

Publication: The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press

Vintage baseball revived in Bridgehampton

By [Cailin Brophy](#)

Sep 22, 08 8:22 PM



Rich Ness, aka "Tree" was the starting pitcher for the Atlantics on Saturday. CAILIN BROPHY

[see all images](#)

Video



Email this article

Print this article

Get news alerts

A closer look revealed the bright orange of a Gatorade cooler, perched on a bench, peeking out from underneath a worn, drab cloth. Every so often, a player would sneak a sip from a bottled water or bright red energy drink. Aside from that—and the cars that slowed down to cast a curious glance at the people on the field on Corwith Avenue in Bridgehampton—there were no other visible signs that this was not the 19th century.

Players from the Atlantic Base Ball Club and the Bridgeport Orators—both members of the Alliance of Vintage Base Ball Clubs—took part in a doubleheader on Saturday, giving the community a taste of vintage baseball, and it was clear from the opening pitch that these players take both the game and its authenticity seriously.

The teams are made up of a group of players ranging in age and ability level, but what they have in common is a love for the game in what they say is its purest form, when gloves and batting helmets were not yet a part of the game. The Atlantics' home field is on the grounds of the Smithtown Historical Society, but both they and the Orators spend their weekends from April to October competing in games around the northeast, sometimes traveling as far as Ohio or Maryland.

The Atlantics were established in 1997 as a re-creation of the 19th century Brooklyn Atlantics, a team that was originally organized in 1855 and played games at the Capitoline Grounds in Brooklyn. The original Atlantics team was recognized as National Champion in 1864 and 1865. As a nod to that team, current reprisal of the squad plays by the rules of 1864. The players also wear period garb, with replicas of old uniforms and caps, and they even purchase their pants from a company that makes clothes for the Amish community.

Highlights include no gloves, underhand pitching and a round home plate. Foul balls were not counted as strikes and balls that initially struck the ground in fair territory were considered fair, even if they bounced foul inside the first or third baselines. A ball caught on the fly or the first bounce resulted in an out, and runners were not

permitted to overrun first base. While the current Atlantics have been around for little more than a decade, many members of the team have been playing vintage baseball for even longer. Ed Elmore, aka “Pigtail”—named for his long hair—started playing vintage baseball in 1992 for the Freeport Athletics and is now a captain for the Atlantics. On Saturday, he was the umpire and dressed the part, complete with black top hat, black coat with tails and a silk maroon vest.

Elmore has made himself a student of the game and has done plenty of research on the old rules, which is a necessity for playing vintage baseball correctly. Games played in 1864, for instance, had a slightly different set of rules than games played in 1898 or 1884.

Saturday’s games were a mixture of baseball at its finest, with good sportsmanship, several surprisingly athletic plays, throws and catches and a healthy amount of competitive fire mixed in. The players are not afraid to dive after hard hit balls and, they say, have the war wounds to show for it.

“We’ve had a few broken fingers,” Elmore admitted.

The players maintain that gloves are “for sissies.” The Atlantics brochure goes a step further, stating, “No gloves, no steroids,” in capital letters.

There is also, apparently, no discord on the team, according to Frank “Shakespeare” VanZant, who says that is one of the main reasons he enjoys playing.

“I’ve played baseball all my life, and there is no baseball as fun as this,” he said.

“Softball doesn’t give me the same pleasure or have the challenge of trying to catch without a glove. It’s also a great fellowship of guys and everybody wants to win.”

The nostalgia of the game also appeals to VanZant.

“You can feel like you’re out in a cow pasture on farm land and you’ve just finished all your farm chores and now you’re enjoying a game with people in the community,” he said. “That’s how baseball was played back then.”

Older players seeking a slice of history aren’t the only ones who’ve caught the vintage bug. There were several young players on both teams as well. Pitcher Rich “Tree” Ness plays along with his sons, Sean Ness and Brian Ness—dubbed “Toothpick” and “Splinter” in keeping with the theme of their father’s moniker. Rookies, like the Ness brothers and 29-year-old Mike Hill are referred to as “fresh meat.” According to VanZant, veteran players will often take advantage of their inexperience with the nuances of the old rules. VanZant said that one common mistake made by new players is to overrun first base. According to the rules of the time, if a player overran first, the first baseman needed only to attempt to make a tag to record the out. Hill joined the team on a whim, after seeing signs advertising the Atlantics game while he was riding his bike near Smithtown.

“I wanted to try something new, and I was hooked right away,” he said. “I loved it. It’s just the raw nature of the game, it’s simplistic and it’s baseball in its infancy.”

The Atlantics and Orators will continue to play games until the middle of October. The season will conclude with the league tournament on Saturday, October 18, at Elkton Landing in Maryland.

For more information about the Atlantics and vintage baseball, visit geocities.com/atlanticbbc.