

The Winning Ways of William Watkins

Abstract

A native of Brantford, Ontario, William Henry Watkins is the most successful Canadian professional baseball manager of all time. He played his first competitive baseball with the Guelph Maple Leafs, which he also managed, in 1880. Four years later, as third baseman for the Indianapolis Hoosiers of the American Association, he was nearly killed when struck by a pitch. His ability to play the game was impaired and he turned to managing for the rest of that season and for nearly 40 more, sometimes as a team executive and owner.

In 1885, Watkins and several of his Indianapolis players were sold to the Detroit Wolverines. To ensure the players signed with their new team, he helped kidnap them. In Detroit, he found great success as manager, leading the National League club to a second place finish in 1886. The following year, his Wolverines captured the pennant and in the “world’s series” championship defeated the St. Louis Browns, 10 games to 5.

Among the many clubs he managed were the St. Louis Browns and Pittsburgh Pirates of the National League, Kansas City of the American Association, and Indianapolis of the short-lived Federal League. His major league managing record was 452-444. Overall, his teams claimed a dozen league championships; in the National League, American Association, Federal League, Western League, Western Association, and the Michigan State and Canadian leagues. “Watty” Watkins spent much of his lengthy career with Indianapolis teams, eight of them in all, and made his home in Port Huron, Michigan. This paper focuses on his early years in the game and his time as manager of the Detroit Wolverines.

During more than four decades, William Henry “Watty” Watkins found baseball success as a player, manager, executive and team owner. His career as a manager is particularly noteworthy, along with his reputation as a strict disciplinarian in an era when players were known for their wayward ways involving alcohol, women, gambling and other pursuits that often affected their on-field performance.

Watkins is not well known in Canada. His career was mainly in the United States and it is about much more than simply the number of wins and championships he accumulated. He helped establish leagues, and took the reins of losing clubs and turned around their fortunes. Watkins even participated in what today would be considered a kidnapping of players in order to sign them.

Watkins was born May 5, 1858, in Brantford, Ontario, to prosperous dry



goods merchant and former farmer, John Harton Watkins and his wife, Eliza Jane. After his mother died when he was 10, young William was sent to live with maternal grandparents in Erin. His education, which included a year at exclusive Upper Canada College in Toronto, introduced him to baseball. Watkins demonstrated mechanical aptitude and found a position with a novelty-machine manufacturing business and then at an engine-making plant.¹

In 1880, Watkins joined the Guelph Maple Leafs baseball club, one of Canada's most successful teams during the 1870s. He played infield and outfield and helped manage the semi-professional nine. That same year, Guelph's successful brewer George Sleeman, long-time president of the Maple Leafs, helped establish the Canadian Association of Amateur Baseball Players. There had been no Canadian organization since the collapse of the previous one after 1878 when Guelph, London, Hamilton, St. Thomas and Woodstock were members. The league included "amateur" in its title because it wanted to keep professionals, especially those from the United States, out of the Canadian game.² But the Woodstock Actives hired American professional Lew Brown, who had a contract with Boston, as catcher for their up-and-coming Canadian pitching star James "Tip" O'Neill. It was generally believed Guelph was paying some of the men on its roster. The Harriston Brown Stockings were also accused of paying players, and the season ended amidst accusations of professionalism, with Guelph, Harriston and Woodstock all claiming the championship. As president of the Association, Sleeman presided over subsequent deliberations that saw

his Maple Leafs crowned as Canadian champions.³ It marked the first championship for player-manager Watkins. There would be plenty more.

For unknown reasons, Watkins took the following year off from baseball.⁴ Perhaps the controversy that had embroiled the Canadian league put him off the game, or he simply couldn't find a team needing his services. For 1882, he turned up on the roster of the St. Thomas Atlantics, playing outfield and third base. He also managed the Atlantics, just as he had done in Guelph.⁵ The Atlantics became semi-professional after their successful 1881 campaign in which they claimed the title of Canadian champions by defeating Sleeman's Maple Leafs.⁶ Pitcher for the Atlantics of 1882 was Guelph native Bob Emslie, who went on to a career in the National League as a player and long-time umpire. The Atlantics claimed the championship of Canada again in 1882 with Watkins on board, and then barnstormed through New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.⁷

