

## Sports

# A taste of baseball history with the Taverneers

By Kelly-Ann Franklin

Baseball has been around for quite some time, but, barring the fundamentals, today's version is extraordinarily different than what you might have found in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Here in the 21st century, head out to Memorial Baseball Park or the high school on some weekend and you may just see an updated version of the game of baseball. An 1800's version, that is.

Last year, Duncan "The Judge" Mackay and John "Lucky" Lucker scouted out playing fields, parties and local taverns to recruit players for their Simsbury Taverneers vintage base ball team and this year's inaugural season. That's right, vintage base ball.

"(I wanted to) play baseball the way it was meant to be played," said Mackay of why he decided to get involved. "We're all kids at heart, here we are, we have one guy who is under 40 and we thought it would be fun to do it for two reasons.

"One was playing the game with no equipment, the way the game was born and getting back to basics. The other part is that it is a celebration of the history of the town."

Lucker went to last year's Hartford Invitational Tournament in downtown Hartford for the July 4 weekend and found he was having fun just watching the games.

"So what I did was I spoke to some of the players from other teams and said 'what did you do to

start a team like this?'"

He exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers with the people he spoke with and then he and Mackay decided to get together with some of the guys they hang out with, other Little League baseball and youth soccer dads, and watched the team grow over just a few months.

"Pretty much all of us are dads and have other commitments, so we can schedule it at our own pace and schedule games when it suits our schedule," Lucker said.

And the players they found to play seem to enjoy themselves.

"It's a great thing, it's a chance to get out there and play," said outfielder Paul "Stitch" Simeon. "The fundamentals still are the same, the hard part is learning some of the strategy."

## Why the name?

During the mid-1800s, Route 10 through New England was a busy pathway for travelers. Close proximity to the road prompted business owners in that era to open several inns and taverns. Pettibone Tavern, the team's sponsor, and Phelps Tavern are two of those taverns that still exist today.

"We picked the name because of the history of Simsbury which grew up around the taverns, the original Pettibone Tavern and Phelps Tavern, those

were two of the most well-known taverns in town," Mackay said.

"So it's a draw to the town. Ultimately, when we're better organized, we're going to have a big tournament which will coincide with Septemberfest and it will be an opportunity for people to come to Simsbury and take advantage of the hospitality. The name is intended to reflect that history."

## What's the difference?

The Taverneers follow 1868, 1871 or 1886 rules depending upon the teams they play. Today's baseball enthusiasts may be thinking, "OK, how much different can the game be? It's still hitting a ball and running around the bases, right?"

In any era of play the Taverneers will enter into, there are no sunglasses, batting gloves, batting helmets or exposed protective gear allowed.

In fact, the only evidence that it's a vintage base ball game being played in 2004 are lights around the field, sponsorship signs in the outfield and bottles of water in the dugouts.

There are no Nikes, Reeboks or Louisville Sluggers - their bats resemble large branches cut down from trees instead of today's tapered and top-heavy lumber.

"The bats are big, they're a big round stick," Mackay said. "It's very different, but a lot of fun. It's all about technique, with these things, it's more strategic hitting."

Catcher's equipment and fielding gloves are only allowed in 1886 games, which makes trying to field a ground ball or catch a fly ball interesting, to say the least.



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"You've got to use your head because some of the rules you see today are different," Lucker said. "Obviously not having a glove or mitt is a big deal. The first time that I played in a game, I would go up for a catch and my hand would go three inches too low because I'm used to having a big mitt on."

When the Taverners go to throw out runners on the basepath, the throws are not like those of today, they are a much lighter throw, or a hard toss.

"The real big thing is, you have to learn to take your time, you can't just wing it over there," Simeon said. "You have to take your time and make a nice throw, rather than just gun it over there."

The catcher doesn't get shin guards or a hard shell on top of his head. He does get a measly little chest protector and a wire mask. But he doesn't get a big mitt like today. All he has is kind of a big gardener's glove with padding shoved in it like in the old days.

"The flow of the game depends a lot on the pain threshold of the catcher," Lucker said.

"It's a real marriage between the pitcher and the catcher in terms of how they can synchronize their play and have to adjust to the natural limitations of having so little equipment. The padding is basically supplemental that he's added on his own. That's what they used back then."

But Mackay is the one suffering back there.

