

The Great(er) Delaware Sports Book

Second Edition

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CRUDEN BAY BOOKS

THE GREAT(ER) DELAWARE SPORTS BOOK
Second Edition

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THE LINE-UP

Section I	5
<i>Delaware Sporting Life Through The Decades</i>	
Section II	93
<i>Delaware Sports</i>	
Auto Racing	94
Baseball	99
Basketball	144
Boxing	154
Football	164
Golf	198
Horse Racing	208
Olympics	226
Section III	232
<i>Awards</i>	
Indices	243

INTRODUCTION

Almost twenty-five years have passed since the research for the original *Great Delaware Sports Book* was completed in the early 1990s. Since the history of organized sports in Delaware only spans about six quarter-centuries that means an additional 16% of First State sports heritage is now missing from that book. So let's see what has happened in that time...

But first, one must grapple with that nagging question - "Who is a Delawarean?" Of course, there are those athletes of the first order, the native Delawareans, born and raised. Your Porky Olivers, your Chris Shorts, your Elena Delle Donne. The lucky ones, if you will.

And there are those who arrived early and accomplished much - Vic Willis, Judy Johnson, Randy White, et al. Or those who arrived later, stayed awhile and left an indelible mark such as Pete Oakley or Tubby Raymond.

No one would confuse Rich Gannon or Joe Flacco with a "Native Delawarean" but the feats of athletes of their ilk demand inclusion. A thornier question concerns those who were born in Delaware but left before their careers blossomed. Or even started. No one wants to deny Paul Goldschmidt his birthright as a First State native but is he a Delawarean athlete having never performed on athletic fields here? Like in his Delaware life, he gets a cameo in here, too.

This edition is organized much like the original. Section I looks at Delaware sporting life through the decades. What was the Delaware sporting scene like? What games were Delawareans playing? Section II is a history of specific sports in Delaware.

One difference is found in Section III - the Record Book. It is mostly gone. The *Great Delaware Sports Book* was compiled before there was a widespread Internet. Many of the statistics and team and player records put in that book were assembled in one convenient place for the first time. These days everybody carries around a Delaware sports record book in their pocket so, in deference to the digital age, only biographical capsules of Delaware's Athlete of the Year are included in Section III.

Enough. Let's get started and learn about the Delaware athletes who have brought recognition and glory to the First State through the years...

*Delaware Sporting
Life Through The
Decades*

1870s

Prior to the Civil War sporting events were manifestations of everyday life: marksmen toted their hunting rifles to the shooting range, teamsters raced their wagons along dusty country roads and even fire departments dueled in city streets for recognition as the fastest rescue squad in town.

By the 1870s leisure activities began to evolve for their own sake. In Delaware baseball was the first team sport to come to the fore. Every town fielded its own nine: the Tammany Club of New Castle, the Newark Agiles, the Milford Academic, the Bumble Bee Club of Laurel, the Odessa Mutuals. By mid-decade the *Every Evening* in Wilmington was calling baseball the national game and reported, “the fever for this game is becoming more prevalent than for several seasons. Practice games are constantly going on in lots about town.”

While First Staters up and down the peninsula were picking up bats and balls, trotting races reigned as the premier spectator sport in the state. Trotting horses were America’s first sports superstars and Delawareans turned out by the thousands to cheer - and bet - on some of the country’s top trotters at tracks in Wilmington, Middletown and Dover. Local horses also raced around ovals in Felton, Christiana and Hares Corner. When a 1/2-mile dirt track was leveled in Newark local residents expressed relief that “we will now know who has the fastest horse without endangering the lives of our people.”

By all accounts sports were booming

in Delaware by the 1870s. On September 25, 1871 the state’s first sporting grounds opened at Scheutzen Park as the home of the Wilmington Rifle Club. The Park would soon be hosting wheeling matches, running matches, walking matches, foot and sack races and trotting races. In July of 1873 Scheutzen Park witnessed the birth of women’s sports in Delaware.

In reporting on the running races it was recorded by *Every Evening* that “perhaps the crowning feature in the afternoon sport was the race between Mr. and Mrs. Moulton, 100 yards, this being the first opportunity of witnessing female pedestrianism. All eyes were centered on her. We are pleased to say that she proved that ladies could enjoy athletic sports and yet not be coarse and vulgar. Her lady-like deportment excited considerable comment. Mrs. Moulton is a fine-looking, fluty formed lady and judged from the time she made (13 3/4 seconds) she bids to be the fastest runner in America.”

Elsewhere croquet was sweeping the state; there were reports of playing even by moonshine. On the waters of the Christina and Delaware Rivers boatmen raced their yachts and skiffs. Crow merchants in Delaware City enjoyed a brisk business supplying birds for shooting matches. Indoors there was bowling at the Atlantic Garden on 224 King Street in Wilmington. Across the street at 104 Market Street were team and single-handed shuffleboard matches between Wilmington and neighboring cities. Down the street in the Hardings Billiard Room at 6th & Market billiards and finger

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: BACHELORS BOAT CLUB

Undoubtedly the greatest sporting venue in Delaware in the 1870s was the Christiana River, as the Wilmington stream was known until 1937. Large crowds gathered on wharves and bridges and lined her banks to view crew races. The first big race occurred in 1873 when the *Falcon* of the Undine Club tangled with the *Thistle* of the Pioneer Club. The course stretched from the 3rd Street Bridge to the Wilmington & Western railroad bridge and back, about 1 1/4 miles. *Falcon* reached the finish line first in the opening heat, winning 20 minutes to 20:20 and took the second heat more decisively, 19:30 to 20:30.

The next year a third club joined the Christiana regatta to race before a crowd estimated at 8000. The Bachelors Boat Club was only together one month and using a hastily acquired boat from Philadelphia. The new crew was lightly regarded among the bettors. They entered the 5-man gig class with *Idalia* and, averaging less than 140 pounds a man, thumped the Pioneer Club by 26 seconds in the 3-mile feature. Undine, the heavy betting favorite, was more than a minute back. In the 7-man barge class *Falcon* once again ruled over *Thistle*.