Upon returning home, the Atlantics played in London against a team from Port Huron, Michigan on August 30. The game was arranged with the London Tecumsehs, but London had disbanded. Five members of the Tecumsehs appeared on the roster for recently formed Port Huron team. Watkins scored three times as St. Thomas hammered the visitors 20-7, marking the first loss for Port Huron. Watkins apparently caught the eye of Port Huron organizers, who were seeking more men to complete their roster. St. Thomas was one of the few remaining top-notch clubs left standing in Ontario, and was having trouble finding opponents. So Watkins and fellow Atlantic Jim Tray, a catcher, jumped to Port Huron in early September, along with several former Tecumsehs, including pitcher Billy Mountjoy.⁸ The Port Hurons went on a winning streak, losing only two of 18 games, and claimed the state championships of both Michigan and Indiana.⁹ By season's end, Watkins had appeared in 12 of those games, scoring 18 runs, with an impressive batting average of .400.¹⁰ He and Tray (who batted .418) were champions three times over in a single season. Both returned to the Port Huron nine for 1883. Watkins would never again play for a Canadian team.

Port Huron got off to a strong start the following year, defeating Watkins' old club, the Maple Leafs, 7-1 in late May. But the new club ran into financial trouble and failed to attract fans, disbanding in September, but not before claiming the title of "little Michigan champions."¹¹ Watkins

signed with Bay City for 1884, apparently producing some bitterness in Port Huron by doing so. *The Port Huron Times* suggested that by the following year he'd be able to write a book, "What I Know About Managing," based on his experiences in Port Huron and Bay City.¹² It didn't elaborate. The sarcasm was a precursor to the sort of criticism from the press and players that the hard-nosed Watkins would generate during his lengthy career.

Bay City disbanded in July of 1884 and that same month Watkins signed with the woefully weak Indianapolis Hoosiers of the American Association.¹³ Within days, he was named manager. A bit more than a month later, he was nearly killed during a game against Cincinnati. On August 26, hard-throwing Reds pitcher Gus Shallix beamed Watkins in the temple with two out in the first inning, and Watkins had to be carried from the field.¹⁴ Because of his early departure, Watkins did not appear in the box score, leading to later confusion about the official number of games he played. Watkins slipped in and out of consciousness for several days, but returned to the Hoosiers lineup on September 11. His play was erratic in the field, however, and during his last 12 games he went 3-for-37 for a batting average of .081. Watkins benched himself, realizing he was no longer the player he had been. His managing record with his first major league club was an unimpressive 4-18. The Hoosiers placed 11th in the Association, and were dropped by the loop after the dismal 1884 campaign.¹⁵

Watkins had ended the playing part of his career (except for an occasional appearance) at the age of 26 with a batting average of .205, in his 35 games with Indy. But he had much more to accomplish in baseball. That fall, he married Edna Buzzard, the daughter of a Port Huron lake captain, and settled in her hometown opposite Sarnia, Ontario. Within weeks, Watkins helped organize the Western League, and for 1885 he established a new team in Indianapolis playing under the old Hoosiers name.¹⁶ His club was in first place by June, but the team and league were struggling financially. Watkins travelled to Detroit to see if the Hoosiers could buy the anemic Detroit Wolverines of the National League and switch to that loop. But Detroit wanted far too much money, he learned. The principals of the Wolverines saw an opportunity in the overture from Watkins, however, and decided to buy the Hoosiers. After brief negotiations, Detroit acquired the entire club, including star slugger Sam

Thompson and manager Watkins, for \$5,000.¹⁷ Soon afterward, with the loss of its best team, the Western League collapsed. Watkins was named manager of the Wolverines and kept only four of its players to make room for the newcomers.

Detroit faced unexpected logistical problems with the purchase of an entire franchise. Under National League rules, players could not be signed by a new club until 10 days after their release from their old club. The sale of a franchise had not been contemplated. For a time, Detroit directors owned two teams. Detroit soon learned that managers from other clubs were also interested in many of the Hoosiers, with their pitcher and catcher being wooed especially hard by Cincinnati. So Detroit directors Frederick Stearns and John B. Molony, along with Watkins, devised a scheme to protect their new players and keep them from signing more lucrative contracts elsewhere.

