





play old-time ball!

vintage base ball expands in the merrimack valley

by **Jill Gambon**
photos by **Rob Huntley**

On an ungroomed expanse of grass at Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, the Newburyport Clamdiggers are taking the field. The Clamdiggers, one of the newest additions to the Essex Base Ball Association's vintage baseball league, are down by three runs to the Lowell Baseball Nine.

"Striker to the line, bottom of the third," bellows umpire Jeff Peart, who stands behind home plate decked out in a black frock coat and top hat.

A Lowell Nine player stands at the plate, wielding a long, thin wooden bat. The pitcher underhands the ball and the batter swings, connecting with a loud "thwack." The ball sails in a wide arc before it lands in the outfield and bounces. The right fielder grabs it.

"Out on the bounce," Peart announces.

Some of the spectators look puzzled. "Out on the bounce?"

Yes, according to 1861 rules, which are what the Essex Base Ball teams use, catching a ball on a bounce is an out. It is just one of the quirky features of vintage baseball, a game that is attracting a growing number of players and fans in the Merrimack Valley.

"It's addictive," says Brian Sheehy, the driving force behind the Essex Base Ball Association. "It's competitive and it's a lot of fun."

Sheehy got turned on to vintage ball as a student at Merrimack College. For Sheehy, a die-hard baseball fan majoring in history, old-time baseball was a perfect marriage of his interests. In July 2002, he heard that the Danvers Historical Society was organizing a vintage team — the Essex Base Ball Club. He went to a game, started playing and has been hooked ever since.

David Leopardi throws the ball in from a true 'outfield.'
Fielders in the league do not play with gloves.



summer fun & travel guide

In the 11 years since the Essex association was formed, dozens of players have joined — the teams are open to anyone who wants to play. To accommodate the growing number of players, a three-team league was formed last year. The Clamdiggers, the Lowell Baseball Nine and the Lynn Live Oaks are based on actual teams that played in the region in the 19th century. In 2013, the league was expanded to include the Portsmouth Rockinghams and the Essex Base Ball Club. The latter has become the travel team for the association, hosting teams from across the country.

Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, which is owned by Historic New England, serves as the league's home field. Essex Base Ball Club players travel around the Northeast and as far away as Ohio and California to play other vintage teams. They have even played on Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, N.Y. In 2011, the league lined up sponsors for the first time to help defray expenses.

The players are outfitted in 19th century replica uniforms. Under 1861 rules, they don't use gloves or catcher's mitts or any protective equipment. There are no called balls or strikes, so a batter swings away until he makes contact.

"Originally, I thought the idea of playing without a glove was crazy, but you get the hang of it," says Clamdiggers captain Drew Murphy, who started playing in 2005, when he was still a college student. "Everybody plays hard. It's definitely more grueling than a round of golf."

Murphy liked the game so much that he recruited three of his college friends to play. Last year, he convinced his father, Kevin, to join them.

"I coached Drew when he was starting



Top: Brian "Cappy" Sheehy is the driving force behind the league. Middle: Games are played using old-time rules, and include the occasional goat. Bottom: Jeff Peart serves as the umpire and Master of Ceremonies.

out in baseball, so this is really something to be playing with him and his friends,” Kevin Murphy says. “I’m 55 and I’m a rookie. Once you’re on the field, you feel like a young kid.”

For Patrick Cook, who played in the Philadelphia Phillies minor league system 20 years ago, vintage baseball fills a void that other sports don’t.

“You can have a bad game and still have a great time,” says Cook, who handcrafts the bats that he and his teammates use out of 100-pound blocks of ash wood. Determined to make the bats himself — the ones used in vintage ball are longer and thinner than the bats used by today’s ballplayers — Cook bought a lathe on eBay to do the job. He now turns out seven or eight bats a season.

The vintage games draw crowds of a few dozen up to several thousand. The players like to interact with spectators, who are encouraged to give the game a try. Sheehy hands out copies of the rules between innings so people can follow the action on the field, while Peart, the umpire, deciphers his calls for baffled onlookers.

“I’m a bit of a ham,” Peart says of his role as the game’s unofficial master of ceremonies. “I like to explain the rules to people. You get into some great discussions.”

Sheehy, now a history teacher at North Andover High School, sees vintage ball as a unique attraction that will draw people to the area. He hopes to add more players and expand the league again.

“There’s great camaraderie,” he says. “We connect with teams from all over the country and bond over the fact that we do something unique.”

Essex Base Ball Club

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Top left: Alex Nauffts plays the outfield. Top right and middle: Dan Sullivan at bat. Bottom left: Jason Cantel at Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, the league’s home field. Bottom right: Nick Cantelli waits for his turn at bat ... someday.