The Bachelors performance excited Wilmington boatmen. Their time was competitive with prominent crews around the country. A rematch was arranged for the fall of 1874 to further showcase the three boats. Bachelors raced to a three-length lead early but collided with Undine making the turn at the buoy, allowing the Pioneer Club to reach the finish line first. After great deliberations over many days a re-row was ordered and Bachelors prevailed by ten open lengths.

It was the end of the heyday of rowing on the Christiana. In 1876 Undine and Pioneer merged to form the Delaware Rowing Club but their challenge to Bachelors was not accepted. In 1879 the barges from the defunct rowing clubs were sold to the University of Virginia where they were quite successful again, this time on the James River.

billiards were extremely popular.

Delaware hotels staged many a sporting exhibition; there were boxing and wrestling matches in the Dobbinville Hotel in New Castle; the Washington Hotel in Wilmington hosted an international checkers match won by Wilmington's Matthew Priest - 9 games to 3 with 33 draws - at \$100 a side; and the National Hotel in Middletown witnessed the first visit to Delaware of the famed billiards players Joseph and Cyrille Dion. The Dions spotted some crack Delaware amateurs 90 out of 100 points and beat

them routinely. If not overwhelmed by the quality of local billiard playing the invaders were said, however, to be much impressed with Delaware's magnificent peach orchards.

But as the decade drew to a close the novelty of sport was tattered. Attendance at the Scheutzen Park trotting races was dwindling and its Wheel of Fortune was doing the lion's share of the business. Several meets had to be cancelled. The Quickstep Baseball Club, the darlings of Wilmington, was disbanded. In desperation, with the prospect of no

games to bet on in 1880, the *Every Evening* re-printed an account of a Quicksteps glory game from 1876 explaining that

“sport is at such a low ebb in Wilmington that raking over the old ashes is found more satisfactory than doing nothing.”

The Battle For The Lady Fayre

Jousting began in 11th century France as a military exercise and soon spread throughout Europe. Despite church opposition for its savagery and occasional state banishments jousting continued through the Middle Ages until the death of King Henry II of France from jousting injuries in 1599.

Its revival, in a decidedly more humane form, occurred in Mount Solon, Virginia in 1821. Surely no sport in America has more romantic origins than jousting. A young Virginia maiden could not choose between the affections of two ardent suitors. So she decided to bestow her favor on the winner of a jousting contest.

The site chosen for the joust was the the Natural Chimneys, a rock formation in the Shendandoah Valley that resembled medieval castles. The two contestants were to ride at three rings suspended from arches 30 yards apart. The young “knights” practiced for weeks and on the day of the event a large crowd turned out to view the spectacle.

Such a good time was had that it was decided to make the joust an annual event. From that day to this, on the third Saturday in August, the winning knight has earned the right to name and crown his “Queen of Love and Beauty,” making the Mount Solon jousting tournament the oldest continually held sporting event in America.

In Delaware riding tournaments were staged

at St. Georges, Hares Corner, and elsewhere. Carriages bearing hundreds of spectators streamed to the tracks and fans would line the long, straight course behind fences. Near one end of the course, where the horse and rider would start, stood a stand where a man was at the ready with the starting flag.

Riders, competing under colorful jousting titles, lanced the three successively smaller rings - some as small as 1/4” in diameter - from iron hooks suspended below wooden arches while riding their charging mounts down the 90-yard course in not more than eight seconds. A single ride was known as a tilt and a tournament typically would feature five tilts per rider before lunch and five afterwards. As many as three dozen knights would compete with the one capturing the most total rings being declared the winner.

The hand of a fair maiden was soon ignored; by the 1870s the top prize at a Delaware riding tournament could be a \$300 buggy. Perhaps it was this loss of tradition that sounded the death knell of big-time jousting in Delaware but with the advent of more modern sports riding tournaments began being supplanted as sporting entertainment in the last decades of the century.

Oh, and the fate of that first winning modern day knight and his “Lady Fayre”? Alas, it is lost to history.



1880s

If the post-Civil War years witnessed the birth of spectator games in Delaware, the 1880s must be acknowledged as the decade of participation. In 1880 one observer noted that, “the prospects for tennis and archery will come into general use this year, with much improved equipment in these games.” Gymnastics became so popular by 1882 that *Every Evening* editorialized that, “we should have a first-rate gymnasium here and we could if young men would take hold of the thing in popular spirit. If the time that well-dressed loafers spend in ogling women on Market Street were spent in healthful exercise it would be pleasanter for the women and better for their overbold admirers.”

Such athletic spirit indeed swept over Delaware. Young men banded into clubs to indulge in their favorite sports. Soon in existence were the Delaware Cricket Club, the Wilmington Bicycle Club and the Wilmington Camping Club. The oldest gun club in the state, the Wawaset Gun Club started in 1883. The Wilmington Croquet Club organized in 1888 and rented a plot of ground at the corner of 7th and Franklin for competition. The historic athletic clubs, the Delaware Field Club and the Warren Athletic Club, both organized in this decade.

July 4th was the greatest sports day of the year with bicycling, cricket, baseball, shooting matches and horse racing all available throughout the state. Indoors, in addition to gymnastics, there were two seasons: the roller skating season which started on October 1 and the swimming

season which opened on May 1.

The Wilmington Natatorium opened at 4th and Jefferson in 1885 and the aquatics were instantly said to exceed even roller skating for “pure, unrestricted enjoyment.” Women were especially enamored with swimming. Whereas the women of the Delaware Field Club held their tennis tournaments in secrecy away from the critical male eye, women swimmers were much in evidence at the Natatorium. The services of a woman instructor were retained and she quickly had 35 ladies in her class. When an observer dropped in one day he reported, “Four or five ladies, one a swimmer, the other learners, took a dip at the Natatorium this morning. They enjoyed the clear water and, under the instruction of Madam Pagenstecher the neophytes made satisfactory progress. The swimming lady of the party was bold enough to essay the high dive, a feat many of the males prefer to avoid.”

In the manner of all converts, promoters of the new athletic fervor oft times took their passion to extremes. Thus the odd marathons of the day. Milford’s Dorsey Hall hosted a 12-hour pedestrian contest open to all for \$100 in gold. In Wilmington, the sports halls featured days-long, go-as-you-please walking matches.

