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Baseball Arrives in Holland: ***A history of the origins of baseball in Holland, Michigan***

by Michael Van Beek

On September 12, 1902, N. J. Whelan, the editor of the *Holland City News*, reported that the local baseball team had been robbed of a victory against Ionia. He began by claiming that the disorderly fans in Ionia had provoked the umpire with such "pestering and abuse" that he quit umpiring and left the field. Then in the 7th inning, with Holland leading 4-0, the game spiraled out of control. After an Ionia base hit with runners on base, the Holland pitcher, Neal Ball, promptly headed to the backstop behind the catcher, Tony Vander Hill. While Ball was waiting to fetch a possible bad throw to home plate, the Ionia on-deck batter marched up and kicked him in the wrist. Then all hell broke loose. A group of angry and frustrated Ionia fans rushed from their seats to home plate. They mobbed Vander Hill, who had by then caught the throw from the field, and held him down. All three Ionia baserunners circled the bases to make the score 4-3. The Ionia fans quickly returned to their seats after the runs had scored, and amazingly the Holland team decided to finish the game. With Ball pitching with a sore wrist, the Ionia team scored six more runs, and Holland lost 9-4. Whelan summed up this occurrence, claiming that there was "more rowdyism to the square inch in Ionia than in any city in Michigan."

Events like this help define the rich history of Holland baseball. Although this type of boisterous event in the Holland versus Ionia game proved rather rare, the story of baseball in Holland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is certainly a tale worth telling. The *Holland Sentinel* claimed in its obituary of "Java" VerSchure (one of the early Holland baseball enthusiasts) that "Holland's baseball history is a story in itself;

in fact, it is outstanding..." However, even though this story might be outstanding, the development of baseball in Holland was a problematic matter. Indeed, there were many failed attempts at putting together a successful team and a relating positive baseball atmosphere before anything permanent could be established in Holland in the early 20th century.



Hope College/Joint Archives

Hope Collège Baseball Team, 1906

The very first known game of baseball in Holland's history was recorded in the *Holland City News* on June 1, 1872. It was a match between a team of Hope College students and a Grand Haven team. It is unclear just what type of team this Grand Haven team was; it could have been high school team or perhaps some type of amateur team. Regardless, Hope won the game 52-38. The next week the same teams played a rematch. This time the Grand Haven team came out on top 30-12. It is not abnormal that

(Continued on page 2)

From the Director

This entire issue of the Joint Archives *Quarterly* is devoted to the great sport of baseball and its part in Holland's history as written by one of Hope College's very own baseball stars, Michael Van Beek. After Michael spent many hours with us in the reading room preparing to write this story for a history class, I asked him to donate a copy for the archives. After reading it I knew it belonged in our next newsletter, and we are pleased to share it with you. Along with some great photographs from local collectors Randy Vande Water, Lois Jesiek-Kayes and the Grand Rapids Public Library, the story of baseball in Holland comes alive. The footnotes have been removed due to space, but feel free to stop by the Joint Archives to read the paper in its entirety.

The Joint Archives of Holland was recently honored with the May 13th television broadcast of its latest video production, *Tulip Time in Holland*, on the local Public Broadcasting Services station WGVU. This video could not have been completed or reached this level of excellence without the help of Hope College's Dr. David Schock, students Jason Kehrer and Daniel Morrison, and local videographer Phil Blauw. Future video projects include the Latino experience in West Michigan and the history of the pleasure boat building industry in the Holland area.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Baseball Arrives in Holland (continued from page 1)

the college team in Holland was the first to have a game reported in the newspaper. In fact, the first account of a college game in the United States was reported on July 1, 1859. It was a match between Williams College and Amherst College in which Amherst won 73-22. The score of this game and of the Holland-Grand Haven game seem unusually high, and quite inconsistent with the relatively low scoring game of baseball that is played today. The type of baseball played in these instances probably resembled a game of slow-pitch softball. In these games, the pitcher was actually trying to let the hitter make contact with the ball. Therefore, scoring a lot of runs was not unusual in these games, and "there were, therefore, endless bursts of action and limitless quick sprinting with very little dead time in between."

So far as is known, the game in 1872 marked the beginning of college baseball in Holland. Finding the date of the first amateur team in Holland is more difficult and compared with articulating baseball's roots in America. J. C. Post, a local

attorney and baseball supporter, provided one of the only clues to discovering the beginnings of amateur baseball in Holland when he claimed in 1901 that he played for a team called the "Ottawa" in the early 1870s. The exact origin of this "pioneer club" is unclear because Post did not specify a beginning date, but merely stated that they were fond of baseball before 1871. Furthermore, it is difficult to specify what type of team this was. It could have simply been a recreational team that scrimmaged amongst themselves or possibly a competitive team that played nearby towns. The most accurate assumption would be that it resembled a group similar to the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, since Holland was still a very small farming community with relatively weak traveling capabilities. Additionally, the "Ottawa" probably played a version of baseball similar to that typical of many college games during this time.

The next mention of baseball activity in Holland was in 1878. Whether there were no other baseball ventures besides the Ottawa team during this six or seven-year period is unknowable based on the newspaper. On May 25, 1878, the *City News* detailed a meeting of town citizens with the goal of organizing "a club of sufficient numbers to be able to practice among themselves, and to do such other business as the assemble may deem necessary." After this mention of the possibility of putting together a team, there was very little about baseball referred to in the *Holland City News*. It is hard to figure out whether the lack of baseball reportage in the paper was a sign of the lack of baseball activity in Holland at this time. Indeed, one of the reasons for this lack of baseball coverage may be contributed to the editor of the paper, Gerrit Van Schelven, who simply may not have been attuned to the idea of including baseball happenings in the local newspaper. Indeed, during this time period, there are only sporadic mentions of baseball activity in Holland. From 1878 to 1887, only four blurbs about baseball exist in the *City News*.

