



James "Tip" O'Neill
THE WOODSTOCK WONDER

CANADIAN BASEBALL HISTORY CONFERENCE
DENNIS THIESSEN - NOVEMBER 2018

James “Tip” O’Neill, the Woodstock Wonder Dennis Thiessen

Amateur Years, Woodstock Actives, 1877-81

1877

Tip’s 1877 Record: 6 wins, 2 losses, 1 tie

- May 15: London Atlantics recognized as the Amateur Champions in Canada. Teams competing for the 1877 championship: Atlantics, Guelph Maple Leafs, Hamilton Standards, and Bowmanville Royal Oaks. Woodstock did not enter.
- July 13: 15–0 (A) loss against Hamilton Standards.
- July 27: 12–5 (H) loss against London Atlantics (Bob Emslie-CF).
- August 2: 9–0 (H) win by forfeit against Bowmanville Royal Oaks (disputed call in the ninth inning, Actives leading 11-10).
- August 29: 4–4 (A) tie against Guelph Maple Leafs.
- September 27: 7–2 (A) win against London Atlantics.

1878

Tip’s 1878 Record: 11 wins, 5 losses

- May 15: London Atlantics recognized as the Amateur Champions in Canada. Teams competing for the 1877 championship: Woodstock Actives, London Atlantics, Guelph Maple Leafs, Hamilton Standards, Kingston Earls, Kingston St. Lawrence, and Markham Iroquois.
- June 28: 6–1 (H) loss against Hamilton Standards; Hamilton accused of paying pitcher and catcher.
- August 12 (A): 5–2 loss against London Atlantics in 10 innings; August 19 (H): 3-2 loss against London Atlantics.
- August 16: 10–3 (A) loss against Guelph; August 22: 1-0 (H) win against Guelph, Tip pitched a no-hitter.
- September 23–30: 13–1 (A) and 9–0 (A) (forfeit) wins against Kingston Earls; 12–4 (A) and 10–5 (A) wins against Kingston St. Lawrence.

- December 3: Judicial Committee of the Canadian Association of Baseball Players (CABBP) awarded the amateur championship to the Woodstock Actives. The Actives were the only team to complete the full number of games required for the championship, which was 10, two against each team (Hamilton had disbanded). Woodstock had a 6–4 win-loss record. The London Atlantics had 4–1 win-loss record (beat Actives twice) and Guelph had a 4-2 win-loss record (split their two-game series against Woodstock).
- December 25: The Actives received from the Secretary of the CABBP the championship streamer in recognition of their championship. The streamer was 24 feet long and 8 feet wide and read: “Actives, of Woodstock, Champions of Canada.” The Beaver and Maple Leaf appeared on the left-hand corners of the streamer.

1879

Tip's 1879 Record: 13 wins, 4 losses

- April 3: At the annual meeting of the CABBP, following a dispute over the 1878 championship, none of the clubs in attendance (Guelph Maple Leafs, Harriston Browns, Toronto Clippers, Toronto Atlantics, Woodstock Actives) entered the Association. The CABBP subsequently suspended operations.
- June 20: First time that a newspaper (*Woodstock Sentinel-Review*) used the nickname “Tip”.
- July 1: 7–0 (H) win against the Windham Wranglers, part of Dominion Day celebrations.
- July 31 to August 6: “Our ‘Actives’ Abroad,” 6-game trip in New York State. Played against Batavia (won 22–0 and 13–2), Lima (won 8–4), Canandaigua (won 8–7), and Lyons (won 5–2, lost 14–10). Tip pitched a no-hitter in the 22–0 win against Batavia.
- August 20: 8–6 (A) loss against Harriston Browns; September 30: 17–4 (A) win against Harriston; October 1: 11–9 (H) loss against Harriston. After the 11–9 loss, the *Toronto Daily Mail* declared that Harriston Browns were the amateur champions.

1880

Tip's 1880 Record: 9 wins, 2 losses

- May 10: Tip given a gold ring by members of the Actives as he left for Chicago; played for a short time with the Chicago Franklins.
- May 21: Meeting held in Guelph to resuscitate the CABBP. It was renamed the Canadian Association of Amateur Baseball Players (CAABBP). Emblem (silver baseball bat) of championship of Canada in the hands of Guelph Maple Leafs. Some of the teams competing for the 1880 championship: Woodstock Actives, Guelph Maple Leafs, Harriston Browns, Galt Mutuals.
- July 28: 8–7 (H) win against Harriston Browns (Bob Emslie-P; Bill Mountjoy-3B); September 9: 8–5 (A) win against Harriston.
- July 12: 8–3 (A) loss against Guelph Maple Leafs; August 10: 8–1 (A) loss against Guelph; September 1: 17–2 (H) win against Guelph; and September 8: 1–0 win (A) against Guelph, Tip allowed 3 hits and had 14 strikeouts. Lew Brown, on a one-year suspension from Boston (National League), caught for the Actives in the two wins against Guelph.
- August 28 to October 2: Woodstock, Guelph, and Harriston clubs accused each other of using professionals. September 3: Judicial Committee of the CABBP ruled that Harriston was a professional club and thus banned it from further play against amateur clubs. October 2: Judicial Committee also awarded championship to Guelph after Woodstock refused to play Guelph at a neutral park without the use of Lew Brown. October 3-19: Officials from the three clubs continued their dispute in the press.