The greatest such event occurred in the Wilmington Rink in 1888. A track of tan bark and sawdust was laid out for the 75-hour marathon, refereed by world champion James Albert. Albert was the first man to run over 1000 kilometers in a six-day race, logging 621.75 miles earlier that year. Albert gave exhibitions

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: WARREN ATHLETIC CLUB

For five years during the 1880s the Warren Athletic Club staged track and field exhibitions that were the envy of cities ten times again the size of Wilmington. In the five-year run of the games, despite persistent bad weather that became the hallmark of the event, a slew of American and world records were toppled. Nationally prominent athletes paid their own way to Wilmington, with only the lure of gold and silver medals and the hospitality of the Warrens.

The first exhibition, in the spring of 1885, featured dashes of 100 and 220 yards, runs of 1/4 and 1/2 mile, a hitch-and-kick, a tug-of-war, and a 2-mile bicycle race for the championship of Delaware. The races were handicapped with lesser competitors granted either a head start or a reduction in distance.

In 1886 the Warren Games began attracting national athletes and a spring and fall meet were held. By 1887 the only Delaware winners remaining were in "Delaware state championship" events. That year Wilson Coudon, the North East, Maryland strongman, shattered the American record in the hammer throw with a toss of 102' 7" and in the high jump William Byrd of the University of Pennsylvania soared 6' 3/4" for a new national mark. Byrd narrowly missed a world record and the spring 1887 edition of the games was widely acclaimed as one of the finest meets ever staged anywhere.

The next year Coudon made 28 throws with different hammer weights, establishing 13 world records at the Warren games. In 1889 he again favored Delaware with a world record toss. Despite the excellence of the athletic performances and the first class accommodations provided by the Warren Athletic Club the games were never a financial success. Once again Delaware sports fans were chastised by the local press: "There was a fair attendance (roughly 750) of spectators filling the grandstand but not so large as the character of the sports and contestants merited or is due from the public of Wilmington."

Unable and unwilling to shoulder the monetary burden of first-class national track meets the Warren Athletic Club stopped the games in 1889. It was the last time the track and field world would ever take notice of Wilmington.

and expounded on his diet necessary to triumph in such a contest: no solid food, not even bread; calves foot jelly; ten quarts of milk daily; beef extract; ice cream to keep his stomach cool; 30-40 bottles of ginger ale and daily raw oysters.

Five runners competed and 500 fans, many spending the night, looked on. The contestants averaged about two hours of

sleep a day and Frank "Black Dan" Hart, led the entire way, winning by less than a mile before an enthusiastic crowd of 1300 on the final night. Hart, a superstar "pedestrian" who had set the world record by covering 565 miles in Madison Square Garden in a six-day race in 1880, covered just over 216 miles for the three-plus days in Wilmington.

At the Natatorium on June 7, 1887 Wilmington favorite John Pierson and United States champion Dennis Butler of Philadelphia met in a much-publicized marathon swim. Butler and Pierson were lifeguards together in Atlantic City in the early 1880s when both were credited with more than 80 ocean saves. Since then each had often engaged in lengthy river and ocean swims.

Now the game was to swim for two hours each night for six days with the winner taking \$200 of the \$250 purse. Butler entered the water first on opening night and entertained the crowd with feats of eating and smoking underwater, imitating a number of fish and demonstrating different styles of swimming. Predictably, perhaps, he battled through cramps much of the first night and Pierson swam to a half-mile lead. The national champion made up the advantage the next night and by the end had won handily.

With the demise of the Middletown Fair in 1883, Dover was the indisputable capital of Delaware horse racing throughout the decade. But the horsemen were now sharing their tracks and roadways with a new contraption that was rapidly eclipsing some of their popularity: the bicycle. Wheel clubs formed in Smyrna and Middletown and the Wilmington Wheel Club members were so successful on a national scale that Wilmington became a mecca for top riders.

The Delaware sports fan continued to greet tries at professional baseball with an impassioned indifference. In 1889 Wilmington baseball talent was consolidated into a single team which took on all comers. The club started by winning its first seven games but attendance was “distinctively Wilmingtonian - small.” Fans countered with complaints that the park was the most dreary place imaginable, littered with broken seats and



Frank Hart was the biggest national sports hero Delaware had seen when he came to race in the 1880s.

filthy walls in need of paint. Professional baseball again fizzled in Wilmington.

Amateur baseball, on the other hand, was booming in other Delaware towns in the 1880s. Newark was “infested with the baseball epidemic” and it replaced horse racing as the prominent topic of conversation at the agricultural fairs. The Kent County teams in Dover, Smyrna, Milford and Camden engaged one another with nothing short of open hostility. During the State Fair upwards of 6000 would attend these spirited games with thousands of dollars changing hands among the spectators.

Finally, as the decade drew to a close, on October 26, 1889 a little event took place that was destined to become the most enduring sporting passion in Delaware: Delaware College, with all of 68 students, was demolished by the Delaware Field Club 74-0. The University of Delaware had played its first football game.

Delaware Bicycle Racing in the 1800s

The first high-wheeled bicycles began appearing in Delaware in the 1870s. These unwieldy contraptions could only be urged with great exertion to speeds approaching 10 miles per hour, slower than a good distance runner. By 1880, however, the sport had gained enough enthusiasts to form the Wilmington Bicycle Club. The Club rented out the Old Foundry at 10th & Orange streets and built a bicycle track 10 feet wide and 210 feet around, making 25 laps to the mile.

Still, when the first Championship of Delaware bicycle race was staged later that year at Scheutzen Park no Delawareans were as yet accomplished enough riders to enter. A New York invader took home the title. By 1885 when the 2-Mile Bicycle Championship of Delaware, now part of the Warren Games, was open to only Delawareans there was only one entry. Harlow H. Curtis pedaled the solitary distance in 11 minutes and 52 seconds. In 1885 there were but 42 members in the Wilmington Bicycle Club.

Then, the mania hit. Wheel clubs sprang up throughout the state. The riders of the Wilmington Wheel Club were acknowledged as some of the country's best. Wheelmen strove to cover each of America's major roads in record times. Frank Dampman of the Wilmington Wheel Club set the 20-mile record on the Lancaster Pike in 1888 in 74:50.3 and won the prestigious 100-mile Buffalo to Erie road race against many strong entries from around the world. Also in 1888 B. Frank McDaniel recorded over 5000 miles on his bike, comparing with the best totals recognized in the country. And neither of these men was the top rider in Delaware; that honor belonged to Wallis Merrihew. McDaniel and Merrihew would trade championship honors for several years

before establishing a cycle shop together on Market Street.