Things did pick up in 1888 when a new team named "The Peerless" formed. It played the local Hope College team often but also played Grand Haven, Spring Lake, and South Haven – all towns along Lake Michigan and less than twenty-five miles from Holland. It is hard to say whether this team traveled by boat to its games, or whether it used the local railroad – the Michigan Lake Shore Railroad Co., which was constructed and operational by 1870. The claim could be made that since the opposing teams were all located on the lakeshore, they probably primarily journeyed by boat. However, it should also be noted that the railroad connected Holland with Allegan and Muskegon, which would have provided the team with a viable route to Grand Haven, Spring Lake, or South Haven. Even though "The Peerless" could apparently afford to travel frequently, financial trouble

probably ended their tenure as Holland's premier amateur team. On July 28, 1888, the *City News* reported that one hundred fans showed up for a game between "The Peerless" (now being referred to as simply the "Holland City Base Ball Club") and Spring Lake. However, the team ended up losing money on the game even though they hosted it. The account of "The Peerless" demonstrated that financial backing was one of the main concerns for any baseball team starting up in Holland at this time.

After "The Peerless" collapsed, baseball again became a rarity in the *City News*. Gerrit Van Schelven was still the editor and from perusing through the newspaper at this time, it is obvious that he was more interested in local and national politics than in the social development of Holland. Titles such as "Washington Gossip" and "Holland's Municipality" frequently occupied Van Schelven's editorial page. As with the previous period in which baseball was rarely mentioned, it is hard to tell whether this reflected a personal preference of Van Schelven or simply the fact that there was not a lot of baseball activity in Holland at this time. Even though there was little mention of local baseball happenings, Van Schelven did print the standings of the professional teams throughout the country. From 1890 through 1892, these standings were on the second page of the paper regularly, but starting in 1893, Van Schelven began featuring them more sporadically. By 1894, the standings could no longer be found in the paper. Again, it is difficult to specify whether this is a direct reflection of Holland's lack of interest in baseball or a personal preference of Van Schelven.

Despite the fact that Van Schelven quit running the national standings of the professional leagues in 1894, May of this same year was the beginning of another surge in Holland baseball that actually lasted longer than just a few years. The *City News* reported the completion of a new fenced-in baseball park. The fencing surrounding the park obviously provided the local teams with an easier method of collecting admissions fees from fans. Ticket prices were twenty cents for men, fifteen cents for boys under fifteen, and ladies were admitted free of charge. Since expenses were such a crucial element to the development and lives of these local ball clubs, the erection of this new field was very important. Indeed, the very same day that the new ballpark was mentioned, the *City News* reported that a team sponsored by the *Ottawa County Times*, a broader based newspaper, was scheduled to play on the new field. This team proved to be the primary amateur team at this time. The competition of the *Ottawa County Times* team, however, was rather limited. For the most part, they played college teams from Grand Rapids, Grand Haven, Douglas, and Fennville. None of these teams were more than twenty miles from Holland. In addition to the *Ottawa County Times* team, the *City News* described for

the first time a recreational game between teams composed of workers from different companies within Holland. On August 25, 1894, the printers squared up against the cigar makers on the new field and won 23-20.



Photo courtesy of Randy Vande Water.

*Baseball park located at
19th Street and College Avenue, c. 1900*

The new baseball facility, completed in 1894, clearly sparked new vigor into the baseball life of Holland. However, competitive amateur baseball had not yet become the focal point of the baseball activities in Holland yet. Rather, baseball existed for the next few years as a rather recreational sport. There was talk of creating new clubs to play new teams, but for the most part, these attempts failed. As witnessed before, failure to raise sufficient funds was probably the cause for this failure. Most of the teams that existed at this time were probably just young boys playing for fun. It is hard to determine if these were the only teams that existed in Holland at this time, because the paper did not specify what Holland team played when it reported the scores of games. Moreover, the *City News* only mentioned different team names when they were forming or collapsing. For instance, the *City News* does mention the formation of two teams, the Bluebirds and the Western Stars, whose average age was fifteen. The references to these two teams provide support for the idea that most of the teams that existed at this time in Holland were composed of young teenage boys. Furthermore, it should be noted that there was no mention of admission charges for these games during this period. Ticket sales would only be needed if the players on the team were being paid. Many of the games reported in the paper during this four-year span were not played at the new ball field, which had the capability of collecting admission prices easily. Instead, the fairgrounds of Holland and the college campus field were the location of many of the games that were reported in the paper at this time. In addition, most of Holland's competition at this time provides evidence that these teams were probably composed of teenagers. The Juniors of Zeeland were one of the teams that the Holland club played frequently. However, it may not have been the lack of adult amateur baseball in Holland that propelled the Holland

teams during this period to play many high school, college, and other young teams. Lack of peer competition at the amateur level might lead to games against younger opponents.

An editorial note on March 20, 1897, summarized the condition of baseball in Holland nicely during this period, "Holland has long been characterized by her lack of energy in the athletic lines in general..." This "lack of energy" in Holland could be attributed to a variety of factors. However, an incident during one of the local baseball games on August 25, 1894, may have affected the interest in baseball at this time. While Tony Vander Hill was hitting, the catcher in the Ionia incident, a freak accident transpired that nearly killed a teenage boy name Johnnie Van Landegend. The bat slipped out of Vander Hill's hands as he swung and flew over the fence, striking Johnnie square in the head. He was rushed to a doctor and diagnosed with a fractured skull. He eventually had to have surgery to remove pieces of the fractured skull that were imbedded into his brain. Even though Johnnie Van Landegend did recover completely, this accident in which a young boy was severely injured while simply attending a ball game could have significantly influenced the opinions about baseball of many of the people in Holland.