1881

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| Tip's 1881 Record: 4 wins, 3 losses, 1 tie |
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- April: No annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Amateur Baseball Players (CAABBP) held; games played in 1881 without an “official” championship series organized by the Association.
- April 28-30: Played three pre-season games with Detroit (first year in National League); Tip was not offered a position with the Detroit; for most of May, Tip played with the Hiawathas, a barnstorming team in Detroit sponsored by the Hiawatha Tobacco Factory.
- June 4: Guelph beats Toronto Clippers 4–2 at the Cricket Grounds in Toronto, Tip played second base for Toronto; July 1: Toronto and Guelph (Bill Mountjoy-P) tied 3–3, Tip pitched for Toronto (prior to game, Bud Fowler reported as starting pitcher for Guelph, but was not in the lineup on game

day); August 10: London Tecumsehs (Bill Mountjoy-3B) beat Guelph (Bob Emslie-P) 6-4 at Tecumseh Park, Tip pitched for London.

- July 23: 9–8 (A) loss against Toronto Clippers; July 29: Tied 13–13 (H) against Toronto (Bob Emslie-P); August 6 (A): 10–3 win against Toronto (Bob Emslie-P), Tip had 15 strikeouts; August 15: 7–5 (A) loss against Toronto (Bill Mountjoy-P). After Toronto defeated Woodstock on August 15, the *London Free Press* was the only newspaper to declare Toronto Clippers as the champions of Canada.

Tip's Amateur Pitching Record, 1877–81: 43 Wins, 16 Losses, 2 Ties

Professional Years, 1882-84

1882: New York Metropolitans

Tip's 1882 Record: 25 wins, 10 losses

- April: Tip travelled to New York to seek a position with the New York Metropolitans, an independent team that was also part of the League Alliance. Jim Mutrie (manager) added Tip to the team as an alternate and change pitcher.
- Mets used four pitchers in a 162-game season: Jack Lynch (82 games), Tip O'Neill (35 games), John Doyle (24 games, also Canadian-born), John Valentine (24 games)
- April 16 (First game with the Mets):18–9 win (H) against Princeton; Tip pitched two innings then moved to CF; Tip had 5 hits in 5 times at bat; *New York Clipper* on Tip's pitching:

The new pitcher has been spoken of as a 'ripper' in regard to his speed, and so he proved to be, and a very damaging one, too. He was tediously slow in delivery, watched the bases in the old way without the least regard to signals from his catcher, and, though Clapp promptly returned balls for a quick delivery when the batsman was out of form, he never once took advantage of it...Pitching as he did in this game, he would require about half a dozen new catchers in a season...What O'Neill might do were he to study the art of

pitching we cannot say; but, judging by his exhibition in this game, he has nothing but speed to recommend him. (April 22, 1882, New York Clipper)

- April 16 to May 31: Tip won his first nine games, three of which were against American Association teams.
- July 21: 6–5 win (H) against Providence (National League); Tip “proved himself to be a first-rate pitcher”.
- August 11: 8–7 (H) loss against Cleveland (National League); Tip ineffective in his attempt to change the pace of his pitches, resulting in four earned runs.
- August 12–October 27: Tip injured his hand; unable to play for the rest of the season.
- Across the season, newspapers repeatedly expressed concerns about Tip’s wildness and his lack of strategy. Reporters also worried about how hard John Clapp, Tip’s catcher, had to work (e.g., sore hands from catching Tip’s swift balls; sudden shifts or leaps to catch or block his wild pitches).

1883: New York Gothams (NL)

Tip’s 1883 Record: 5 wins, 12 losses

- Tip assigned to the newly-formed New York Gothams, as were three of his 1882 Metropolitan teammates: John Clapp, Dasher Troy, and Frank Hankinson.
- April 28: *New York Clipper* declared: “James E. O’Neill...is acknowledged to be one of the most promising pitchers of the present period.”
- Tip continued to struggle with wildness. Clapp, his regular catcher, was injured most of the year and only caught Tip twice. The primary catcher (Buck Ewing), in an effort to avoid injury, eventually refused to catch Tip. Two other catchers (John Humphries and Mike Dorgan) had considerable difficulty with Tip’s speed and lack of control.
- Tip lost his first three starts of the season: 3–1 (H) and 14–2 (H) against Providence and 11–6 (A) against Chicago.
- Tip not in the lineup between May 19 and June 14 and between July 29 and September 7; bothered by a sore arm for most of these weeks.
- July 5: 18–1 (H) loss against Providence; in the first inning, Tip allowed 11 runs and 3 home runs; New York committed 19 errors.

