

Baseball in Syracuse

By Erik Strohl

Located about 90 miles west of Cooperstown, NY, Syracuse has a rich baseball history of its own. Local historian Ron Gersbacher's research has revealed men and boys are known to have played baseball in its various early forms, including that version known as "town ball" or the "Massachusetts Game," in the early 1830s near Clinton Square. In fact, impromptu games of ball were so popular that by the mid-1840s, it was necessary to enact an ordinance to prohibit ballplaying in both Clinton and Hanover squares. In 1856, *The Syracuse Standard* noted that "Ball playing is the fashion now. It's excellent exercise, and the men as well as youngsters enjoy it."

The Syracuse Base Ball Club became the city's first organized amateur team in 1858, playing in a vacant lot on Otisco Street on the west side. At first most matches were of the intrasquad variety, but soon the club was playing other teams from Cazenovia, Utica, and Otego. After the Civil War in 1865, a new team called the Central City Ball Club was the first to leave the local environs and go on tour. In 1867, it won a gold trophy ball for beating Auburn, Utica, and Rochester and another trophy ball for defeating the Niagara Club on its home turf in Buffalo.



Syracuse Stars, 1888



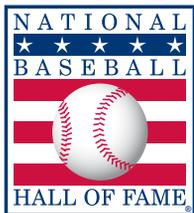
Syracuse MacArthur Stadium

The city's most famous 19th century team, the Syracuse Stars Base Ball Club, was formed in June 1866 by captain and star-pitcher John Dunn among others. In 1876, the Stars switched from amateur to professional with the financial backing of local businessmen and posted a record of 46-13, beating the likes of the St. Louis Browns and Chicago White Stockings. Their star pitcher, Harry McCormick, was one of the first to perfect a curve ball, and the team rode his success to national recognition in the late 1870s.

In 1878, the Stars won the International Association (now League), leading to the Stars joining the top-level National League for the 1879 campaign. Unable to keep up with the stiff competition, they abandoned the season part way through. After a brief respite, pro ball returned to the area in 1885. In 1888, Syracuse's first two African-American ballplayers, Moses Fleetwood Walker and Bob Higgins, took to the field. Moses and his brother Welday had become the first black major leaguers when they had played for Toledo of the American Association in 1884.

The Stars would go on to play in various minor leagues and at various levels, with membership in the New York State League and then the International League. During these years, future Hall of Famers Grover Cleveland Alexander and Jim Bottomley spent time with the Stars. By the 1920s they were the top-level farm club for the St. Louis Cardinals. After a brief hiatus, International League ball returned to town when the newly-christened Chiefs arrived from Jersey City, NJ in 1934. Except for a brief span from mid-1957 through 1960, the Chiefs have been a fixture of minor league baseball in Syracuse. Over that time they have played at various levels, but most predominantly in Triple-A ball. They have been affiliated with numerous major league teams, including the Reds, Phillies, Tigers, Yankees, Blue Jays, and Nationals.

The Chiefs have won eight International League titles since 1934, with the most recent coming in 1976. Their alumni include Chris Carpenter, Ron Guidry, Roy Halladay, Fred McGriff, Thurman Munson, Hank Sauer, and most recently, Washington Nationals' phenom Stephen Strasburg. With a baseball history well over 150 years and still going strong, one can expect to see this legacy continue.



Erik Strohl is the senior director of exhibits and collections for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Images provided by the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. This is one of a series written for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2011.