After this period when baseball was predominantly played by young teenage boys, the sport grew almost exponentially. Suddenly in 1899, the *City News* starts to regularly report more games and happenings of the Holland City Base Ball Club. A clear definition of how this team organized or why they began to appear in the newspaper at this time is difficult to articulate. One of the best possibilities could be the fact that a new editor replaced Van Schelven, who has been shown to be more concerned with regional and national political news than local social activity. Van Schelven moved on to become the postmaster of Holland, and N. J. Whelan, the editor who provided the account of the episode in Ionia in 1902, took over as chief editor of the *City News*. Whelan actually bought a share of the paper (owned by Mulder Bros. Publishing) and promised to continue in making the *Holland City News* an "exponent and

representative of the material, moral, and educational interests of Holland and its people." Indeed, although he praised Van Schelven's job as editor, when it came to supporting and printing news of the local baseball teams, Whelan manifested a different approach than Van Schelven. By May 12, Whelan had already printed the entire line-ups for both the Holland High School team and the team out of Hope College, something that Van Schelven rarely did. In the same issue that the high school and college line-ups were printed, Whelan stated, "It seems singular that Holland manifests so little interest in the great national game – baseball. We have good material here for a team. Who will furnish the enthusiasm and financial backing?" This plea by the editor obviously worked as he described two weeks later that "public spirited citizens of Holland have generously subscribed to a fund started for the maintenance of the Holland baseball club..." The Holland City Base Ball Club adopted a more proficient method of raising funds. Now they had the financial backing which had forced many of the previous Holland teams to fold.

In fact, the financial support was significant enough that Holland gave birth to many other teams in the 1899 season. A team rather similar to the Holland City Base Ball Club was founded. The *City News* gave details of several games between the Holland City Base Ball Club and the this newly formed team called the Holland Independents. Apparently, the Independents were not of the same caliber as the Holland City Base Ball Club, because they lost 12-1 in what was called the championship game for the city. Besides the rival games between these two city teams, Holland also witnessed many more recreational games between teams representing different businesses in 1899. In addition to the printers versus cigarmakers game that actually continued throughout the lackluster four year period of baseball before 1899, Holland saw businessmen battle clerks and farmers, and the workers of 7th Street play the workers of 8th Street.

There are many possible reasons why business baseball sprouted at this time. Harold Seymour states that this type of baseball originated "as a method of social control by businesses for motives of enlightened self-interest, such as increased production, less employee turnover, and above all, prevention of unionism and strikes." It seems unlikely that this would have been the motive of these businesses of Holland to increase the baseball activity among workers. To begin with, it seems logical that since baseball in Holland was clearly becoming more popular at this time, the recreational baseball being played more frequently amongst different businesses was a simply a natural response to this increase in popularity. Obviously, the businessmen, clerks, cigarmakers, printers, or farmers of Holland would be much more inclined to be interested in forming a team after watching



Hope College Joint Archives
Holland City News Editor N. J. Whelan (top), and staff members C. L. Mulder and B. A. Mulder, 1899

amateur baseball develop in the city. Another reason Seymour's explanation of why competitive baseball between businesses took rise is that business leaders feared the formation of unions, and baseball was a means to keep the workers happy. Since Holland's social life was deeply rooted in a conservative Calvinist mentality and traditionally opposed to unionism, it seems rather improbable that the fear of unionism would be a catalyst for the rise of business baseball in Holland.

Very little change occurred between the 1899 and 1900 seasons. From the beginning of the season, it was clear that there would be a definite attempt to raise funds for the team. In 1900, the *City News* did not list or report more games than the previous season, but the paper was filled with accounts of the efforts to raise money for the Holland City Base Ball Club. Indeed, Whelan intensely advocated raising financial support of the local team. One effort reported by Whelan was put together by the Zeeland Athletic Association. Near the beginning of the season, they decided to provide "baseball benefit entertainment." The Zeeland Cornet Band, a Hope quartette, another local quartette, and various recitations were to be the entertainment of the night. Even though this was part of the Zeeland Athletic Association, it must have been directly linked somehow to the Holland team, because their manager, John De Pree, was quoted as being very pleased with the results. In fact, the building of two new fields in 1900 are mentioned during the course of the season – one at Jenison Park and one just a few blocks from the original fenced-in field.

In general, however, the methods of raising money did not turn out to be very effective. Towards the end of the season, the editorial section of the paper repeatedly called for new ways of supporting the team, and gave evidence that the team was folding. Whelan stated, "If some good base ball sport is not furnished for the remainder of the season it is the fault of the fans." He was most likely implying that the Holland community did not raise sufficient funds. Additionally, Whelan reported a proposal to send around a petition to support the baseball team. Whoever signed the petition must support the team by contributing 25 cents per game, even if they did not attend the games. Another proposal was put together to reallocate the funds that are raised each year during the local fair from the football team to the Holland Base Ball Club. It is unlikely that any of these attempts to raise money actually had much of an effect on the team. One week after he called for additional funds and proposed a system to finance the team, the editor blamed a 10-1 loss on the lack of support and claimed that the team had "no incentive to practice." Although Whelan continued in his attempt to promote new ideas of raising funds and support for the team, the people of Holland generally failed to respond

to his calls for financial backing of the Holland City Base Ball Club.