- September 8: 16–6 (A) win against Philadelphia; Tip walked 5 batters and had 3 wild pitches, while the catcher (Humphries) charged with 8 passed balls in two innings of play.
- September 14: Tip sent to play with Hartford; played 19 games -- pitched in 10 games (6–4 win-loss record), in outfield for 7 games and at first base for 2 games; October 1: Beat Holyokes 11–1, pitched a no-hitter.
- October 17–27: Played two games in center field with the New York Gothams; Tip pitched for the New York Metropolitan (American Association), in final game of season beating Allentown 14–0, for a second no-hitter in October.
- October to December: Tip approached Mutrie, manager of the New York Metropolitan (American Association) to arrange a transfer from the Gothams to the Mets. Tip signed with the Mets on October 31, a day **before** he was released from the Gothams (November 1), violating the rule that a player had to wait 10 days after his release before he could sign with another team. Tip’s contract with the Mets was thus voided. St. Louis Browns signed Tip for 1884.

1884: St. Louis Browns (AA)

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| Tip’s 1884 Record: 11 wins, 4 losses |
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- April 6 (First game with the Browns): 5–4 win (H) against Reserves; Tip had 9 strikeouts; sore arm after the game; St. Louis newspapers praised Tip’s performance in the box:

“...probably one of the finest exhibitions of pitching seen on Sportsman Park in years” (April 7, 1884, St. Louis Republican)

“O’Neill’s fine debut...Universal comment was that he was a great pitcher and would do his share this season—and to tell the truth, he seemed to feel under the same impression yesterday, never losing his imperturbability at any stage in the game.” (April 7, 1884, St. Louis Post Dispatch)

“His first appearance yesterday at Sportsman’s Park thoroughly and firmly confirmed all the good things that have been said in his favor as a first-class pitcher.” (April 7, 1884, St. Louis Globe-Democrat)

- May 1 (First game of season): 4–2 (H) win against Indianapolis; Tip allowed 6 hits and no earned runs, struck out 6 and walked 2 batters; hit the first batter he faced; “evidently suffering from a sore arm and was rather wild in his delivery” (May 2, 1884, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*).
- May 7: Tip complained about rheumatism in his right arm.
- May 14 to June 25: 25-game road trip—Tip pitched 7 of the first 16 games, missed the next 6 games, and then pitched 2 of the last 3 games; 6–3 win-loss record.
- June 22: 12-3 (H) win against Washington; first game Tip played in outfield; left after two innings, hit a single in the first inning and, in the second inning, was hit in the head by a pitch, which knocked him out; Tip went on to play 64 games in the outfield during the last three months of the season.
- July and August: Tip was the starting pitcher in three games—July 6: 12–6 (H) win against Pittsburgh, with Tip “visibly suffering from a lame arm” (July 7, 1884, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*); July 12: 15–12 win (H) against Brooklyn; and August 30: 9–0 loss by forfeit to Toledo, game called in the 8th inning, with Toledo ahead 2–1, Charles Comiskey (captain) pulled team off the field, refusing to play on after a disputed call.
- At season’s end, Tip’s .733 win-loss percentage (11 wins, 4 losses) was the best in the American Association.

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| Tip’s Professional Pitching Record, 1882–84: 41 Wins, 26 Losses |
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“Tip-Bits”

Origin of the Nickname of “Tip:” First called “Tip” in 1879. At least three explanations of why: (1) Pulled to the stage, James starred as “Tip” in the farce “Tip and Slasher.” His less-than-successful schoolboy performance drew catcalls and comments from the audience — presumably some of whom were his Woodstock teammates — who yelled “Slide!” “Judgment!” “Play Ball!” and “You’re Rotten”; (2) “The nickname ‘Tip’ was given to him because he merely seemed to ‘tip’ the ball when batting. He stood at the plate straight as an arrow, a giant in physique, and it seemed that he would just push out his bat and the ball would shoot like lightning;” and (3) “A powerful and consistent hitter, O'Neill knew how to wait for his pitch. He would deliberately foul off ball after ball until the pitcher gave him what he wanted, eventually earning him the nickname ‘Tip.’”

