making a comeback. The Brooklyn Athletics Base Ball Club will hold its opening day with round robin play against the Flemington Neshanock and the Elizabeth Resolutes at Atlantic Park on the Smithtown Historical Society property located at 239 Middle Country Road in Smithtown, Saturday, April 5 at 10 a.m. Games will run throughout the day. Admission is free.

The 19th century exhibition team, based in Smithtown, draws its inspiration from baseball's first dynasty, the Brooklyn Athletics. The Athletics were the first recognized champions of the National Association of Base Ball Players, a forerunner of Major League Baseball, and held the national championship multiple years through the mid to late 19th century. Over the years, the original Athletics evolved to the Brooklyn Bridegrooms, then the Brooklyn Dodgers and currently exists today as the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"It's very interesting to learn the lineage of a team as popular as the Dodgers," Athletics co-captain and shortstop Dean Emma said. "Where they came from, where they played, the name changes and the historical point of view; it's cool

to learn how baseball started way back 150 years ago."

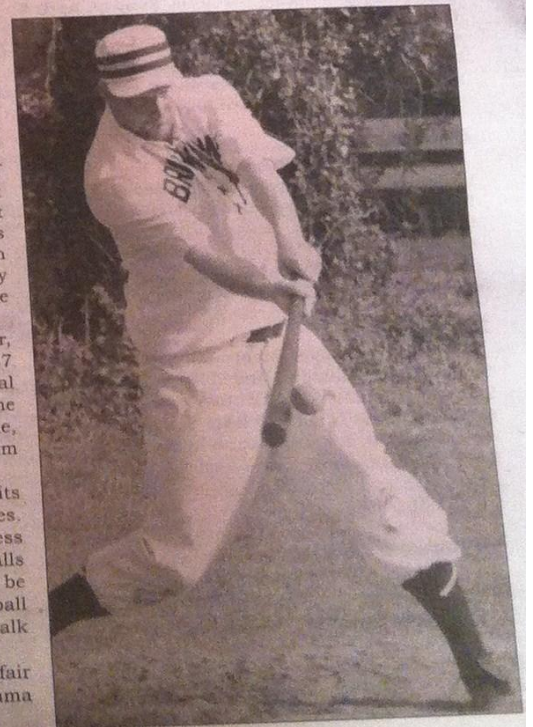
This season also marks the 150th anniversary of the Athletics 1864 championship team that went an undefeated 19-0. "It's going to be a difficult feat to replicate because we play twice as many games as they did," Mr. Emma said. "A lot of teams in the area play primarily 1864 rules, so when they do research and find out who the champions were from back then it's kind of humbling."

Most weekends from April through November, the Athletics will play a schedule of at least 37 games at Atlantic Park at the Smithtown Historical Society and around the country. However, the team does not follow rules of the modern game, but uses rules of the 19th century when the team was in its heyday.

While the game is fundamentally the same as its modern counterpart, there are several differences. Walks and balks advance all runners regardless of a force, three balls constitute a walk, foul balls don't count as strikes, not all pitches need to be called, and outs can be made by catching the ball on a single hop. Mr. Emma said the one-hop, walk rules are the greatest differences in the game.

"If the umpire deems a third pitch ball, or unfair pitch, all runners move up a base," Mr. Emma

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Catch olde fashioned baseball this weekend

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said. "If there is a runner on third and the batter walks, it doesn't have to be a force for the runners to advance. They can score an ace (run) without being forced which makes a big difference."

"If caught on one bounce it's an out which can neutralize big power hitters who can hit the ball over 300 feet," Mr. Emma said. "It's a great thing about the game we all like. Every team has players from 18 to 60-years-old, so it really makes the game about the strategy of placement, defense and smart baserunning."

Each player on the team also receives a nickname. These include "The Dream" for Mr. Emma, "Flash" for Kevin Harrison, "The Butcher" for Nick Baruso, and "Hammy" for Frank Obidenzo.

"It was a commonality of baseball back then," Mr. Emma said. "The guys got together for exercise after work and made nicknames for each other. It was a fun thing at first, but as time went on it became more of a routine for every player to receive a nickname based either on their name or something that happened when they started playing. Every team that replicates 19th century baseball does it."

Each weekend, Mr. Emma looks forward to stepping on the field and going back in time. "It feels like living back in the 19th century," Mr. Emma said. "Even the people that come out and watch us play for the first time say it has an old feel because of the lingo, catchphrases and equipment. Everything we do is authentic from the black cleats to the accurate uniforms."

"That's the great thing about what we do," Mr. Emma continued. "We try not to be modern. We even drink out of tin cups. We also have respect for the other team and the umpire. It's all for love of the game."

Mr. Emma also enjoys playing at Atlantic Park. "I grew up in Smithtown and just bought a house in Smithtown, so there's nothing better. I feel I was meant to play in this setting," Mr. Emma said. "It's designed for both hitters and fielders. The quiriness of the field is also indicative of the fields back then. There are trees 260 feet from home plate and left field goes way out. There are animals behind home plate and woods that add a very old fashioned feeling to it. It's like another world."

The season begins with round robin play against Flemington Neshanock and the Elizabeth Resolutes. "They're two teams from New Jersey that we have good relationships with," Mr. Emma said. "We're close with their captains and core guys that play year after year. We're looking forward to opening with them."

The season will also take the Atlantics on the road to states like New Jersey, Delaware, Michigan and Rhode Island. "It takes a lot of time and dedication to travel, but it's great," Mr. Emma said. "If you develop a good reputation, other clubs will travel to you or invite you to different festivals. Sometimes we travel with our families and sometimes it's just the guys. It puts things in perspective as to how it was back then. It lets us get away from everyday life and play ball with good people."

"My favorite thing is the camaraderie of the different teams," Mr. Emma said. "Every year we have a core group come back and play. It's kind of addicting once you get a taste of it. My teammates are the best in the game. If not for them, it wouldn't be half as fun. We have a special bond that's really hard to come by and can't be overestimated."