In 1889 Delawareans took five of the first 20 places in the nation's biggest race in Newark, New Jersey and plans were made for Delaware to host its own 25-mile road race. The course was planned for the main road between Wilmington and Middletown and offered the most prize money in the country's history, mostly in the form of new bikes, athletic equipment and even cigars.

Attendance was estimated at between 5000 and 8000. So many fans crowded the route in some spots that the 23 riders were forced to navigate single file through a small aisleway of humanity. The roads were sandy and pitted with stones and every rider tumbled at least once. There were several reports of collisions with racing fans as well on the road. William Van Wagoner, the United States Champion from Rhode Island was in 8th place at the mid-way point but overtook the leaders with four miles to go and beat Dampman to the finish line. Van Wagoner was carried off his wheel by the enthusiastic crowd; eventually he would join the Wilmington Bicycle Club.

The next year Van Wagoner repeated his triumph in the greatest bicycle race yet seen in this part of the country. To accommodate the eager crowds the 25-mile route ran from Wilmington to New Castle and back, beginning and ending on the track at Hazel Dell in South Wilmington. For most of the race Van Wagoner and Washington Seeds of Wilmington raced in tandem. They reached the Hazel Dell track together for two final trips around the oval. They traded slight advantages to the deafening screams of fans until Van Wagoner out-sprinted Seeds in the final 15 yards as the

Wilmingtonian hit a puddle.

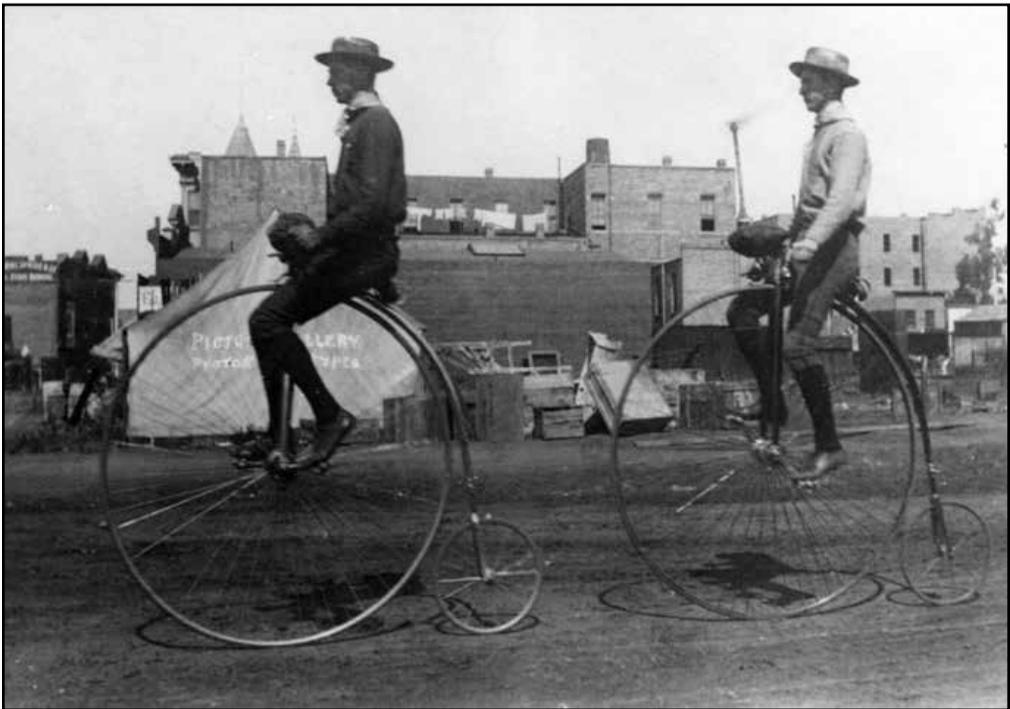
Seeds was relatively unknown in Delaware sporting circles before this performance but within a year he would be the state champion cyclist and establish a record time between Wilmington and Dover of 3 hours and 32 minutes. By this time bicycle racing was the dominant sport in Delaware. Thousands would turn out for the big races to cheer the colors of their favorite club.

In addition to the great road races regular events were held on the horse tracks. Although not suited for the “silent steeds” some impressive records were set by top riders from across the country. At the kite track in Kirkwood Carroll B. Jack of Wilmington set the state record for the mile in 2 minutes and 22 seconds, averaging over 25 mph.

Indoors the Old Foundry had evolved

into the Pyle Cycle Academy with indoor races and training facilities. Starting in 1896 the Academy sponsored the first great Delaware exhibition for bicycles, the modern-day car shows of the 1800s. “Come see 10,000 wheels,” gushed the promotional flyers. Proceeds went to the construction of a first class banked, cinder track at the Riverview grounds. That year 2000 fans packed the new track for regular Friday night races under the lights. Delaware sports fans were enjoying the best cycling in America.

But just like that it was over. Even without competition from the automobile bicycle racing died out in Delaware before the turn of the century. It would be nearly another 100 years before sporting America would cast its eye back to Delaware for bicycle racing.



*Out for a ride on a penny-farthing in the 1880s.
When the riding got serious, Delawareans were at the
first rank in the nation's bicycle racing.*

The First Delaware Thanksgiving Football Game

Traditional Thanksgiving football kicked off in Delaware in 1889 when the top athletic clubs, the Warren Club and the Delaware Field Club, tangled on the Union Street grounds. Both teams were about equal in weight but the Warrens had not even known how to play football until two weeks before the game. Despite the impending mismatch 700 people turned out for the contest, played through a steady downpour.

Out in the quagmire the more experienced Delaware Field Club did not hesitate to take advantage of their opponents' ignorance of some of the technicalities of the game. An impressive winning margin, it was thought, would inspire terror in upcoming opponents. Even the umpire was woefully lacking in the rules and occasionally turned to the Field Club for help with some calls. All told, Warren was lucky to get out of the first half trailing only 40-0.

