

Elizabeth, Waterbury Claim 2008 Gotham Cup

Contributed by Joseph Lazauskas
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If you were walking near the North Meadow of Central Park this past weekend, you'd have thought you were in a time warp. Umpires monitoring home plate in black top hats, black tuxedo suits and purple vests?

They hollered "Warning on the striker! Warning on the hurler!" during the first balls and strikes of each at bat. Runners passing home requested to the tally keeper, "tally me, ma'am," who responded "a fine tally, sir." Fielders scattered throughout the diamond in baggy uniforms with embroidered bibs, cloth hats and red string ties. They fielded balls at ease with their bare hands. This was 19th century baseball at its best, and the third annual Gotham Cup.

Historical reenactments are rare in urban settings, and while Central Park is no stranger to odd sights, the Cup conjured surprise and delight in the passing fans. Many abandoned their plans to watch the display. Ten teams from throughout the northeast donned the dress of their historical teams and challenged each other in a two day tournament to determine two champions of old-time baseball, based on 1864 and 1891 rules, respectively. New York City's only vintage baseball team, the New York Gothams, hosted the Cup, which was sponsored by Gotham Baseball Magazine and the Dive Bar.

An enormous grill, \$2 Bud Lights and \$3 Bud and domestic pints which were affordable even with 19th century pocket change. Between games, the old-time players mixed amongst the patrons sipping their Dewar's drink specials brought a saloon feel to the sports bars' swank interior. Adding even more charm to the festivities was the sight of Dive Bar owner Lee Seinfeld and event planner Danni D'Orsi greeting the players and their families as they helped serve drinks, bus tables and host a heck of a party.

All weekend long, the Dive Bar offered a second home to the tournament, serving \$1.50 hot dogs on an Even Friday's rainstorm, which delayed Saturday's opening games from 10:00am to 1:00pm, didn't get Seinfeld or his staff off their game. Despite dozens of players showing up to the Dive Bar to wait out the delay, looking for food and drink that wasn't supposed to be ready until 2pm or later, Seinfeld marshaled his troops into action.

"There's no such thing as an easy day in the restaurant business," said Seinfeld. "And if you can't handle the unexpected, you shouldn't be in the restaurant business."

As for the games themselves, this was New York baseball at its purest. It truly incorporated New York City; though all the teams had set rosters that traveled to New York to play two to three of the 40-60 games they will play this season, but still, some newly acquired fans joined in on the action.

"We were playing our game [on the adjacent diamond]," said Mike Vines, a former UCLA baseball player wearing his 1864 Talbot (MD) Fair Plays baseball uniform for the first time, "and the guys were walking by in their uniforms and carrying their equipment. They looked over and said 'real men don't use gloves.' So we had to come and check it out."

"The ball hurts a little bit when you catch it with your hand," said Vines' friend, Brandon Knox, who also joined the Fair Plays. "You catch a line drive in the belly and you've just got to hold onto it."

Besides for the ban on gloves, the 1864 rules require a sharp learning curve: pitchers can only pitch underhand; the pitcher's mound is 45 feet away, not 60; balls that hit fair and roll foul are live balls; and balls caught on one hop are outs. Even experienced players had to be reminded of more obscure rules.

"If you get picked off on third base, the person who follows you leads off the next inning," Gotham captain and tournament organizer Ken "Trolley Car" Schlapp told his team before their first game. "So you could potentially bat twice in a row. "You don't have to tag when a ball is on a bounce."

"I tend to forget some rules," Schlapp admitted.

The 1891 rules are closer to the modern game. Pitchers throw overhand from 55 feet away, catchers have thick mitts, and thin, leather gardening-style gloves are optional. Each team played two games on Saturday, and the top two 1864 and 1891 teams battled for the championships on a rainy, windy Sunday. Unlike other historical reenactments, there were no predetermined results, and the mood shifted from light hearted fun to serious competition.

The 1891 championship between rival ball clubs Glen Head Zig Zags and Elizabeth Athletic Club (pictured, above right) featured five hit by pitches, constant verbal disputes, and a near brawl after an Elizabeth runner bowled over the catcher at home plate. Elizabeth took an 8-5 lead into the bottom of the ninth, closed the gap to 8-7 and put the trying run on third with one out. Elizabeth long time captain and patriarch Paul Salamone showed more fire than any New York manager, screaming "focus!" and "keep your head in the game!" constantly to his younger players. Terrific defense ended the contest. A diving, chest block at shortstop on a line drive and a bare handed catch in foul territory by first baseman Michael Bernes ended the game.

But all's well that ends well, as the teams lined up to congratulate each other in a traditional V, exchanging speeches and cheers of "Hip Hip Hoorah!" (as pictured left)

"There were a lot of special moments on the field," Salamone said. "We love playing you guys. They're always great ball games. They always go to the wire. This is what it's about."

In the 1864 championship, the Waterbury Connors, a team led by high school teacher Jim "Crazy Legs" Wigren with many of his former students on the roster, beat the Talbot County Fair Plays of Maryland 28-11.

Afterwards, all the teams returned to a packed Dive Bar for celebration and a trophy presentation with 1969 New York Mets champion and Gotham Baseball Magazine Senior Editor Art Shamsky.

It was a tremendous honor and privilege to meet Mr. Shamsky," sad Salamone. "It was a great tournament."

The 2008 Gotham Cup was the biggest yet, and with what Gotham Baseball Magazine and The Dive Bar have in store for next year, his figures to be an event that will be in Gotham for years to come.

Huzzah!