
THE 1930 ONTARIO PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL LEAGUE

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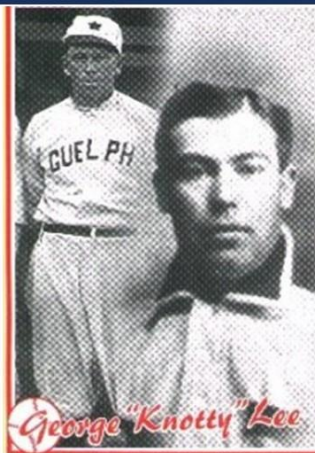


Why on earth should anyone care about a league whose existence from idea to demise lasted less than five months? Five months from 88 years ago at that? Despite its short life span, the Ontario Baseball League was fascinating for many reasons, the most important being loyalty to home towns. The league existed because a single person was passionate about there being professional baseball in Ontario outside of Toronto, enough so that he convinced six cities to support his dream. But the league also was of immense importance to many men from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a town three hundred miles and an entire country away. For a couple months in 1930, the Ontario league afforded an opportunity for a few dozen men to pursue their dreams, entertain fans and earn some money during a time when it was difficult to do those things.

George “Knotty” Lee was one of the most important people in the creation of professional baseball in Canada. His efforts earned him induction into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 1983. During his lifetime he formed four professional leagues which were at least partially based in Canada. His third attempt was his most ineffectual and is the subject of our talk today.

In 1930, Lee decided that Ontario needed more professional baseball again. While Ontario has a long, illustrious history of amateur baseball, no city outside of Toronto’s International League team had had a professional team since the

THE BEGINNING



Michigan-Ontario League folded in 1926. Lee felt that this absence needed remedying.

Ambition is a powerful driving force, and the launching of the Ontario League was fueled almost entirely by Lee's ambition. Most others would have looked at the numerous obstacles that potentially stood in the way and have stopped, or at least delayed, their plans. Lee forged onward.

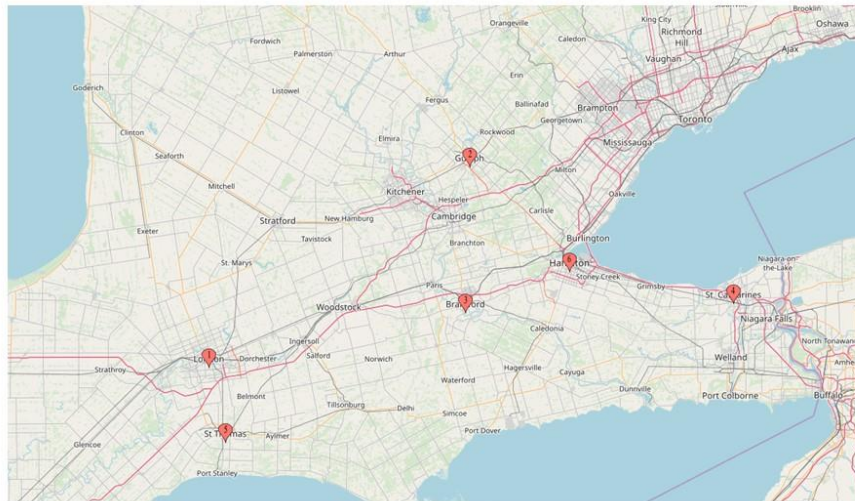
The biggest challenge of Lee's league was the timing. Knotty did not begin lining up cities for the league until March of 1930. By this time, the major leagues were already engaging in spring training, other minor leagues were also underway and amateur Ontario teams were getting organized. This didn't stop Knotty from his quest. Not only did he want to bring professional baseball back to Ontario, he wanted to make sure Canadians had the opportunity to play for those teams. In his initial pitch to potential cities, Lee stressed that each team would have a minimum of six Canadians apiece. With rosters of fourteen players per team, Lee was hoping that the Ontario League would be at least one-third Canadian.

Towards that end, Lee pitched the league to members of the National and Canadian Hockey Leagues as a way for them to maintain their fitness. The amateur ranks were also encouraged to come out and make a bid for joining the pros. As the start of the season approached, both groups largely turned away from the league. Many of the hockey players, having just completed a season, felt

that they needed rest. A number of amateur players who were on the cusp opted to maintain their amateur status.