After the ten-minute intermission the game Warren Club, dressed in canvas suits with blue stockings and caps, grew accustomed to the game. They tackled better and even gained some yards with their primitive offensive thrusts. Delaware's first Thanksgiving game ended with the final score 68-0.

Roller Skating Mania

With the introduction of the ball-bearing wheel in 1884 the popularity of roller skating zoomed. An indoor rink was hastily built in Wilmington at 11th and Madison and the enterprise paid for itself inside of three months. Flushed with optimism, investors established the Citizens Skating Rink at 4th and Washington before the winter was out.

Roller skating races and rink polo matches, in addition to the recreational skates, were well-patronized. But the skating craze, which lasted two or three years in most cities, didn't even grip Wilmington for one season. Skating was all but dead in Delaware by the spring of 1885. The town could support one rink but not two. The flashy Citizens Skating Rink was razed in 1888.



America - and Delaware - was gripped by a roller skating craze in the 1880s.

1890s

Late in 1889 an *Every Evening* reporter observed that, “athletics has taken a wonderful, and it is to be hoped, permanent hold on this community.” Indeed it had. And the sport that had the strongest hold on Delawareans in the Gay Nineties was football. Prior to football, baseball in Delaware had been played well into November; now the baseball playing season wound down in mid-September so area elevens could commence practice.

Football, first played in 1869, was slow to gain a foothold in the First State. Delaware College had received challenges to the gridiron as early as 1883 but didn't play their first scrimmage until 1889. The Delaware Field Club played the earliest football and dominated state teams for several years. Primitive football produced either total mismatches with lopsided shutouts or, if the teams were evenly skilled, low-scoring exchanges of territory. There was no such thing as the 35-31 shootout popular today. Of Delaware College's first 75 games there were only four in which both teams scored in double figures.

In Newark when news leaked out in 1889 that the college boys were going to play football Sheriff Bill Simmons swore up and down Main Street that the first corpse carried off the field would mean the end of the game. Sheriff Simmons was on the sidelines but there were no incidents and by the early 1890s Delaware College was the state championship football club.

In 1891 the Newark school completed a shutout sweep of the three Delaware teams: YMCA, 58-0; Warren Club, 30-0; Delaware Field Club, 6-0. It was common

practice in those days for schools to welcome any nearby resident to the team, regardless of whether he happened to be a student or not. In 1894 Delaware College announced that future football squads would comprise only matriculated students and the school would no longer engage non-academic institutions in battle. The banner of football supremacy for the rest of the decade passed to the Warren Club.

If football was king of Delaware sports in the 1890s, it reigned over the most diverse kingdom yet seen in the state. Basketball made its first appearance in the Wilmington YMCA in 1894 and the YMCA also began playing the first lacrosse in the state. Over at the Delaware Field Club golf was being played for the first time and was soon seen on the expansive private residences of several Delawareans.

Cricket was as popular as baseball for several years and the Delaware Field Club enjoyed its best year ever at the wicket in 1891, going 5-3-2 against the strong Pennsylvania clubs. New smokeless powder and clay pigeons sparked a revival in shooting - in 1892 there were 60,000 gun clubs across the country. Several marksmen from the Wilmington Rod & Gun Club gained national recognition during the decade.

Croquet was as popular as ever and bowling was coming into its own, the state record game being raised to 256. It was a Golden Age for Delaware boxing with regular weekly exhibitions being fought. Even pigeon racing enjoyed a flurry of popularity. Homing pigeons were shipped

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: SALADIN

On his farm in Kirkwood about ten miles south of Wilmington medical entrepreneur and sportsman James McCoy constructed a so-called “kite” track that was pinched at one end - a configuration that produced some of the fastest harness racing in the country.

McCoy offered big purses to attract the nation’s finest equine talent. Many of America’s top horsemen sent their top pacers to the McCoy Farm. For Independence Day 1893 he put together his greatest day of racing when he lured Mascot, the world record pacer with a 2:04 mark, to Kirkwood with an offer of \$5000 for a new record.

Mascot would face the Delaware champion, Saladin, who had set a world record of his own with a 2:09 mark on a half-mile track. In the hyperbolic journalistic style of the day it was said that, “if the race had taken place in New York or Philadelphia it would attract a million spectators.”

Saladin, foaled in California in 1886, was very sickly at his yearling sale in New York and owner James Green was able to claim him for only \$500. Many observers doubted the brown colt would even survive the train ride from New York to Wilmington. He debuted in Philadelphia as a 4-year old, finishing second in a 2:30 pace. By 1893, as a 7- year old, Saladin had performed in several big meets around the country and claimed 8 wins in 27 starts.

Some 7000 fans paid 50 cents each to see the two great horses battle. Saladin, with Green handling the reins, broke twice in the early going and trailed Mascot by two lengths at the half-mile pole when he found his stride. Saladin caught Mascot at the 3/4 pole and raced to the wire five lengths the best. His time was recorded at 2:05 and 3/4 seconds.

Fans raced to surround and pet Saladin while others lifted Green to their shoulders and carried him around the track as they yelled themselves hoarse. His feats at Kirkwood thrust Saladin into the class of world-class pacers but he was so fast he soon had no owners willing to test their stock against him and his racing career faded to a close.



On the track at Kirkwood racetrack operated by the Maple Valley Trotting Association.

500 miles by rail and released for the race home to the loft. Wilmington birds typically made fine showings in these events. In 1899, 11 of 123 Wilmington birds returned from South Carolina in a single day; only 19 of 720 Philadelphia birds accomplished the same feat.

Baseball, amateur style, could still lay claim as the national pastime in the smaller communities but in Wilmington, as usual, interest ran hot and cold. In 1896 there was just enough enthusiasm to carry Wilmington through its first minor league season from first pitch to final out - but not enough support for a second season in 1897.

On the race track Delaware produced its first superhorse - Saladin, a record-breaking brown colt. For two years Delaware even sported the world's fastest

race track, Dr. James McCoy's innovative kite track near Kirkwood. Moving almost as fast in the early 1890s were Delaware's wheelmen, who became recognized as some of the finest cyclists in America.