The *Detroit Free Press* explained it this way:

“. . . it was deemed best to remove them from all outside influence, and the entire team came to this city yesterday morning with the Detroit directors. From Detroit they proceeded by rail to Toronto and will there take a steamer for a pleasure trip down the St. Lawrence to the Thousand Islands. They will join the Detroit Club here the middle of next week.”¹⁸

That account may not have been entirely accurate. Several other versions were told and reported over the years. One of the Hoosiers, Deacon McGuire, said the players were sent by train to Cleveland where they boarded a steamer to cruise Lake Erie. The captain, he said, was ordered to stay out of sight and deliver his human cargo to Detroit once the 10-day waiting period ended.¹⁹ In his own reminiscences published later, Wolverines director Stearns said he and his manager hired a yacht and sent the players on a cruise around Lake Michigan.²⁰ Stearns candidly explained the plight of the players to another writer: “Some of them were far from being good sailors and were sea-sick most of the time. However, we kept them practically prisoners until the time limit had expired, when we brought them back to Detroit, where they all signed their contracts.”²¹

Slugger Sam Thompson, one of those held hostage, recalled the players were entertained royally with food and drink, but by the sixth day afloat

they were uneasy and demanded to be put ashore, but the captain refused. The hostages realized they couldn't take over the ship, however, because many were farm boys who had never before been on the water. Besides, they were out of sight of land and had no idea where they were. As Thompson told *The Washington Post* years later: "We didn't touch land during the time and no boat was allowed to come near us. We were prisoners, but well-cared-for prisoners. Anything in the line of creature comforts you could find packed away on ice. We lived on the best in the market, and spent the rest of the time in fishing and playing poker, chips having very thoughtfully been provided."²²

Back in Detroit, and after signing Wolverine contracts, the players found waiting for them scores of letters and telegraphed offers for their services from other clubs that had piled up during their captivity.²³ They also learned that the sea legs they had acquired made their first few practices far more interesting than expected.



After the new Wolverines were safely signed, the *Detroit Free Press* reported the men had spent their time fishing in "The Flats," a low-lying delta paradise for fishermen and hunters at the north end of Lake St. Clair.²⁴ The original *Free Press* story about the cruise in the Thousand Islands may have been a ruse to help Wolverines management throw rival teams off the trail of the prized players. The true story is hard to pin

down. It is hard to lose sight of land for very long on Lake St. Clair, unless the steamer turned circles in the middle of it. Regardless of the itinerary, if team management tried such a tactic today they would face charges of kidnapping, abduction and likely a slew of other criminal counts. Watkins played a key role in the escapade as team manager. It was in his best interest, as a former principal of the Hoosiers, to ensure the deal with Detroit was consummated to maximize his own financial return.

Watkins quickly set to work in his new role, trying to improve the fortunes of the under-performing Wolverines during what was left of the

season. He had replaced manager Charlie Morton who had recorded 7 wins and 31 losses. Watkins began to turn things around, compiling a 34-36 record by season's end, when Detroit finished sixth in the National League.

Before the 1885 season was out, however, there was more risky business to be undertaken: another kidnapping, of sorts, although this one had willing participants. Wolverines director Stearns, who was about to become president, was determined to improve the performance of the club. A leading pharmaceutical manufacturer, Stearns had played baseball at the University of Michigan, and he saw Watkins as a kindred spirit, knowledgeable about the game and willing to bring much-needed discipline to Detroit. Watkins imposed fines on players for poor play and substantial penalties for late night drinking and partying. Sometimes described as a "martinet," he did not endear himself to the players.²⁵

Stearns and other Detroit directors learned the Buffalo Bisons were in poor financial condition and might drop out of the National League. The Bisons had opened a new ballpark and fan support during the team's seventh year as a League club was insufficient to pay the bills. In mid-July, the Bisons' star pitcher Pud Galvin was sold to the Allegheny Club of Pittsburgh for \$1,500. Other professional clubs began to pursue Buffalo's Big Four hitters of Dan Brouthers, Jack Rowe, Hardy Richardson and Deacon White. In September, Stearns travelled to Buffalo in a bid to acquire the foursome. But Buffalo directors said they were not interested in selling off parts of the team; they wanted to unload the entire franchise. Stearns called in fellow director Molony and they agreed to take the entire team for a reported \$7,000.²⁶ The League president and National League owners were upset at the blockbuster deal Detroit had pulled off, under which Brouthers and Richardson would earn \$4,000 annually and Rowe and White \$3,500, making them among the best-paid players in the game.²⁷ The other owners wanted to sign the players for less money, and were annoyed at Detroit's free-spending ways when the owners were trying to limit salaries.

