



The Hamilton Franchise in the PONY League

A Cardinal in the Coal Mine?

INTRODUCTION

- **Overview of Minor League Baseball – 1949 - 1963**
- **PONY League history from Hamilton's franchise perspective**
- **Storm Clouds on the horizon 1955 – 1956**
- **The New York Penn League**
- **Conclusion**

Minor League Baseball Overview

- **Post WW2 Boom**
- **1949 – 59 leagues, 448 teams**
- **1963 – 18 leagues, 129 teams**
- **What happened?**
- **Hamilton – PONY League – case study**



PONY League History

**Hamilton
Franchise**

PONY League Overview

- **PONY League 1939 – 1956**
- **Class D**
- **2 HoF (MLB) + 2 (CBHFM) alumni**
- **Several Managers**
- **2 original Montreal Expos**
- **Hamilton the primary “O”**

Hamilton Franchise Overview

- **Always a St. Louis Cardinals farm team**
- **1939 – 42 – Hamilton Red Wings**
- **Made playoffs 3 of 4 seasons**
- **London Pirates 1940 – 41**
- **1943 - 45 – War years, no “O”**

1946 -1954 Prelude to a Title

- 1946 – 47 – Hamilton Cardinals**
- 1948 – Hamilton Red Birds, 1st playoff appearance since 1941**
- 1949 – 54 – Hamilton Cardinals**
- Made playoffs 1946 - 53**
- Missed playoffs 1954**

The 1955 Season

- 13 seasons – 20 players**
- Most notable Ken Boyer and Stu Miller (1950 alumni)**
- Only 2 holdovers from 1954**
- OF Arthur Resma (.285/9/76) and C Bill Brown (.252/0/15)**

1955 Season Highlights

- **May 26 17-5; 10 1/2 game lead**
- **Mid season – played 76 consecutive games without being shut out**
- **Finished first (82-43) leading league in runs scored (836) and fewest runs allowed (572)**

Top Players

- **Gary Geiger 20-7 1.98**
- **Starters 2-4 combined 41-17**
- **Bullpen 21-19**
- **Top hitter – 32-year-old 2nd
Baseman Ed Lyons .350, 17 HR**

Playoffs

- **Rd 1 – Defeat 4th place Wellsville Braves (68-58) 2 games to 1**
- **Rd 2 – 3rd place Corning Red Sox (69-57) had upset 2nd Place Bradford Phillies (74-51)**
- **Corning was swept by Hamilton in a best 3 of 5 series**



Storm Clouds on the Horizon

Why did 1955 success on the field and box office not guarantee a renewed affiliation with St. Louis?

Change for the 1956 Season

- **August Busch – Were going to take a serious look at our minor league setup**
- **19 farm clubs – need a balanced system, not mere numbers**

1956 Season

- **Rebranded as independent Hamilton Red Wings with no returning players from 1955**
- **Bad weather – 25 of first 40 scheduled games in league postponed**
- **Hamilton and Bradford Yankees folded May 16, 1956**

Other League Warning Signs - 1955

- **Hornell Dodgers nearly folded
June 27th**
- **Erie Senators nearly folded
shortly thereafter**
- **July 30th Bradford Phillies
burned seasons tickets between
games of a double header**

A Few Stats

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Att</u>	<u>Hamilton Att</u>	<u>Rank</u>
• 1952	339,764	82,286	1 st
• 1953	291,325	53,291	1 st
• 1954	373,981	41,379	4 th
• 1955:			
• Hamilton Cardinals	82-43	53,989	
• Bradford Phillies	74-51	35,979	
• Corning Red Sox	69-57	42,919	
• Wellsville Braves	68-58	45,799	
• Erie Senators	66-60	53,151	
• Hornell Dodgers	50-76	27,314	
• Jamestown Falcons	48-78	32,700	
• Olean Oilers	46-80	47,189	
• Total	339,040		

1956 Final year of the PONY League

Wellsville Braves	74-56	30,479
Corning Red Sox	68-55	33,450
Olean Oilers	68-58	27,281
Hornell Dodgers	57-58	20,334
Jamestown Falcons	52-62	19,757
Erie Senators	47-74	28,223
Hamilton Red Wings	6-8	1,200
Bradford Yankees	3-9	<u>1,258</u>
Total	161,973	



The New York Penn League

- **PONY League restructured as NY-Penn for 1958**
- **US Only**
- **Canadian teams 80's/90's**
- **PONY not resurrected**

The 1958 New York Penn League

- 8 Teams – Bradford, Corning, Erie, Jamestown, Olean, Wellsville + Batavia and Elmira**
- Bradford folded May 23rd and relocated to Hornell May 28th**
- League operated continuously as a Class A short-season league until 2019 MLB minor league system overhaul**

Canadian Teams Return

- **St. Catharines Blue Jays 1986-1995 (Blue Jays)**
- **St. Catharines Stompers 1996-1999 (Blue Jays)**
- **Hamilton Red Birds 1988-1992 (Cardinals)**
- **Welland Pirates 1989-1994 (Pirates)**
- **Note – The “O” did not return during this time frame**

Conclusion

- **1949 – 235 MLB affiliation; 213 independent**
- **Independents lacked sponsoring MLB club resourcing so needed community support to survive**
- **Growth of TV and other recreational options hurt attendance**
- **The Hamilton franchise rapid fall illustrates how quickly independent minor league teams could fall to financial pressure**

References

- **Our Game Too**
- **When Minor League Baseball Almost Went Bust**