"I've broken my little finger and when Hank Newman pitches that's when I take extra icing, so I've got lots of frozen peas at home," he said, laughing. "The first thing I do when I go home is stick my hand in the freezer and grab a bag of frozen peas."

For the team's equipment and uniforms, Lucker checks out the Internet, especially Ebay, to try to find old equipment and extras, including a 34-star flag from the 1860s placed on the home dugout side.

"Depending on the era of the uniform you choose, there are different variations," Lucker said. "Ours are pretty close to 1880, 1890, we picked it for the appearance more than for the history."

The players do not have numbers or names anywhere on their uniforms and they go by nicknames as in the tradition of the 19th-century style game.

There is also only one umpire per game, standing generally within 10-15 feet of home plate or several feet behind the catcher. As for the pitcher's mound, there isn't one.

It didn't exist in the old days, so there is a six-foot by six-foot box outlined 45 feet from home plate with no elevation to provide more speed on a fastball. In 1886, the distance was moved to 50 feet, but still not raised. The games are also much kinder than today's game.

"It's still competitive, but it's a gentlemanly competitiveness than the softball a lot of the adults play," Lucker said. "A lot of us are softball refugees who are kind of too old to play that competitively. It's tough to get up and go to work."

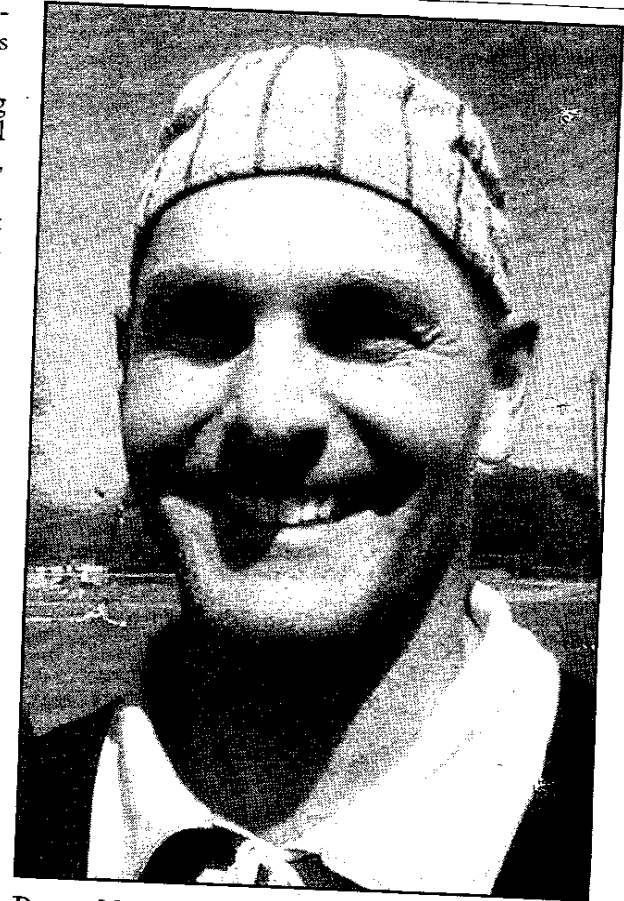
### Future plans for the team

This year's inaugural season has the Taverners traveling about 50 percent of the time. Last month the team hosted a doubleheader with the Providence Grays out of Rhode Island, the team's only appearance in state for June.

In July, the Taverners will participate in the Hartford Invitational Tournament and then travel to Roxbury, N.Y., on July 17 and then Old Bethpage, N.Y., on August 7. On a date in September still to be determined, the Taverners will hold an exhibition game during Septemberfest at Iron Horse Boulevard Fields.

"We're playing a doubleheader in Providence, we've already played a game in Columbia (Connecticut)," Lucker said.

The Taverners are planning to hold a northeast regional Simsbury Invitational Vintage Base Ball Tournament during the Simsbury Septemberfest weekend next year. Lucker and Mackay are looking



Duncan MacKay is a member of the Simsbury Taverners base ball team, which follows 1868, 1871 or 1886 rules depending upon the teams they play.

for volunteers to help organize and get the event up and running.

"The other thing we're trying to do is promote the history of our era," Lucker said, "and to bring a lot more people to the Farmington Valley and maybe make it an annual event." **SL**

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