Detroit was unable to sign the players right away, however. The just-devised Saratoga Agreement was intended to stop the poaching of players, and barred teams from negotiating with them for the next season until October 20, 1885. The Agreement also contained a little-known provision stipulating that during the 10 days after a player was released, only teams from the same league could negotiate with him. After that, he could sign

anywhere. The Saratoga Agreement, which had yet to be formally adopted, was designed to keep the National League and American Association from entering bidding wars, and to prevent a consequent escalation of player salaries.

The Big Four first appeared for the Wolverines in Detroit on September 19 for a game against the New York Giants. The visitors were upset at the move, having been instructed by their directors to refuse to play if the four suited up for Detroit. National League president Nick Young telegraphed umpire Bob Ferguson telling him the move was illegal and he should award the game to New York by default if the four played.²⁸ Detroit relented, played without its new stars, and lost 6-5.

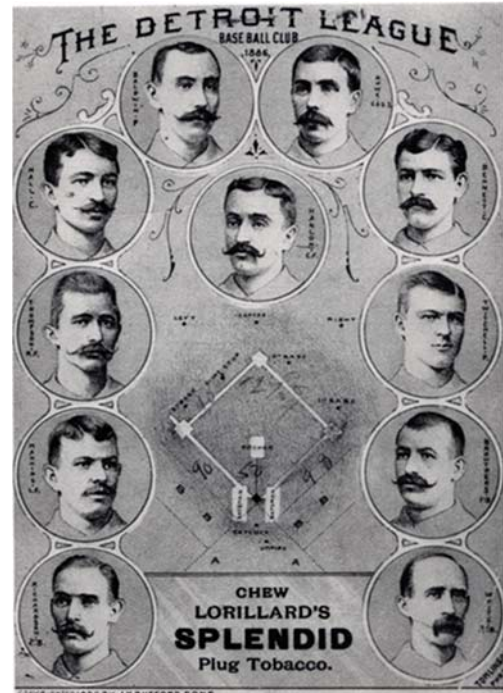
On the night of September 21, the four players disappeared from Detroit as controversy about the situation raged in professional baseball, and managers from other teams pursued them. The players themselves wanted to play with Detroit, and agreed to flee town until October 20, when they would be free to sign Wolverines contracts. The foursome were soon enjoying themselves, hunting and fishing at the St. Clair Flats, the same marshy area at the north end of Lake St. Clair, about 30 miles north of Detroit, which may have provided refuge for the Hoosiers back in June. Brouthers, Rowe, Richardson and White are believed to have stayed in the private lodge of one of Detroit's wealthy directors. After the October deadline passed, The *Detroit Free Press* reported the players themselves had hoped "to escape the annoyance of telegraphs, letters, and delegations from places where they do not wish or expect to play next season."²⁹ It wasn't until November, at its annual meeting, that the National League finally ruled Detroit could keep the men.³⁰

The 1886 season gave Watkins a chance to make his strengthened troops a contender. He acquired second baseman Fred Dunlap from St. Louis during the season to further improve the Wolverines. Solid pitching and heavy hitting saw the club end the season in second place, with a record of 87-36, just behind Chicago. Watkins proved to be a demanding manager, and some of his players chafed at his no-nonsense approach, his fines and

his criticism of them. *The Sporting News*, the St. Louis publication still upset he had lured away that city's star player Dunlap, described Watkins as "more disgusting to the [Detroit] players than [Chicago star player and manager Cap] Anson is to the Chicago giants."³¹ That was saying something, because the hard-nosed Anson had a well-deserved reputation for abusing players and umpires.

