

Bloomers had some success against big league clubs

On Jun. 23, 1916, the minor league Bloomington Bloomers hosted the major league Chicago White Sox in a mid-season exhibition game.

Some 4,000 people crammed into Fans Field on Bloomington's south end for the David and Goliath contest. It was said to be the largest crowd in local baseball history, at least up to that time. With future White Sox Hall of Famer Ed Walsh pitching the first six innings, the visitors escaped with a hard-fought 3-1 victory.

At the time the White Sox were on the road and in midst of a five-game series against the St. Louis Browns, but having a day off they made the day trip to Bloomington. They traveled on the Chicago & Alton (C&A) Railroad, arriving in Bloomington at 1:30 p.m. and returning to St. Louis on a 1:00 a.m. train.

In this era, some major league owners viewed off days during the 154-game season (the current 162-game schedule dates to 1961) as little more than lost revenue. As such, on days off they sometimes scheduled exhibition games with minor league clubs, splitting the gate receipts with their hosts.

On Aug. 24, 1916, two months after holding their own against Chicago, the Bloomington Bloomers defeated the visiting Boston Braves 5-0 behind Charles "Rube" Schlansker's nine shutout innings. There were 2,000 spectators in the stands, a good showing given most everyone in the Twin Cities and surrounding countryside had flocked to the massive farm tractor show on the city's east side. In fact, many of the Boston players spent the morning before the game at the tractor show as well!

With a tighter-than-expected schedule, local officials had to cancel a postgame reception for the Beantown visitors. With a series against the White Sox set to begin the following day, the Braves decided it best to dress at the ballpark before boarding a 5:30 p.m. northbound C&A to Chicago.

From 1901 to 1939, the Bloomers played in the Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League. The "Three-I" was a well-regarded minor league that over the years had successful teams in small and medium-size cities, including Springfield and Peoria, Ill.; Evansville and Terre Haute, Ind.; and Cedar Rapids and Davenport, Iowa.

Bloomington, situated as it is between St. Louis and Chicago on what was then the C&A mainline (tracks today owned by Union Pacific and used by Amtrak), was a convenient stopover for big league clubs looking to boost their bottom line.

Not all exhibition games were held during the regular season. Others occurred in the spring as major league teams left their warm-weather training sites and made their way—exhibition game by exhibition game—to their home ballparks.

Though Bloomington beat the Boston Braves in 1916, other exhibition games against major league competition ended far less favorably for the hometown heroes.

Back in early April 1903, for instance, the Bloomers were crushed by the visiting Chicago White Sox 18-0. “It was useless from the first,” reported a disappointed Pantagraph. “There were some 400 fans out to see the alleged game, not because they expected the Bloomington team to win, but because they wanted to see how the White Sox play ... But they were not entirely prepared to see them wipe up the earth with our home team and then throw the rag away.”

On Apr. 12, 1910, the Chicago Cubs wrapped up their 1910 spring training schedule in cold, wet and windy Bloomington. With the south side park little more than a “vista of mud,” Chicago unceremoniously dispatched the Bloomers 14-4. The weather and field conditions left the visitors “disgusted with their experience,” noted The Pantagraph.

During the 1917 season, though, the Bloomers managed to give the Cubs a run for their money. With the Jun. 25 game tied 2-2 after nine innings, Chicago ended the upset bid by rattling off 5 runs in the top of the tenth frame. “Nine beautiful innings. One nightmare,” lamented The Pantagraph.

In 1919, the Bloomers played two N.L. teams in a one-week stretch. The Cubs, with two days off between a 3-0 victory in St. Louis and an upcoming home series against Brooklyn, stopped in Bloomington for a Jul. 29 game.

The Bloomers were led by catcher Walter “Butch” Henline and infielder John Henry “Heinie” Sand. The two, who would go on to become teammates with the Philadelphia Phillies and enjoy solid major league careers, helped Bloomington beat the defending National League champions 3-0.

Six days later, Sep. 4, the Cincinnati Reds topped the Bloomers 5-2 before some 2,500 “bugs” (an anachronistic term for fans) at Bloomington’s cozy ballpark. One month later Cincinnati defeated heavily favored Chicago in the infamous 1919 World Series tainted by the “Black Sox” match fixing scandal.

On Aug. 16, 1921, the Washington Senators, en route to St. Louis for a two-game series against the Browns, were in Bloomington for an exhibition game. This contest was of special interest to

many Twin City residents because Washington owner Clark Griffith grew up in Normal and began his professional baseball career in 1887 with the short-lived Bloomington Reds.

The Bloomers bested Griffith's Senators 6-1. Many of the highlights that day were supplied by Washington coach Nick Altrock, known as the "Clown Prince of Baseball." The locals got a kick from Altrock's "inimitable mimicry of umpire Matty Fitzpatrick," among his other antics. "It is doubtful which the fans enjoyed the most," surmised The Pantagraph, "the slaughter of the Senators or the stunts of Nick."

In 1935, Bloomington was an affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals and coached by the recently retired big league spitballer and future Hall of Famer Burleigh "Ol' Stubblebeard" Grimes.

On their way to Chicago, the big league Cardinals, having just taken both ends of a Memorial Day doubleheader against Cincinnati, stopped in Bloomington for a May 31, 1935 exhibition.

With a key series against the first-place Cubs beginning the next day, Cards player-manager Frankie Frisch sent little used Nub Kleinke to the mound. In contrast, Bloomington relied on right-hander Bill Cox, a promising prospect from the Cardinals affiliate in Columbus, Ohio.

Cox pitched 9 solid innings as Bloomington walloped St. Louis 11-1.

To the disappointment of many, fan favorite Dizzy Dean did not pitch. Instead, he spent much of the time coaching from the sidelines, providing a humorous running commentary of the game that could be heard throughout the park.

Dizzy and his brother Paul were notoriously uncooperative during the Cardinals many exhibitions. St. Louis owner Sam Breadon viewed such games as a welcomed revenue-generator during off days, while the Dean brothers would've simply preferred the day off.