The people of Holland came together in financial support after the failed season of 1900, and the Holland City Base Ball Club began to implement a more stable method of provided funds and organizing the team. This is evident since there are not nearly as many petitions by Whelan to raise money for the team during the 1901 season. Additionally, the organization of the team improved at this time. Most of this improvement can be linked to the work of Tony Vander Hill – the same man that nearly killed Johnnie Van Landegend and one of the victims of the debacle in Ionia in 1902. According to the *City News*, Vander Hill was thinking of moving to Holland for the summer of 1901 with the idea of putting together a top quality team. Vander Hill had been playing for a Grand Rapids team before this season, and he claimed that he could bring four of the best players from Grand Rapids to play in Holland. Whelan attempted to raise support for this idea by stating, "If an association is organized, a ball park fenced in, and a grand stand built" baseball could be "placed on a paying basis." The paper claimed that if this were to happen Vander Hill and his players from Grand Rapids would stay for the entire summer, and this is precisely what happened. Vander Hill assembled the team with players from Grand Rapids and stayed for the summer. In fact, after the season was over, he found a job for the winter and remained in Holland.

Recreational baseball was also reported in the paper alongside news of the Holland City Base Ball Club organized by Vander Hill, and there is no doubt that the businesses of Holland were playing against each other regularly again. In fact, there was a rather comical insert in the paper that proves this point exactly: "The fat men have challenged the lean men, the police officials have challenged the city officials, the Eighth Street business men have challenged the River Street business men, the letter carriers have challenged the printers and some interesting games will very likely be arranged." Whether all of these teams played is unimportant – the fact is that Holland obviously was home to a variety of recreational baseball activity in 1901.

As the number of games between the various Holland businesses was peaking during the season of 1901, the Holland City Base Ball Club similarly expanded and increased its competition. This increase in the amount of competition and games can be linked to the building of the Electric Interurban line that linked Holland to Grand Rapids. Indeed, many of the new competitors for Holland's team during this season were from Grand Rapids and the surrounding areas. They played such teams as the Blue Ladles and Garlands of Grand Rapids many times throughout the season. In fact, Holland

found its toughest competition in the McLachlan's Business School team – another club from Grand Rapids. They lost three straight times to this team, and the paper reports that the fans were bitterly disappointed that Holland could not defeat this team.



Hope College/Joint Archives

John "Jack" Schouten in his Interurbans baseball team uniform, c. 1900

Besides playing teams from Grand Rapids, Holland squared up against the teams that they had routinely played in the past – Grand Haven, Saugatuck, Douglas, and Whitehall. However, this season they began to play these same teams much more frequently. In fact, a deal was arranged to have fans who wanted to travel to Saugatuck on the Electric Interurban pay 30 cents to go down and see

Holland play. The *City News* reported that over one hundred spectators took advantage of this deal and accompanied the team to Saugatuck. Towards the end of the season, the Holland Base Ball Club played a five game series with the local team from Grand Haven. Furthermore, Holland also took part in a tournament in Big Rapids, which was over an 80-mile trip. It was considered the amateur tournament championship of West Michigan, and besides Holland, teams from Grandville, Zeeland, and Big Rapids fought for the \$50 prize for first place. Holland lost their very first game to Zeeland, which Whelan claimed was really a team consisting of some of the best players from the entire Grand Rapids area.

Baseball in Holland began to expand in other ways during the 1901 season. Indeed, attendance rose throughout most of the season. The *City News* reported several games in which over one hundred spectators saw a game. Improvements in travel throughout West Michigan also allowed fans to follow their team to nearby cities much more easily. From these facts, it is fair to suppose that Holland certainly began to accept the notion that was articulated by the Grand Haven *Tribune* at the time, "Nothing advertises a town more than a first class baseball team." Additionally, a more consistent form of organization began to take shape. The wrinkles of the previous years had been smoothed out, and the organization of the team became secure. Tony

Vander Hill and the players that he brought with him from Grand Rapids provided further leadership and organizational skills to the team. In summary, J. C. Post, a member of one of the original teams in Holland, concluded about the year, "The baseball season in Holland has proved successful in every respect."

The 1901 season indeed was one of the best that Holland had ever seen. The increased number of games, the improved attendance level, and the solid organization and leadership began to characterize the team by the end of 1901. However, the 1902 season would turn out to be Holland's finest. Holland compiled a 49-14 record in 1902 and pronounced themselves the champions of the entire state of Michigan in "one of the hardest fought baseball wars in the history of the state." Holland took another large step in the development of their amateur baseball program in 1902. Evidently, baseball at this time in West Michigan became much more of an athletically competitive sport, and less of a friendly game between towns. Indeed, the Holland City Base Ball Club truly developed into an independent team in 1902. With most of the financial and organizational troubles of the past sorted out in 1901, the team took the leap into the professional arena of independent baseball. An independent baseball team is one that does not necessarily belong to a defined league, but still pays its players and charges admissions for the games. The money used to hire the players was probably donated by local wealthy citizens who took pride in watching their town's baseball team compete and win at a high level of competition. Holland developed into this type of team in 1902 and created the best independent team in the state and the most successful team Holland had ever known.