In the off-season, League magnates decided to provide a guarantee of only \$100 a game for visiting teams, instead of the 30 per cent share of the gate previously given. The move was seen as aimed at Detroit, in a bid to curb its free-spending ways. Detroit had always drawn good crowds on the road, and often pocketed \$500 or more from games. It did less well at home. During a protracted dispute with League owners, Wolverines president Stearns threatened to bolt to the rival American Association because of the change. But he recanted when the guarantee was raised to \$125 and several League teams like Chicago agreed to retain the former gate-splitting formula with Detroit.³²

The year 1887 would be a highlight in the career of the baseball manager who was about to turn 29. Watkins arranged for spring training in Macon, Georgia. He is one of many managers, including Detroit's first manager Frank Bancroft, who, it is claimed, introduced the innovation. The Wolverines won all 31 of their spring games in the south. Detroit opened its season April 28 in Watkins' old stomping ground of Indianapolis, winning 4-3 over a new version of the Hoosiers. The season saw Detroit battle for the pennant before large crowds that gradually diminished at home as the season wore on. Detroit captured first place on May 4 and never relinquished it. The Wolverines suffered some pitching woes, and Watkins was criticized in the *Detroit Free Press* for his decisions, such as his benching of hurler Pretzels Getzien, his suspension of erratic lefty Lady Baldwin, and what were described as his "asinine experiments."³³ But the bats in the Detroit lineup were among the best in the League, and the team



captured the pennant, 3.5 games ahead of the Philadelphia Phillies. The final Wolverines record stood at 79 wins with 45 losses. After the National League season concluded, a “world championship series” was played against the American Association champion St. Louis Browns. Both clubs agreed to play 15 games at their own parks and in eight other cities to bolster their income by extending the season. Detroit won the series, 10 games to 5.



At the peak of his success, storm clouds were brewing for Watkins. In a banquet to salute the accomplishments of the Wolverines, club president Frederick Stearns failed to mention his manager, while dishing out praise for the champions.³⁴ Watkins had feuded with second baseman Fred Dunlap about his play. Dunlap was hostile and said he would no longer play for Detroit if Watkins remained as manager. So Watkins sold him off to the Pittsburgh Alleghenys, making both men happier. Meanwhile, eight other Wolverines formed a “combine,” telling management they would not sign new contracts if Watkins remained. They wanted team secretary Bob Leadley to take over the reins, but Stearns refused.³⁵ Watkins knew he was unpopular, but insisted the stance by the players was all part of a plan by the new Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players to rid the game of non-playing managers. “I treated my men so loyally this year that I cannot understand why there should be any objection to me,” he told the *Detroit Free Press*.³⁶ Shortly before Christmas, Stearns resigned unexpectedly as club president to focus on his growing pharmaceutical company. A key defender of Watkins was gone, although directors remained behind him for

the time being. The “combine” of players gradually weakened as the next season approached and they feared unemployment. They began signing new contracts. One holdout was Deacon White, who insisted he could not possibly play for a manager who had treated him so badly.³⁷ But upon obtaining a promise of better treatment, White joined the team toward the end of spring training in Mobile, Alabama. Another holdout, Ned Hanlon, also relented and signed on.

The 1888 season began poorly. After an early losing streak, Watkins pronounced himself “disgusted” that players who did so well the previous year could play so poorly. He laid off Baldwin without pay, and fined Hanlon for failing to slide during a base stealing attempt.³⁸ The divide between the players and their manager continued to grow. The Wolverines were winless until April 28, when they defeated Indianapolis, 1-0. Injuries mounted and attitudes worsened even further during June, when Watkins fined pitcher Pretzels Getzien \$100 for what he termed “back talk.”³⁹ Watkins was accused of riding Getzien and pitcher Pete Conway too hard, and he was pilloried for his handling of the lineup. Crowds at home were becoming thin as Detroit rose to second place by early July. A 16-game losing streak began July 28 with a 21-17 slugfest loss to Chicago. During the swoon, it was reported, the Wolverines appeared “devoid of spirit” and their fielding was particularly poor.⁴⁰

Criticism of Watkins mounted in the *Detroit Free Press* as fan support continued to erode and losses mounted. “For some time past,” its sports reporter opined, “he has shown a remarkable lack of judgment and unless there is a speedy improvement in this respect, the team will do worse . . .”⁴¹ In late August, Watkins could take the heat no longer and resigned. He wasn’t talking, but former president Stearns explained: “Well, he said there was too much friction in the conduct of the club and his position was so unpleasant.”⁴² Watkins’ record had been 49-44 for 1888 and Detroit was in third place upon his departure. Club secretary Bob Leadley replaced him as manager and went 19-19, as Detroit finished fifth.