But as the decade ended Delaware's sporting grounds were not nearly as fertile as the rest of the Gay Nineties. There was no pro baseball and the semi-pro Brownson club was so reticent about committing money to the sport they did not even don uniforms. The Warren Club had suffered severe economic reversals, lost their gymnasium which was the finest in the state, and were disappearing altogether. A game of basketball was still not much to look at and bicycle racing was gone. Delaware sports slipped quietly into a new century.

Off-Track Betting Comes to Delaware

Without any advance notice a new establishment opened at 612 Market Street in Wilmington in the winter of 1895. Despite the lack of publicity the Electric News and Money Transfer Company was doing a thriving business within days. It was Delaware's first off-track betting parlor.

Large blackboards lined the walls of the spacious room listing all sorts of sporting information, mostly for horse racing. Typically ten races, five from New Orleans and five from Arlington, Maryland, were available to Delaware sportsmen. Given the communications of the day, the handicapping information on the horses in the races must have been virtually nil, making the wagering little more than betting on numbers.

Clerks behind frosted windows collected bets and telegraphed the money to the

main office in New Jersey where it was played on any race selected. Bulletins provided updates during the races and any winning monies was telegraphed back to the parlor. The Electric News and Money Transfer Company took a 25-cent commission on each play; the minimum bet was \$1.00.

Business was brisk with crowds of 150-200 hovering around the parlor during business hours from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Well-known businessmen mingled with the assorted shady characters expected around the fringes of gambling. The operation was perfectly legal but alarmed politicians rushed laws through the legislature banning the gambling parlor. Delaware has not seen legal betting on horse races away from the racetrack since.

Delaware Gets A National Champion

General Manager Thomas Kane of Wilmington's Institute Hall had taken special pains to present his building for the occasion. The platform was placed as close to the center of the main floor as possible and raised some four feet. Chairs were meticulously arranged at suitable intervals on all four sides to afford the most convenient and comfortable viewing of the evening's proceedings. Yes, even the Opera House could not stage a better event, thought Kane.

There was no way Mr. Kane could anticipate the pandemonium that would soon convert his orderly hall into chaos even a New Castle County conventioneer wouldn't recognize. The Warren Athletic Club's wrestling program on May 12, 1892 was particularly strong, with the main attraction featuring the American champion, Weiss, of Brooklyn.

After several preliminary boxing and wrestling bouts Warren Club member John Cooper appeared to face Weiss. For a full five minutes the 700 partisan fans roared and pounded on chairs in anticipation of the 125-pound match. Officials called for order but could not harness the Warren enthusiasm. Only the referee's wave to wrestle brought silence in the hall.

Cooper sprang to the offensive throwing his opponent in the opening moments, although the referee failed to award the bout to the Wilmington man. Cooper tackled Weiss again but in the flailing arms and legs the referee was kicked and refused to render judgement on the second fall. The crowd was frothing as Cooper pinned the champion for a third time and was awarded the match. The great victory was achieved in one minute 29 seconds.

Cooper's hand was not even raised before he was hoisted to the shoulders of Warren men and paraded around the hall. The din of shouts and cries shook the building as the audience rose en masse on top of chairs to salute the new champion. The enthusiasm on the street almost equalled that in the hall. Cooper was shouldered up and down Market Street and feted in celebrations until well past midnight. But Mr. Kane had one more chore. The fallen ex-champ, literally dazed by his beating, had to be carried off the platform and through the crowd to the dressing room by the ubiquitous manager.

Cooper left active competition that year and began an association with the Wilmington YMCA that would stretch into the 1940s. He turned out numerous championship teams and wrestlers, the best being 135-pound Hubert Williams who won the collegiate title with the Naval Academy in 1935. He would one day be the earliest Delaware athlete recognized by the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame.



When it was constructed in 1871 the French Second Empire-styled Grand Opera House replaced the Wilmington Institute Hall, built in 1850, as the sporting venue of choice in Wilmington.

The First Night Baseball in Delaware

Seeking any way to draw apathetic Wilmington fans to his minor league baseball team manager Denny Long arranged to play the first night baseball game in this part of the country at the Union Street grounds on July 4, 1896. Night baseball was no longer a novelty on the Pacific Coast and a game under the lights in Indianapolis had attracted 10,000 curious onlookers. But Wilmingtonians proved less enthusiastic.

After his regular Atlantic League doubleheader against Paterson Long strung electric arc lights on the ground and up high around the field for a third game. In addition to the ballgame the stands at Union Street afforded an excellent view of the Delaware Field Club's fireworks down the street.

An oversized, bright white ball was used and the likely apocryphal story has been passed down from that night that Wilmington hurler Morris "Doc" Amole hid a firecracker inside the ball before a pitch to batsman Sam McMackin (some versions of the tale had the immortal Honus Wagner at the plate) in the fourth inning. When McMackin swung and made contact the resulting pyrotechnics caused the bat to shatter and the disgusted umpire ended the game.

If such an incident occurred the Wilmington reporters somehow missed it and did not include the prank in game accounts. As it was, the players couldn't manage well and score was not kept as the contest deteriorated into a "funny exhibition." In the end only 200 people showed up to see an event that was fully 40 years ahead of its time.



Wilmington Peaches pitcher Doc Amole was said to have ended Delaware's first night baseball game by throwing a pitch with a firecracker hidden in the ball.

Live Bird Shoots

With the coming of fancy shooting clubs and better equipment target shooting became a much more humane sport in the 1890s but for some nothing matched the excitement of a live bird shoot. One of the last - and best - of these matches took place in Claymont in 1896. The team of Joseph Cross and George Huber of Wilmington squared off against Robert Miller of Wilmington and Reuben Stout of Magnolia in a 50- bird shoot for \$200 a side. The four men were widely regarded as the best marksmen in Delaware.

Several hundred spectators turned out even as rumors spread through the town that Cross, the state champion, was gravely ill and near death on the morning of the match. Cross indeed made it to the shooting grounds and struggled to the shooting line. He managed to record 42 kills in 46 tries before fainting and forfeiting his final four attempts. His partner Huber killed all but one bird but nine of his hits fell out of bounds and he was credited with only 40 kills. Miller and Stout recorded 85 legal hits out of 100 to take the prize 85-82.