Already by October of 1902, the Grand Rapids *Democrat* had accused the Holland City Base Ball Club of saving one thousand dollars from the previous season to hire the best players in the area for the upcoming 1902 season. Since most of the teams in West Michigan at this time were composed of local players playing for their respective local team, hiring players from other towns was viewed as rather devious. Holland denied the charges of saving money for hiring new players in October of 1902, but based on the quality of players on the team, it is difficult not to think that the *Democrat* was on to something. In fact, Holland did sign players from all over the state in between the 1901 and 1902 seasons, and these players led the team in its high level of play. The decision to go out and find players to sign throughout Michigan instead of just playing with a local group of players from Holland was one apparently pushed by the fans. Whelan said that Con De Pree, the manager of the team, and Benjamin Van Raalte, Jr., the team treasurer, listened to the fans and dropped some of the locals to get "first-class, high price men" so that Holland would be able to "hold its own

with any club in the state.” Furthermore, Whelan reported that local wealthy citizens invested most of the money for this endeavor. At the end of the season, the team was composed of: Vander Hill, Karsten (a 17 year old pitcher), Ball, De Pree, Tibald, Andrews, Fairfield, Marshall, Root, and VandenBerg. Of this group, only De Pree, Vander Hill, and Karsten were from the immediate Holland area. The rest of the players on the team were signed from other cities throughout Michigan.

The greatest signing was undoubtedly Neal Ball. The newspaper reported Ball’s signing in March of 1902. Ball was a tremendous pitcher and shortstop who played the previous season in Battle Creek. After the signing, Holland made the claim that they owned a pitcher that could compete with “the top-notchers of the state.” It was a very logical move to hire Ball and rather typical, as a good pitcher was often the first hired player on

independent teams. Even though Ball was born in Grand Haven and relatively familiar with the Holland area, he was not an easy man to sign. Apparently his play in Battle Creek the previous season earned him enough recognition that a team from Wheeling, Virginia, showed interest in hiring Ball. In the end though, Ball came to Holland because that is where he had been offered the most money. The signing was momentous for the upcoming baseball season as Ball turned out to be the team’s best pitcher and hitter.

In the same issue of the *City News* that announced Ball’s signing, Whelan commented on the rise of popularity of baseball in general: “Basketball, boxing, wrestling, running, jumping, in fact every athletic sport but one, has gone into eclipse. The eclipse is caused by baseball, the sport that now occupies the entire horizon of the athletic world.” Apparently, Whelan was attempting to draw even more support for the upcoming baseball season, and based on the attendance records printed in the *City News*, it worked. Early in the season, there were reports of over one thousand people attending some games. The games with the greatest attendance were normally between Holland and Grand Rapids as both cities could draw fans for the game. However, 1,200 fans showed up for a game in Greenville,

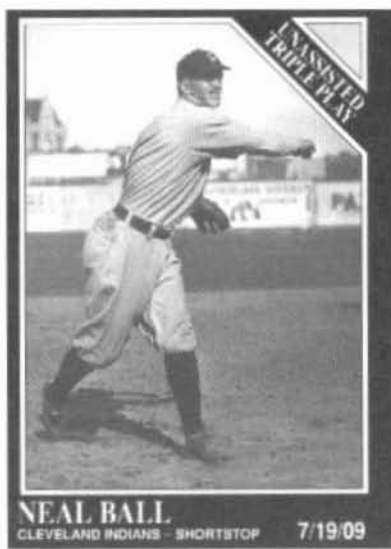


Photo courtesy of Randy Vande Water

*Cleveland Indians star
Cornelius "Neal" Ball, 1909*

and the paper claimed that 3,000 fans saw Holland play in Ionia. There are very few records of home games in Holland ever attracting that many fans, and this can be directly linked to their baseball facilities, which apparently did not have big enough grandstands to hold as many fans as other towns could. With the opening of the Holland Association Ball Park, the baseball facilities were upgraded, but it seems unlikely that this field provided enough seating for the thousands of fans. Furthermore, an argument could be made that these attendance numbers were just blown out of proportion by the editor – a tactic used to gain continued support for the team. Traveling to a foreign town and defeating their local baseball team in front of a large crowd would certainly make the victory seem all that more important and enjoyable for the residents of Holland. However, there is no denying the fact that excitement in Holland was at its peak during the 1902 season. A great example of the increased amount of enthusiasm about baseball is the fact that when Holland played away games, crowds would gather and wait eagerly outside the local cigar store downtown to find out the score of the game.

In addition to possibly exaggerating the number of fans at a ball game in 1902, Whelan utilized his editorial comments to increase the excitement in Holland about the baseball team. At times he employed colorful language to describe ordinary baseball terminology in order to make the game and team seem more amusing. For instance, he once described Vander Hill, Holland’s catcher at the time, as “irrepressible, irresistible, reliable, enthusiastic master of the art of throwing to second base...” Additionally, Whelan made direct references to the fact that Holland had put together a very good team. After about a month or so of playing, Whelan claimed, “There is no disguising the fact that Holland has the strongest team in Western Michigan.” As mentioned, Whelan’s attempt to gain support and increase the level of enthusiasm over the team in 1902 certainly worked, and at the end of the season Whelan bragged that “never before has such attention been paid to the national game.”

As the excitement and enthusiasm in Holland increased during the season, the team’s competition diversified as well. Holland found itself pitted against some of the finer teams in all of West Michigan. Their first early battle took place against a team that called themselves the Grand Rapids All Stars. Apparently, this was a team of the best-picked players from all over Grand Rapids. Holland edged them 11-8 with their superstar Neal Ball pitching. However, the All Stars would get their revenge a month and a half later by the score of 6-5. In addition to facing strong teams like the All Stars, Holland also expanded its array of opponents. They played against Greenville, Muskegon, Ionia, and Big Rapids on a rather regular basis, all of which were over 35 miles from Holland.

They even took on teams from Chicago during the season. Although Holland never made the trip to Chicago to play teams there, a couple of different traveling teams from Chicago visited Holland to face the Holland City Base Ball Club. Holland lost to the Chicago Union Giants a couple of times but defeated the Chicago Edgars once.