Watkins had accomplished much during his three years in Detroit. Under his watch, the Wolverines won 249 games and lost 161, for a healthy .607 winning percentage. During his tenure, the Wolverines captured the League pennant and the world’s championship, no minor accomplishments. Watkins was widely seen in the baseball community as a man who

demanded the best from players, and he would not be unemployed for long. Within two weeks, he was hired by the Kansas City Cowboys, the cellar-dwellers of the American Association. Back in Detroit, things didn't improve. After the 1888 season, the franchise was sold to Cleveland and the players dispersed.

Watkins continued managing or owning teams until 1914, in such cities as St. Paul, Duluth, Rochester, St. Louis, Sioux City, Indianapolis (again), Pittsburgh, Memphis, Minneapolis, and in his adopted home town of Port Huron, Michigan. Along the way, in 1897, he became an American citizen.⁴³ His teams claimed six more championships. His final one came in 1914 with the Indianapolis Hoosierfeds of the short-lived Federal League. He acted as general manager and business manager for the club. It marked his last hurrah in Indianapolis, the city to which he so often returned and where he captured five championships.

During his nine seasons as a manager in major league baseball, Watkins recorded 452 wins and 444 losses with 18 tied games. That produced a winning percentage of .504.

Back home in Port Huron, Watkins was active in local businesses and later moved to adjacent Marysville, helping it become a city. He was president and a financial backer of Port Huron's entry in the Michigan-Ontario league in 1921 and 1922, his final position in baseball. A ballpark in Port Huron was named in his honour.

DEATH STRIKES OUT VETERAN OF BASEBALL

Veteran Baseball Manager Expires In Local Hospital

W. H. WATKINS

CONTRACT ON

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In 'Watty' Watkins, Manager Of World Champions, Dies In Hospital Here

The Supreme Umpire called the third strike on William H. "Watty" Watkins, one of the "old guard" of professional baseball, Wednesday night in Port Huron General hospital.

"Watty", who was 79, went to the hospital a month ago after an illness of nearly six months. He died at about 3 p. m. of diabetes. Although he had not been improving, his death was unexpected, it was said at the hospital.

He leaves a record of managerial prowess achieved in the rough and ready days when the national pastime was in its infancy. His record has probably never been equaled in baseball history. It outshadowed his civic service and accomplishments in Marysville and Port Huron.

He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Edna Watkins, Marysville; and two sisters, Mrs. L. E. Shilton, Toronto, Ont.; and Mrs. Ella Crisp, New York city.

The remains are in Falk's fu-

Overall, his teams won championships in about a dozen professional leagues, a record for a Canadian-born manager. The game that nearly killed

him as a young player had been very, very good to William Watkins. He died in Port Huron in 1937, at the age of 79.

The Port Huron Times Herald noted his passing this way: “He leaves a record of managerial prowess achieved in the rough and ready days when the national pastime was in its infancy. His record has probably never been equaled in baseball history.”⁴⁴

Watkins was inducted into the Port Huron Sports Hall of Fame in 2008. For several years his name appeared on the ballot as a candidate for induction into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

The Championships Won by William Watkins

1880—Guelph, Canadian League.

1882—St. Thomas, Canadian League*; Port Huron, MI, Michigan and Indiana leagues.

1883—Port Huron, MI, Little Michigan Champions.*

1887—Detroit, National League; world championship.

1894—Sioux City, IA, Western League.

1895—Indianapolis, Western League.

1897—Indianapolis, Western League.

1902—Indianapolis, American Association.

1908—Indianapolis, American Association.

1914—Indianapolis, Federal League.

*claimed.

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Notes

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