

SPORTS IN NEW ALBANY'S PAST

“Take me out to the ball game, take me out to the park.” Those words from a popular song of yesteryear reflect the popularity of baseball as the great American sport in cities and towns throughout the nation. And in New Albany, too, going out to the ball park was a favorite diversion in years gone by – in days when ball parks and grandstands were a part of the New Albany scene.

In the days before the Civil War, baseball, and indeed most any type of organized sports, were almost unknown in the United States. But one of the unexpected by-products of the great civil conflict of the 1860s was the phenomenal spread of baseball to all parts of the United States – both on the sandlots and as a professional sport. Abner Doubleday of Cooperstown, N.Y., is credited with being the originator of baseball. And it is perhaps significant in sports history in this area that Capt. Doubleday was a member of the Union garrison at Fort Sumter along with Lt. Jefferson Davis, a New Albany native, at the time the Civil War started.

Davis later resided in Clark County and returned there after the war. Whether he brought back baseball with him or not is unknown, but it was in the years after the war that baseball came to New Albany. It is known that baseball became a favorite game in the army camps and that returned veterans took back a taste for the game to localities all over the nation.

Baseball in its early days in New Albany was strictly an amateur sport, with numerous teams here playing each other and teams from Jeffersonville, Louisville and other nearby areas. Teams were often organized on the spur of

the moment and as quickly disbanded. But so popular did the sport become that professionalism soon entered the picture and by the 1880s the New Albany Browns, a semi-professional team, was playing to packed stands at the old ball park that extended north from Culbertson along 15th Street and east toward Vincennes. The stand and bleachers along 15th Street accommodated several thousand spectators.

After the turn of the century the focus of baseball activities was shifted to the new Glenwood Park at the end of Spring Street along Silver Creek. The Glenwoods, a semi-professional team, played at the diamond set up in the new Park. The local Red Men Lodge and the Calumet Club teams also played there.

Another fenced ball park with grandstand was located on State Street at Cottom in the early years of this century in the neighborhood where the Butcher Seventh Street and Cherry where the North Side Athletics played about the time of World War I.

New Albany's last ball park disappeared about 15 years ago. Located north of Charlestown Road near Silver Street, this field was obliterated when the Mann Court Subdivision was built. In its later years this was the home field of the Bensinger team, but in earlier years the New Albany Browns had played there.

Basketball, today far and away the top sport here and all through the Hoosier state, got its start in New Albany at the Y.M.C.A. built in the 1890s at Main and Pearl. The old building was torn down about four years ago to make way for the new Municipal Parking Lot. The Y.M.C.A. had the first indoor gymnasium in New Albany and soon intramural teams were formed to play the brand new game of basketball which had been developed as an indoor game for winter months when outdoor sports were impossible. Four teams were formed – the Anchors, the Arrows, the Keystones and the Stars.

The new game didn't attract too much attention in its first years. Then the momentum began to build up. The first New Albany High School basketball team was organized about 1902 and played home games at the Y.M.C.A. It wasn't a particularly strong aggregation in the early years, and in 1904 lost every game of the season. But in 1906 high school basketball here got a shot in the arm with the completion of the new high school on Spring Street with an indoor gymnasium.

Then the following year the organization of the team as it is managed today came into being. Before 1907 the high school team operated rather independently of the school, playing non-school teams in the Y.M.C.A. League. But that year the captain was suspended from play because of low grades. The team then claimed it was operating as an independent organization and the captain returned to the team. As a result, the School Board took action to put all high school athletics under the direct control of the school – just as it is today.

Football in New Albany will always be associated with the name of Harry Buerk. The first football team at New Albany High School was organized in the fall of 1900 and two years later Earl Walker, a faculty member, spurred school interest in the team. But when Buerk arrived from Borden College in 1904 to become high school principal he took over the training and management of the team and put the Bulldogs in the top rank. It is fitting that the High School athletic field is named in his honor.

Through the years New Albany has contributed many greats and near-greats to the sports world. Best known today are Billy Herman, star infielder who became coach of the Brooklyn Dodgers and now is with the Milwaukee club, and Jim Henry, now a student at Vanderbilt and second leading scorer in the Southeastern Basketball Conference.

And today, with basketball in the headlines, it's interesting to turn back to the New Albany High School annual, the Vista for 1905 for a quote. "We trust," wrote a student that year, "that the crowning games in years to come at dear old New Albany High School will be basketball."

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