As well as playing teams from areas that they never had before, Holland faced new and different types of teams during their championship season. Holland's high level of play earned them the opportunity to represent Michigan and play their toughest opponent of the entire season – the All-American team. The All-American team was composed of some of the best players of the entire American League, including future Hall of Famer Nap Lajoie. In fact, Holland faced the second baseman Lajoie during the peak of his career. In the 1901 season, he won the Triple Crown, leading the American league in home runs, runs batted in, and batting average. His .422 batting average is still an American League record. However, the 1902 season provided some legal disputes for Lajoie. In 1901, Lajoie switched from playing for the Philadelphia Phillies in the National League to the American League Philadelphia Athletics. The Phillies managed to obtain a court order forbidding Lajoie from playing in Pennsylvania for the entire season, since he had violated his contract by joining the Athletics. Therefore, Lajoie only played one game the entire season for the Philadelphia Athletics, and his forbidden to play in Pennsylvania very well may have influenced the decision for him to travel to Michigan and play against Holland.

The game took place in Grand Rapids, probably because Grand Rapids had better facilities and could accommodate a large crowd. A week before the game was to take place, the *City News* ran an advertisement for a deal to take the Electric Interurban to Grand Rapids for the game for a price of 50 cents. Over three hundred spectators from Holland were expecting to make the trip, and Whelan claimed that Grand Rapids was expecting nearly 5,000 fans for the game. The two teams did not disappoint the large crowd that witnessed the game. The All-American team ended up coming out on top by a narrow margin of 2-1, but it took them a hard fought 10 innings to do so. E. W. Dickerson, editor for the Grand Rapids *Herald*, praised the play of the Holland team, "No team could have played a scrappier game against the stars than Holland did." There remains no doubt that the game against the All-American team, with a Hall of Famer in the line-up, is one of the greatest moments in the history of baseball in Holland.

In addition to playing their toughest competition ever during the 1902 season, the Holland team also faced the most dissimilar teams they had ever seen. The Greenville team

that Holland faced a few different times during the season had an African-American pitcher named Buckner that Whelan gave considerable attention to in the paper. He claimed that Greenville hired Buckner for his great pitching ability, and that he had beaten teams all throughout the state. Additionally, there was a mention of a Grand Rapids team, Dickerson's Colts (named after the editor of the Grand Rapids *Herald*), that changed "even its color." Whelan was commenting on the Colts' decision to acquire Grant Johnson, an African-American from Big Rapids. Furthermore, Holland actually faced a few teams that were composed entirely of African-Americans. White teams playing against an African-American team were not something completely uncommon by this time. In fact, the Cuban Giants, one of the best early African-American teams, joined the Middle States League in 1889 where they played only all white teams. More locally, members of the Page Fence Giants out of Adrian, Michigan, played in the predominantly white Michigan State League in 1895. The team Holland played in 1902 was another group nicknamed "Giants" – the Chicago Union Giants. This nickname was probably used so often by African-American teams due to the immense popularity of the New York Giants at the time.



Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids Public Library

*African-American baseball team,
the Colored Athletics, c. 1915*

Holland looked forward to playing the Chicago Union Giants because both teams had proven themselves as quality ball clubs. Whelan claimed that "they [Chicago Union Giants] have sought the chance to come to Holland for some time but Manager De Pree always played shy for he feared the result." This year, however, De Pree was much more confident in his team's chances against the Giants. Although they were acclaimed as "the undisputed colored champions of the world," De Pree decided to pencil them into the schedule. De Pree probably changed his mind on the decision to face the Giants because of one player – Neal Ball. Ball

had apparently beaten the Giants three of the four times he pitched against them when he played for the Battle Creek team in 1901. There was no score reported for the first game between Holland and the Giants in the *City News*, but when Holland was preparing to face the Giants later in the season, Whelan stated that the Giants were seeking revenge. No score was printed after the second game with the Giants either, but since in the year-end summary of the season, only one victory (a 4-0 shutout) against the Giants was noted, it can be assumed that Holland lost the second game with the Giants.

The fact that Holland played against teams composed entirely of African-Americans can be seen as evidence that the city was accepting of diversification of athletics and society in general. However, further research proves that Holland mainly faced African-Americans more as an entertaining spectacle than as evidence of a liberal social ideology in Holland. Holland often poked fun at the African-American teams that they faced from Chicago. They would refer to individual players as the "coon pitcher" and to the team as a whole as the "team of Euthopians (sic)" and the "real darkies of Africa." Furthermore, Whelan mocked African-American speech by printing a phony quote from the Chicago Union Giants coach, Bill Joyner, that read, "We smuver you to death next Saturday shure as I's blacker than you." Obviously, Holland did not hold any liberal concepts of equality when dealing with African-Americans. The games between Holland and African-American teams from Chicago were viewed by the fans as some sort of mysterious and exotic showcase, rather than a statement of any sort of progressive or liberal racial position in Holland.

After their remarkable 1902 season, the Holland City Base Ball Club appeared to be the team to beat in Michigan for 1903. Dickerson stated in the Grand Rapids *Herald*, "Baseball fans in this part of the state have for some time been wondering just what kind of a team Holland would put in the field this year to succeed its stars of last season and uphold the prestige they made for Holland." Holland quickly began to increase their chances of continuing their superior level of play. In March of 1903, the Holland Baseball Association was formed with a president (A. Knooihuizen), secretary and treasurer (I. Goldman) and an executive committee (Knooihuizen, Goldman, and J.P. Oggel). The exact purpose of this association is speculative, but it can be affirmed that they were an important factor in Holland's continued recruiting and signing process for the 1903 season. They had Ball, De Pree, Andrews, and Root all signed again for the 1903 season, and added Sebastian from Albion, Paine from Whitehall, Smith from Muskegon, Gorton and Schiappichasse from Tecumseh (a Detroit league), and McKinnen, who played in a league in California in 1902.