While Lee and his optimism got the league up and going, there were many who doubted the sustainability of the league. The *Guelph Mercury and Advertiser*, while excited about the opportunity to have a professional team in town, also expressed concern over Lee's plan. An interview with Locke McRury, who himself had been involved with forming amateur leagues in Ontario, concurred with the *Mercury's* views. Locals would not turn out to professional games six games a week for financial reasons. A salary limit of \$2,500 per team was too low to attract good players, and fans could probably watch better ball from the prevalent semi-pro and amateur ranks. McRury concluded with foresight by saying that the league might survive the season, but he doubted it. The *Kitchener Daily Record* also chimed in, saying that there was no way Guelph and St. Thomas could draw enough to support a pro team for an entire season.

THE SIX TEAMS OF THE ONTARIO PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL LEAGUE



The six teams found themselves on uneven footing right away. St. Thomas established themselves as the Blue Sox right away, ordering new uniforms. Guelph, meanwhile, had to borrow uniforms from Toronto for their team to practice in. On the first day of practices for squads, Brantford drew from a bounty of local talent and fielded twenty players, while Hamilton could not fill all nine positions on the diamond.

St. Catharines took an interesting approach to filling their team. They hired Johnny Murphy, a native of Scranton, Pennsylvania to be their manager. Murphy had long been associated with baseball in Canada, spending several seasons in the Canadian League and then playing for American and Canadian teams in the Michigan-Ontario League. Murphy's wife had been dealing with an illness and when it came time to report, Murphy informed Blue Sox management that he would be unable to manage the team and put forth the name of Pat Dougherty. Murphy himself passed away just five years later at the age of 41.

ST. CATHARINES MANAGER PAT DOUGHERTY

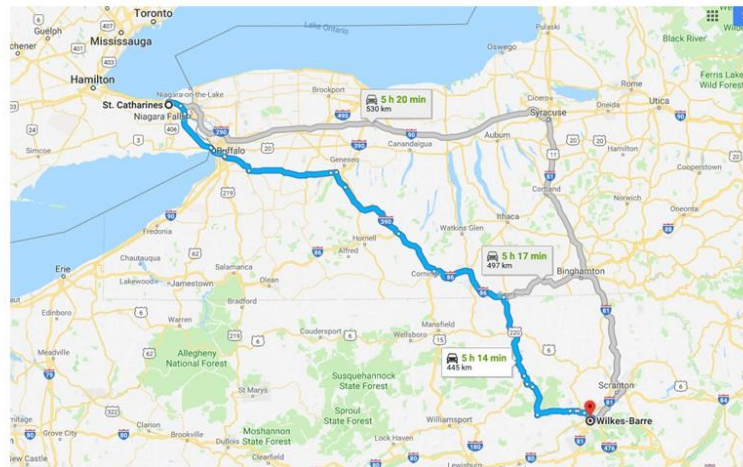


Dougherty had been a teammate of Murphy's playing for Saginaw, Michigan in the Michigan-Ontario League. They opposed each other for several years after playing for the New York-Penn League, Dougherty in York and Murphy in Wilkes-Barre. Murphy drew Dougherty to Wilkes-Barre to play for the powerful local semi-pro Wyoming Valley League to which Dougherty turned to fill his Blue Sox roster.

Two players joined Dougherty on the journey to St. Catharines: Tony Kosloski and Mickey Haslin. Haslin would be one of two players in the league, the other being Reg Grabowski, who would eventually reach the major leagues. Even though he took just two players with him initially, Dougherty pulled players from the Wyoming Valley for the entire season, at one time having his entire non-Canadian contingent hailing from the Wilkes-Barre area. When Dougherty was

limited by the Canadian player restriction, he still managed to encourage other teams to sign former Wyoming Valley players. In all, at least fifteen players from the semi-pro league found their way onto Ontario League rosters over the course of the season.

THE ROAD TO ST. CATHARINES



Although Knotty Lee began organizing the league in March of 1930 and players began to commit to rosters near the end of the month, it wasn't until the end of April that the structure of the league was finalized and a schedule drawn up. By this time, most facilities had already made arrangements to host amateur games, which resulted in difficulties establishing "home" fields for all the dates for some clubs. A one hundred game schedule was decided upon, broken into two "halves", one of 45 games and the second of the remaining 55. Rules were established to discourage delayed starts in an effort to appease fans.