1900s

Football in the early 20th century was increasingly coming under attack for its brutality. Harvard and other schools, where the game was played at its highest level, dropped the sport altogether, demanding reforms. At the end of each year newspapers would dutifully print the death count from that season's play. Delaware was not immune. Clarence Pierce, 20, of Claymont Street in Wilmington died after being kicked in the stomach during a football game in 1909. Pierce was one of 30 American men to perish on the gridiron that season.

Worse, for football lovers, than the violence on the field was the boring style of play which gripped the game. Seldom did fans enjoy even a ten-yard run, and following the ball was a nightmare as 22 players dissolved into an amorphous pile on every play. There were many mismatches between teams of disparate abilities and when squads of equal strength engaged a scoreless tie could be expected.

In this environment baseball grew into truly the national - and state - pastime. In Delaware the spring, summer and fall were filled with baseball and the winter was cherished as a time to speculate on future happenings on the diamond. During the season if fans weren't attending a game they could be found gathered around bulletin boards in newspaper offices clamoring for inning-by-inning updates of local and national games. So many teams were clamoring for Wilmington baseball fields that a permit system for use of the diamonds was instituted in 1908.

Baseball was always a business, not

a privilege for the Delaware sports fan. Any promoter of a baseball game could expect to incur the following expenses in 1905: rent for the grounds - \$55; umpires - \$15; balls -\$12; ads -\$30; grounds man - \$10; police - \$15; extras -\$10. With an admission price of 25 cents an owner needed to attract 600 fans just to cover his fixed expenses. And that didn't begin to cover his biggest costs - player salaries and guarantees to the visiting team.

With professional baseball virtually dormant in Delaware at the turn of the century the Brownson Library Association nursed play-for-pay ball back a game at a time in 1901. Each game that made a profit led to the next one being scheduled. The timing was right. With the game popularized by the consolidation of the best players into two major leagues, baseball was exploding. And by 1902 the best baseball in America outside the major league parks was being played in Wilmington. For the rest of the decade Delawareans could count on professional baseball in Wilmington and topflight amateur ball throughout the state.

Also enjoying a revival in popularity with the new century was horse racing. In 1901 the Wilmington Horse Show Association began leasing the former Wawaset Park grounds at Ninth Street and Woodlawn to stage fancy horse programs. To complement the judging contests the organizers added a few trotting races. Within a few years the races, now known as matinees, supplanted the horse shows. These weekly events became so popular Delaware became recognized as the

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE:

VIC WILLIS

Vic Willis won 248 games in a 13-year career. Every eligible pitcher with a career predominantly in the 20th century who won more than Willis' 248 games is in baseball's Hall of Fame.

Vic Gassaway Willis was born in Cecil County in April 12, 1876, his colorful middle name appended from a character in Buffalo Bill's Wild West troupe who his father had met while a traveling member. Young Willis started playing ball in Newark, competing for the Wilmington YMCA and Newark Academy as a teenager. After one year at Delaware College in Newark Willis left for Harrisburg and pro baseball. He helped Syracuse to a pennant in the Tri-State League in 1897.

Willis gained wide renown for his nasty curve ball, a pitch he called his Grapevine Sinker. He broke into the majors the next year and as a 22-year old rookie helped pitch the Boston team to the National League title with a 24-13 log. In 1899 he went 27-10 with a no-hitter, the last thrown in the 19th century. After an off-year in 1900 Willis came back to go 20-17 for a fifth place team. The next year the curveballer again won 27 games and set the National League record for complete games in this century with 45, a mark that still stands.

After 1902 the Boston club became an awful team, always a threat to lose 100 games. Willis lost 25 of those games in 1904 despite an ERA of 2.81 and in 1905 he established a modern record for losses in a season with 29. Mercifully, Willis was shipped to Pittsburgh where he regained his winning form, tallying 20 or more victories for the next four years. In a series that matched the immortals Honus Wagner and Ty Cobb the Pirates and Willis won the World Series in 1909.

The next year Willis labored for the St. Louis Cardinals and when he was sold to Chicago before the 1911 season he retired. Willis returned to Delaware where he purchased the Washington House in Newark. He remained the proprietor until his death in 1947 of a stroke at the age of 71.

For many years Willis had more wins - 248 - than any pitcher not in the Baseball Hall of Fame. His eight 20-win seasons, and 50 shutouts were topped by fewer than a score of hurlers. The call from Cooperstown finally came for Vic Willis in 1995.



Vic Willis enjoyed his best seasons after being traded to the Pirates in 1906. He went 89-46 in the next four years and won a World Series title.



A golfing group from the early 1900s at Wilmington Country Club.

Matinee Racing Capital of America.

Racing at the matinees was strictly an amateur affair. Expensively bred trotters shared the track with horses unhitched from milk wagons and delivery carts - all in quest of blue ribbons. The working stiffs were especially popular, none more so than William H., who went to the post more often than any other matinee horse. William H., winner of 53 blue ribbons with a lifetime mile mark of 2:38, raced until 1907 when he was knocked down and injured by a Peoples Railway trolley car at 2nd & Madison while on his day job. Meanwhile the best matinee horses from Wilmington were tabbed to compete in intercity races against Philadelphia, Trenton, and Baltimore.

The cream of Delaware society turned out for the matinees not just to watch but to compete. DuPont Company president T. Coleman du Pont was a prominent owner and timer and judge. In a heat in 1905 Howard T. Wallace, president of the

Diamond State Steel Company, shattered his collarbone in a sulky accident during a race. Towards the end of the decade horse racing began to wane somewhat as these wealthy men turned their attention from swift horses to fast automobiles. The first auto races were roadability tests by the Delaware Automobile Association in which target times were assigned and each car hauled its full capacity of passengers as stated in the owners manual. Hundreds would turn out in downtown Wilmington to send off the roadsters on their round-trip outings to Kennett Square and Valley Forge and elsewhere.

Other motorsports were sweeping Delaware as well. Nick Charles, a shoemaker in Wilmington, attained a record motorcycle speed of 65 mph and inked a contract with the Indian Motorcycle Company as a professional rider. On the water Harry Richardson of Dover won national races in the Thousand Islands, New York, averaging 21 mph.

For the first time Delaware sports enthusiasts could find as many diversions indoors as out. Professional basketball came to the state for the first time and in its wake strong amateur teams like the Old Swedes and Brownson entertained new converts. Up to 1000 people would cheer on teams on the Grand Opera House stage and more traditional gyms.