They began practicing together as a team for the upcoming season in mid-April by playing against the Hope College and the Holland High School teams. Furthermore, most likely spurned by their success from last season, Holland had no problem putting together a tough and intense schedule. During one week long stretch in July, they played at Mount Pleasant, Marion, Big Rapids, Cadillac, and Ionia. On that road trip in July, the closest town was 60 miles away. This seems like an enormous contrast to the time when Holland rarely traveled more than 30 miles. Obviously, the Holland team expanded their range of travel and variety of competition yet again in 1903.

Even though Holland benefited from their success of 1902 by playing many more games and scheduling many more teams that they had not faced before, the 1903 team began to falter just as some of the teams of the past had. The first thing that hurt the team was the departure of Ball and Andrew. Both of these players moved on to play for a team in Toledo, which probably allowed them to face better competition than Holland could provide in West Michigan. Obviously, these two players had been an important factor in the success of Holland in the past season, and their absence was devastating. Ball hit well over .400 in his only full season in Holland and was actually referred to as "Mayor Ball," because of his fame and popularity in the town. There were no hard feelings towards Ball after his departure from Holland. The people of Holland backed Ball by admitting that he was smart to take the offer from Toledo since it paid him more. Ball's success apparently continued in Toledo where he was reported as hitting .347 (2nd in the league). He supposedly wanted to come back after he was done in Toledo to finish off the season in Holland, but the Toledo manager would not let him leave. It was probably a wise decision on the part of the Toledo manager, as Ball would later work his way all the way to the American League. There is no report in the *City News* on the progress of Andrew in Toledo.

In addition to the damaging departure of key players from the Holland team, the 1903 squad began facing the same financial problem that had haunted past teams. The lack of funding was probably due to the lack of fan support at many of Holland's games. In fact, the new manager, Goldman, was forced to release Paine due to what Whelan claimed was directly linked to a lack of fan support. Apparently, Paine's contract was too much for the team to handle financially. More evidence of the lack of fan support during the 1903 season is the fact that the Holland Baseball Association was forced to hold a raffle to raise funds for what they had overspent during the season. When the team promised to pay a player, they certainly took into effect the amount of money that they would raise from ticket sales.

Since the only method of raising money for an independent team in Holland was through private donations and admission sales, the lack of both of these is evident in the fact that the Holland Baseball Association needed to raise money at the end of the season.

After the failure of the newly formed Holland Baseball Association of 1903 and the disappointing season that followed, competitive semiprofessional baseball in Holland went into a decline. In addition to losing Ball and Andrew in 1903 to a team in Toledo, Fox and Karsten began playing in the Grand Rapids Central League by 1904. Jim De Pree began school at the University of Michigan and played there, and then decided to play for a team in Calumet – a town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. After these key departures, Holland basically disappeared from the baseball scene for the next couple of years. In 1905, the *City News* claimed that “Holland has gone into the sere and yellow leaf on its ball playing.” They argued that Holland used to be able to put together a team that Zeeland, Saugatuck, Fennville, Grand Haven, Grand Rapids, and Muskegon all would play willingly, but now no one wanted to play the Holland team anymore. Moreover, when Grand Haven was thinking of putting together a semiprofessional team with hired players, Whelan warned, “Holland was in the same boat once. Then danger came. A leap was made from amateur to professional baseball and misery came.” The Holland club benefited from the experience of the successful 1902 team, but ultimately, the failure to keep this franchise manageable and profitable damaged the reputation of baseball in Holland.



Photo courtesy of Lois Jesiek-Kayes

Holland Independents baseball team, 1914

With the team depleted by the departures of key players, Holland did not put together a competitive team again until 1907 when the Independents were founded. Tom Robinson was the manager of this new team and Henry TeRoller was the secretary and treasurer. They boasted, “Holland will be represented on the diamond this year by one of the fastest amateur ball teams in its history.” The Independents played many of the same towns that the Holland City Base Ball

Club had, and actually almost put together a “trolley league” with Zeeland, Grand Haven, Grand Rapids, and Muskegon. The teams were to travel by the Interurban, and Holland began planning to build a new field at Jenison Park with a grandstand. The plan fell through, however, and the team ended up fixing up the old field. The Holland Independents eventually became the most steady ball club that Holland ever produced, playing amateur baseball into the 1950s.

Although the Independents remained as a mainstay in the Holland baseball life, they never fully produced the level of excitement and enthusiasm that the Holland City Base Ball Club of 1902 had. In fact, Neal Ball, the star of the 1902 championship team, renewed a similar excitement in 1909 while playing for Cleveland in the American League. On July 19, 1909, Ball recorded the first unassisted triple play in the history of major league baseball. The great Cy Young was pitching and Ball was at shortstop when Andy McConnell of the Boston team hit a line drive right to Ball with runners on first and second. Ball made the catch then immediately touched second base to retire one runner and then chased down and tagged the other runner caught in between first and second. Ball “woke up Tuesday morning to find himself famous.” Holland immediately celebrated Ball’s feat calling it “the most sensational play in all of base ball history.” Furthermore, even though Ball was born in Grand Haven, the *City News* gave the impression that Ball was from Holland. They called him the “Holland boy,” and claimed that he was “really and indisputably a product of this city.” Ball’s unassisted triple play engendered a sense of pride among the citizens of Holland – one similar to that created by the success and prestige of the 1902 team.