A decision was also made to postpone the start of the season a week. The Guelph team breathed the biggest sigh of relief upon the news as they were having a difficult time securing enough players for their roster.

In an attempt to get fans supporting the league early, exhibition games were arranged with the House of David team and the Buffalo Colored Pullmans. While the games were promoted and fans seemed excited for them, many of the

HOUSE OF DAVID BASEBALL TEAM (1930)



games ended up being canceled due to rain, limiting the preseason preparations of the teams and hampering early local support.

Once the season got underway, obstacles arose. Despite the delay to the season's start, cold weather plagued the Ontario region. Games were canceled and those that were not held little appeal for fans because of the chilly weather. Rainfall also continued to plague the league, resulting in a number of postponements.

Dougherty's St. Catharines team took off right out of the gate, winning seven of their eight games and quickly establishing themselves as the premier team in the league. They never really faltered and would end up winning three quarters of their games in the first half.

Meanwhile, Knotty Lee's Tecumsehs were showing that they had the offense to contend, if not the pitching. Lee had built a right-handed hitting squad that seemed nearly impossible to shut down. It was not until June 15th that a left-handed pitcher was able to defeat them when Guelph's Lefty Beyer, who had only been signed a week earlier, managed to shut out London for eight innings. Beyer had been helped considerably by his defense, who had turned two double plays and the league's only triple play of the season, an unusual 6-3-2 that has only

as he hit the ball unlike anyone, anywhere, at any level of baseball. 1930 was one of the most offensive-oriented seasons in major league history but no one could match what George Bradshaw was doing. At the end of the season, Bradshaw had a batting average of .698. The second highest batting average in the league was his teammate Claret Hoffman who hit an even .400. By the end of the first half of the Ontario League season, local sports coverage in all the towns focused more on what was happening in the Intercounty League than what was going on in the Ontario League.

GALT'S GORD BRADSHAW



A player like Bradshaw might be coveted by the new league. The Brantford native would surely have been a draw had one of the Ontario League teams been able to sign him. But Bradshaw had been enticed to play for Galt with the promise of employment off the field. One of the Terriers' executives, Robert Scroggins, owned a shoe store and gave Bradshaw a job working there. A steady, guaranteed income plus the ability to play baseball regularly for a top notch team was something that none of the Ontario League teams could provide.

Even as the league appeared to most people to be crumbling, Knotty Lee and his ambition were ready to double down. Never mind that one team was ready to fold and others were struggling. Lee said his goal was to expand the league to eight teams and then apply for Class B consideration for the 1931 season.

The second half of the season began with several question marks. Newspaper coverage, which had been dwindling as the season progressed, now was minimal. Reports in the papers suggested that the second half schedule was being modified, but in what way and why, no one seemed certain. After a couple of days it became clear that Hamilton was not going to be supporting a team for the remainder of the season. Guelph was finding that it was having difficulties drawing fans and was exploring the possibility of continuing in Sarnia. Opening the second half of the season in London with a 19-1 loss, the most lopsided defeat in the league, made it seem as though it didn't really matter where they ended up playing. The following day the two teams played in Sarnia with London billed as the home team and Guelph once again lost, 10-1. A couple of days later London again played a home game on the road, this time in Chatham against St. Thomas, which drew fewer than three hundred fans. With just five teams in the league, one team was off every day, which meant that one team was without revenues each day.

Days after giving up on their team, a group of Hamilton businessmen made an offer to purchase the St. Catharines team and move it to Hamilton. Their belief was that Hamiltonians would support a winning team, and what better option than to purchase the team that had proven itself to be the best in the league.

"The largest crowd in weeks" turned out to see the battle between London and St. Catharines. London won the match between the two best teams in the league. Even that slice of success was diminished, as no umpire showed to officiate the game and the two teams resorted to having a representative from each roster umpire. The following day the two teams had an umpire for a few innings only. Umpire Hagan had positioned himself behind the pitcher's mound. When a ball was returned to pitcher Wilskie, Wilskie turned away and the throw struck Hagan in the face, causing him to leave the game and requiring that a player finish out the game. The game was also notable in that London scored nine runs in an inning, the most runs in an inning of an Ontario League game, and that a London player homered on the first pitch of a game, the only time that occurred in an Ontario League game.