“Woodstock Wonder:” First called the “Woodstock Wonder” in Maclean’s in 1964 in an article entitled, “You Can’t Tell the Canadian Big-League Heroes without a Program. Here it is.”

Queen’s Plate 1875: Tip’s father was one of the directors of the Woodstock Driving Park Association and organizers of the meet, held in Woodstock. Tip likely helped out with the three-day event. Throughout his life, Tip was a horse-racing enthusiast, travelling to races whenever the opportunity presented itself and, with his brother George, took a turn at bookmaking at Sheepshead’s Bay Race Track, New York (1893) and for the Queen’s Plate in Toronto (1897).

Finding a Catcher: It was difficult to find a catcher who could or would catch Tip, and, to do so effectively and without injury. In his amateur years, with the exception of Brown for a month in 1880 and Thompson for eight games in 1881, most of Tip’s catchers suffered through passed balls, wild pitches, and bruises or injuries. Tip did not stick with the Chicago Franklins (1880) or Detroit (1881) because they did not have a catcher who could hold him (also the manager worried about the injuries to catchers if they caught Tip on a regular basis). In 1882-83, most New York catchers (except Clapp) refused or were not assigned to form a battery with Tip. The St. Louis Browns signed catcher Pat Deasley because of his toughness and his likely ability to hold on to Tip’s fastball.

A Gentleman, Most of the Time: On July 1, 1884, after the Browns beat Baltimore in St. Louis by a score of 11–5, O’Neill left the Lindell Hotel in the early hours of the morning with Lewis, the Browns’ center fielder, and three of the Baltimore players — Henderson, Gardner, and Emslie (who had also played in Ontario when O’Neill was with the Woodstock Actives) — to continue their imbibing at the “disreputable” Maude Abbey House. “O’Neill, the great,” irritated by a comment made by one of the women who worked at the House, threw a spittoon at her. In the ensuing melee, someone blew the police whistle. O’Neill and Emslie escaped before the police arrived. Gardner was questioned and then allowed to leave. Lewis and Henderson were arrested. Baltimore fined Emslie \$100 and Henderson \$150, and expelled Gardner. Lewis was initially expelled, then reinstated later but not before he swore in front of the judge that he would not drink any evil spirits for six months. O’Neill was neither fined nor reprimanded. His reputation as a gentleman apparently remained intact.

A Failed Treatment: In mid-June, a doctor recommended by Chris Von der Ahe, the owner of the Browns, diagnosed the soreness in Tip's arm as inflammatory rheumatism and prescribed "exercise in warm weather." Despite Tip's insistence that he needed time off to let his arm heal, Von der Ahe ordered Tip to continue to throw for a couple of days and then assigned him to start 2 of the last 3 games in the Browns' 25-game road trip and 2 of the first 4 games at home following this road trip. By early July, Tip's arm was too sore to continue in the box. Comiskey assigned him to the outfield.

A Lame Arm in the Outfield: Though Tip had been a hard thrower in the box for eight years (1877-84), for the next eight years (1885-92), he rarely showed a "cannon arm" in the outfield. For the rest of the 1884 season, when Tip returned the ball to the infield, he frequently threw underhand. On occasion, after he caught a fly ball, Tip flipped it to the center fielder who in turn fired the ball back to the infield. As an outfielder (1885-92), Tip's throwing stats (assists, double plays) were among the worst in the league.

Pitching Rules: 1877-84

Pitching Box: 6 feet by 6 feet (1877); 6 feet long-4 feet wide (1878-84)

Distance (front of box to plate): 45 feet (1877-80); 50 feet (1881-84)

Balls & Strikes: 9 balls-4 strikes (1877-79); 8 balls-4 strikes (1880);
7 balls-3 strikes (1881-84)

Pitching Motion: Underhand-hip (1877); Underhand-waist (1878-82);
Sidearm-shoulder (1884)

Other: Batter calls for a "high ball" (belt to shoulder) or "low ball" (belt to knee)

A foul ball did not count as a strike.

Tip's Pitching Style

Pitches: swift fastball, puzzling curve

Control: good command in amateur years, wild in professional years

Preparation: paused between pitches, set himself before delivery

Movement Across Box: exploded, two quick steps

Arm Swing: fully extended backwards then whip-like swing forward

Arm Position: submarine, between underhand and sidearm

WOODSTOCK ACTIVES, CHAMPIONS OF CANADA, 1878



The images on the first and last pages are courtesy of the Woodstock Museum, National Historic Site. The cover page shows Tip O'Neill standing beside a pedestal. It is cropped from an image that included Tip and his catcher Verge Lee standing with a pedestal between them. The background is an image of fans in the grandstand in Woodstock Driving Park.

For further information on the presentation or about the life and career of James "Tip" O'Neill, please contact d.thiessen@utoronto.ca.

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