Just after Ball made his mark in the history of major league baseball, the state of Michigan provided a unique opportunity to Holland. In 1910, the Michigan State Baseball League invited Holland to put together a professional team and join the league. Con De Pree and Benjamin VanRaalte, the same two that managed the finances and activity of the 1902 team, were chiefly responsible for putting together a new team called the Wooden Shoes. The team began play in 1910 against Muskegon, Traverse City, and Cadillac. Boyne City would later join in 1911. The first year for Holland was miserable, and the Wooden Shoes lost 14 of their first 15 games. Fred Doyle was fired as manager after their terrible start, and Forest Dickerson (the brother of Emerson Dickerson, the Grand Rapids *Herald* editor) took control of the team. The team did not fare much better, however, and finished in last place at 40-56. Ted Penfield began managing the team in 1911. However, the Wooden Shoes’ fate did not change, as they finished next to last behind the new Boyne City team.

The Wooden Shoes never played in the Michigan State League after 1911. Marc Okkonen, who documented a history of semiprofessional teams throughout the state of Michigan, claimed that "...another losing season and the resulting loss of support by Holland fans forced the franchise to withdraw." In addition to their poor beginning in the league, Holland's religious values also affected the team. Indeed, "the ban on Sunday baseball in the strongly religious Holland community also contributed to the team's financial woes and discouraged any future designs for league baseball." Apparently, Holland refused to host games on Sunday, and therefore the team forfeited the revenue that would have been raised through admission fees on Sunday.

After the collapse of the Wooden Shoes in the Michigan State League, Holland never again joined an official league at the semiprofessional level. The Holland Independents did continue to play in Holland however, and remained quite popular all the way into the 1950s. The Independents are probably the best example of a baseball organization that truly worked in Holland. However, although they did have their moments of excitement, the Independents were never as popular as the early Holland City Base Ball Club teams at the turn of the 20th century. Putting together an amateur team in Holland at this time was an experiment, and as evidenced, a fairly unsuccessful one. Problems rising from financial shortages lack of management, and conflicting social values slowed the progress of baseball in Holland in its early years. Ironically, the highlight of the history of baseball in Holland occurred even before a team could consistently support and solidify itself. Indeed, the 1902 season of the Holland City Base Ball Club signifies one of the greatest moment in the history of baseball in Holland, and the effects and influences of this team led to the development of a more stable baseball atmosphere in Holland.

The reasons for the popularity of baseball during the late 19th and early 20th century in Holland are rather difficult to define. Seymour tried to explain why baseball developed in general in small communities like Holland. He stated, "In all parts of the country in the late nineteenth century...the local baseball team represented for many towns the only athletic organization and nearly the only entertainment..." Similarly, baseball provided "lively diversion that interrupted the dullness of daily routine and the deep quiet of bucolic life." Seymour also explained that organized and competitive baseball provided real local heroes for young boys and acted as a "cohesive agent in the community." Clearly Holland is a prime example of this phenomenon. The wealthy of Holland supported the teams, and the blue-collar citizens of the city provided the players and fans. Finally, Seymour pointed out yet another aspect of organized amateur baseball that provoked its popularity and growth in small towns. Baseball

came to symbolize the worth of a town and provided a simple and unique way of measuring it. Carl Becker recognized this trend in his study of early baseball in the Upper Miami Valley. He stated that baseball "seemed to represent the virtues and values of a village that saw itself as a unique community." Indeed, Holland exemplified this phenomenon as well. On July 18, 1903, the *City News* told the story of a bunch of Holland fans hastening to a downtown store to buy a map of Michigan. The reason for this was to find the city of Shepherd on the map. A report had just reached the town that the team had lost to Shepherd, a town with a population of a mere 635, and the people were "mollified" "for they realized that it would have been terrible if Holland had been defeated by a town that was not on the map." Clearly, the entire reputation of the city was on the line when the baseball played teams from nearby towns.

Furthermore, some new ideas have been set forth recently concerning the rise of baseball in small communities like Holland. These ideas evolved from an analysis of the relationship of baseball and religion during this period. Christopher H. Evans explored some of these ideas in his article "The Kingdom of Baseball in America: The Chronicle of an American Theology." He held that "turn-of-the-century liberal Protestantism believed baseball embodied the virtues of Christian recreation." Additionally, Evans stated that baseball was seen "as a means of developing moral character" and a testimony to "a faith in Christian democracy." During this period in the late 19th century, Holland most certainly was an area dominated by liberal Protestantism, with the majority of its citizens being second-generation Dutch settlers. Even though there were instances of "rowdyism" during Holland's games, a sense of chivalry was evident and praised at all levels of play.

Evans' ideas about the rise of baseball in small religious communities like Holland in the late 19th century are new but only one of that have surfaced recently. Indeed, the reasons for the rise of baseball in Holland are extremely complex. One could argue that it was a means of assimilation for second-generation immigrants in America or as a way to gain recognition for a community. Additionally, one could make the argument, as Evans proposed, that baseball exemplified important religious virtues that Holland wanted to identify with. Any one of these arguments could be made for Holland, but most likely, all of them contributed in some manner to the emergence of baseball in Holland. Then again, perhaps the popularity and rise of baseball in Holland was subject to a much more simplistic explanation. In 1903, in discussing the attractiveness of baseball, Whelan proclaimed that the main reason for the popularity of baseball was the fact that the crowd loved "the crack of the bat and the long hit."



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Photo courtesy of Lois Jesiek-Kayes

*Umpire and former Detroit Tiger star Harry "Old Slug" Heilman at the May 16, 1935,
Tulip Time game between Benton Harbor based House of David and the Flying Dutch*