On July 14th, representatives from Guelph, Brantford and St. Catharines met to discuss the league's future. A plan was devised to reconvene in a week's time

to hopefully find a sixth team to finish out the season, and to draw up a remaining schedule that would be financially viable.

Notably absent from the meeting was Knotty Lee or any representative for the London team. It was reported that he was out of the province and days later, a possible reason for that appeared. In a game between London and St. Catharines, the two best teams in the league, reports came that numerous scouts were on hand to witness the game. Lee was trying to make good to his players by arranging for them to have jobs once the league folded. Like carrion birds circling a wounded animal on its last breath, the scouts were seeing what the best parts of the soon-to-be-dead league would be.

Sure enough, soon after came the announcement from the St. Catharines team that they would not be traveling to their next game. Their paychecks were in arrears and the team decided they would go home. It was also discovered that it had been some time since any umpires had been paid by the league.

The next day Brantford followed suit. Manager Dixie Walker had some funds and the team petitioned the Parks Board for a refund of its deposit. Between the two sources, players had enough funds to return home.

With three teams remaining in the league, it would seem as if there was little that could be done to continue, but Knotty Lee, ever the promoter, announced that the “winner” of the second half of the season would play his Tecumsehs, who with the folding of St. Catharines became the winner of the first half, in a playoff series. London had dominated what passed as the second half of the season, losing just one of the thirteen games they played. St. Thomas and Guelph both had losing records, but St. Thomas was not quite as bad as Guelph so got the nod as the second half “winner”. So arguably the most absurd playoff series ever took place and the result was fitting. St. Thomas won three of the four games that were played and were declared the Ontario League champions. This despite a regular season record of 23-30.

Of course, like the other teams, the real motivation of the playoff series was to generate some money for the players to find their way to their next destination. Lee took the best care of his players with most of them moving on to roster spots with other teams, but many of the players in the league were left to

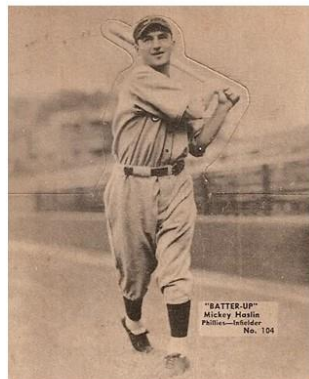
return home and/or find employment on their own, whether on the ball field or not.

Thus ended the brief life of the Ontario Professional Baseball League, less than five months after Knotty Lee had first reached out to cities about backing teams. Lee would continue to play, manage and scout, and founded his fourth, final, and most successful league, the Can-Am League, in 1936.

His Pennsylvanian counterpart, Pat Dougherty, who led the Ontario League with eight home runs, returned to Wilkes-Barre and became a policeman. He competed for a little while longer in the Wyoming Valley semi-pro league as well as the occasional game between the Wilkes-Barre police and the Scranton police.

Many of the players of the Ontario League continued with their professional baseball careers, with two of them reaching the major leagues.

ST. CATHARINES' MICKEY HASLIN



Mickey Haslin also returned to Wilkes-Barre with Dougherty and played in the Wyoming Valley League in 1931. He then signed a Class D contract in 1932. He caught the eye of the Philadelphia Phillies and joined them in 1933, spending a little over three seasons with them, the 1935 season as their starting shortstop. He spent six years total in the major leagues.

After leading the Ontario League in victories, Reg Grabowski of the London Tecumsehs also joined the Phillies, playing for them from 1932 through 1934. His highlight came on September 15, 1933, when he threw a two-hit shutout against

LONDON'S REG GRABOWSKI



the Cincinnati Reds. His former opponent turned teammate, Haslin, had three hits and drove in three of Philadelphia's four runs, making it one of his most productive days in the majors as well. Grabowski would play professional ball for eleven more seasons after his stint with the Phillies.

While the Ontario League had a short existence, it was an interesting one and provided exciting baseball opportunities for fans and players alike.

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