

Albert King: A 1930s speedway fan turned baseball follower

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This article has been written for Project Cobb (the Project for the Chronicling of British Baseball).

When teenager Albert King peered out of the window from his family home on Roman Road in East Ham, he had an uninterrupted view across the fields of the vertical corrugated iron sheets on the perimeter of West Ham Stadium. Like more people in the area in the 1930s, King was aware of the spectacles of speedway and dog racing that had become so popular at the behemoth edifice that could reputedly seat some 120,000 spectators. He was mainly a fan of the speedway and between 1932 and 1940 he rarely missed a meeting at the stadium. In addition, as early as 1930, King had also attended football games when a sprinkling of some 5,000 fans rooted on Thames Football Club in third division league play.

But in 1936, King became hooked on another sport: baseball. As a 16 year old, King was in his waning days of school when a friend, Ted Markey, invited him to attend a baseball game. “He asked me one day if I had ever been to West Ham Stadium to watch baseball and I agreed to go,” remembered King some 70 years later in a 2006 interview. “My previous knowledge of baseball was an occasional mention of Babe Ruth in the daily papers. I was immediately hooked and, even then, had visions of the game eventually catching on and replacing cricket.”

The team he saw in 1936 was the West Ham Hammers. They were a professional side comprising mainly Canadians and Americans and they competed in the London Major Baseball League against other professional teams in a circuit that included squads from White City, Romford, Hackney, Catford,

Harringay, and Streatham and Mitcham. The league was the brainchild of Liverpool native Sir John Moores, who at the time ran the highly successful Littlewoods Football Pools. Just a few years earlier, Moores had attended baseball games in the United States and had become an enthusiastic supporter. He started a professional league in the north of England in 1935 and decided to expand the following year. In London, he deputized LD Wood, who was the owner of a factory in Wembley, to set baseball in motion in London. Wood would also become the owner of the West Ham club.

When King entered West Ham Stadium to the sounds of the crack of ash wood baseball bats smacking leather balls, it was wholly foreign to him. His friend Markey taught him the staple baseball song “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and King joined the supporters’ club (cost: one shilling), attending games somewhat regularly.

Unbeknownst to King, baseball already had a history in the West Ham area. In fact, West Ham United Football Club had even dabbled with the sport at the start of the 20th Century. Beginning in 1906, top London football sides had decided that baseball would be a great summer complement to football action. As a result, such vaunted clubs as Woolwich Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur, Fulham, and Leyton Orient took up the game. It is unclear when West Ham United joined in, but in 1910 a West Ham team, which was described in *Lotinga’s Weekly* as being affiliated with West Ham United, made it to the baseball national finals, falling to Brentford by a large margin.

Alas for fans who joined King at West Ham Stadium some quarter of a century later, that past glory was probably long forgotten. Luckily for the West Ham faithful, the new West Ham squad would

provide some thrills of its own. In both 1936 and 1937 – the 2 years of the league’s existence – the Hammers would contend for the league crown and, in its first season, would register the unlikeliest of wins against a respected American side.

That big victory was against the 1936 US Olympic baseball team. For the Berlin Games, baseball was chosen as a demonstration sport. Baseball was initially planned as a tournament, but the US ultimately was the only country to send a team and, as a result, played an exhibition against itself. That match occurred in front of an estimated 120,000 spectators, which is widely regarded as the biggest crowd ever to view a baseball match. Following the Games, the US team, looking for some competition, came to England and took on the Hammers. The result: West Ham 5, US Olympic Team 3.

Although King missed that epic contest, he did see the Hammers victorious in numerous other baseball clashes and witnessed some incredible performances. “There was an incentive of £25, I believe, for the first batter to hit a home run over the covered stand along the back straight, which would have meant hitting the ball approximately 440 feet [an impressive home run even by today’s standards],” King recalled. “[One West Ham player] George Etheze twice landed a ball on the roof of the stand.” Another West Ham star was a French-Canadian named Roland Gladu. Dubbed in the London press as “The Babe Ruth of Canada,” Gladu not only would wow West Ham fans during his two seasons in East London but also would make his mark in America. In 1944, Gladu played at baseball’s pinnacle, competing for the Boston Braves in the Major Leagues.

King, who left school at 16 to work in a stockbroker’s office, became such an avid fan of the game that he even attempted to begin playing himself. “My father had been told by a workmate of a baseball team playing on the Isle of Dogs and we went on our bikes one Sunday morning to give them ‘the once over’ as my dad would have put it,” King

said. “Unfortunately, the organizers weren’t very accommodating and were looking for experienced players who had their own equipment and who could afford the subscriptions. I fell short on all counts and never pursued the matter.”

Nevertheless, King, who was born in 1920, followed the baseball Hammers until the league folded in 1937. In March 1940, King joined the Royal Artillery at Dover and the following January he was posted overseas in India. During his time in the military he would regale his fellow soldiers about baseball in West Ham. They were likely incredulous at the thought of baseball in East London, but King’s story clearly captured some of their imaginations as they began playing baseball. “Some of the other lads joined in as fielders and batters and we began practising in earnest,” King said. In 1944, when King’s unit came in contact with American GIs, one US captain from Wisconsin suggested setting up some games. Although the Americans won match-ups in both baseball and softball, King remembers the experience fondly.

Baseball in West Ham had a short burst on the West Ham sports landscape, but for Albert King it left an indelible mark. “I am now well into my 87th year and I am still as keen as ever for baseball,” he said.

About Project Cobb

Project Cobb has been established to unify and publicize the various efforts to publish historical details on baseball played in Britain under modern rules. In addition, it serves to promote the preservation of British baseball history as it happens. Further details are available on the Project Cobb webpage, which can be found at the following URL: <http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/cobb.html>.



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