Indoor track meets at the Wilmington YMCA featured the standard fare of dashes, jumping events and shot putting but also offered such novelties as rope climbs and potato races. In the window races competitors would strain against the clock as they squeezed through progressively smaller openings. For awhile indoor baseball - with 25-foot bases and a 6" ball - caught the fancy of fans at the Eleventh Street Rink.

Exciting the most fans was roller polo. The fast five-man game had been around since the skating craze of the 1880s but

team that had never lost even a single game of roller polo.

When the Country Rink opened next to Brandywine Springs an intrastate rivalry began to fester among Wilmington teams and thousands attended the Delaware League matches. In 1909 Wilmington joined the Tri-State Roller Polo League with Baltimore and Atlantic City, skating before crowds of over 4000 when visiting the latter's Steel Pier rink.

In 1904 boxing was re-born with Wednesday night exhibitions in The Casino at 50th and Market Streets. Fighters donned huge gloves so knockouts were rare but the bouts were lively. Boxing season ran from October to May and fans of the sweet science could count on a cleverly-promoted fight card each week. In 1907 the organizers moved the weekly matches out to the Country Rink. Now directly on the train line at Brandywine Springs it was not uncommon to find thousands of fight fans in attendance, especially when a Philadelphia fighter brought Pennsylvanians down in droves.

For those who preferred participating, bowling was the "prince of winter sports." By 1906 there were four bowling leagues and 22 teams in Wilmington. That year the Wilmington Bowling Association sent an all-star team to the national tournament to represent Delaware for the first time. The lanes in Louisville, Kentucky played fast and the Wilmington kegelers suffered through 29 splits and 22 misses for a three-game, five man total of only 2428.

In singles play, however, William "Pop" Roach, the "Grand Old Man" of Wilmington bowling, tallied a 652 series to finish third nationally. Roach, a 190s-average bowler, was proprietor of the Academy Bowling Alley at Fifth and French Streets until ill health forced him to retire to his native San Antonio, Texas in 1907. He left Delaware with five perfect



Bowling was the "prince of winter sports" in Delaware in the early 1900s.

suddenly took Delaware by storm in 1907. That year the Orange Athletic Club travelled to Bridgeton, New Jersey and dispatched their hosts - winner of 31 straight games - for the first time ever on its home rink. Then an all-Wilmington aggregation fell only 3-1 to a Baltimore

300 games and a high series of 859 to his credit.

Delawareans could also see the best bowlers in the country when Wilmington was represented in the Eastern Bowling League. Lanes 12 and 13 at the Academy were groomed and reserved for the bowling greats from Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Newark and New York. In this fast competition Wilmington easily proved the equal of any city. In no sport did Delaware offer greater competition than trapshooting. The Delaware Trapshooting League, comprised of clubs from Claymont to Dover, produced several marksmen capable of breaking targets with America's best. The major trapshoots held throughout the state attracted some of the largest sporting crowds in Delaware. In January 1904, when world champion Fred Gilbert competed at the Wawaset

Gun Club, the throng was so large that fans had to go into the clubhouse in shifts to warm themselves by the coal stove.

The development of homebred shooting talent reached its apex in 1908 when Captain K.K.V. Casey of Wilmington won a silver medal in the 1000-yard shoot at the London Olympics - the first ever medalist from Delaware. Captain Casey, commanding officer of Company C in the First Delaware Infantry, was joined in the rifle matches at Bisley, England by fellow Delawarean John Hessian. Two days later another Delawarean on the 86-member American team, George Dole, son of Wilmington preacher George Henry Dole, aggressively wrestled through four English opponents to win gold in the 133-pound class - the first Olympic gold for Delaware.

Finally, A Successful League

Throughout the 1800s leading Delaware sportsmen had tried to organize state sports teams into leagues. In baseball, in shooting, in football - all attempts failed. There were transportation problems, there were money difficulties, there were competitive disparities, there were petty jealousies.

It was not until 1901 that all dragons were slain and a sports league survived in Delaware from opening day to awards banquet with all members remaining intact to the end. The league that turned the trick was the Wilmington City Bowling League. Even then it stuttered through several false starts. Plans in 1900 were scuttled sending one of the primary movers in the enterprise, the Wilmington Whist Club, off to the Intercity Bowling League with Pennsylvania teams.

Finally in the summer of 1901 the Young Mens Republican Club, the Knights of Columbus, the Wilmington Bicycle Club

and the YMCA bonded into an agreement for a wintertime league. The format was recognizable to any bowler of today: five-man teams, total pinfall deciding the winner over three games, every Thursday night. Each club hosted an equal number of matches on their home alleys.

The Republican Club won top honors with 15 wins in 18 weeks. The well-balanced team averaged 151.4 per man, yet anchor Henry Kurtz rolled only 157.4 per game. The Knights of Columbus, the tailender of the list with only five wins, toppled 143 pins per man, only eight pins a man shy of the champs.

The Wilmington City Bowling League was so successful a second team league formed in the middle of the season. Thereafter, leagues binding Delaware athletes became commonplace in many sports.

A Soccer Fantasy

“Followers of the game of soccer declare that it will not be many years before their favorite game becomes a most popular sport. They have visions of great things which are about to come to pass. Visions of great amphitheaters which will hold tens of thousands of cheering soccer rooters. Visions of strongly entrenched professional soccer leagues, as great in scope perhaps as the present leagues of baseball...”

A newspaper article from the 1960s perhaps? The 1970s? The 1980s? The 2000s? No, 1907. For nearly a century it seems soccer aficionados have been waiting for their game to seize the imagination of the American public. Delaware did begin interstate competition in soccer in 1907 with teams from Philadelphia and New Jersey. But, while these contests were greatly enjoyed by the participants, the games were typically private affairs, attracting little interest among Delaware sports fans.

A Hotbed of Roque

For a brief time at the turn of the century there was no better roque being played anywhere in America than the roque being played in Wilmington. Roque? Best described as a sort of scientific croquet, roque players crossed mallets at the private grounds of Dr. Benjamin Veasey at 1502 Franklin Street. Veasey was widely considered one of the top five or six roquers in the country.

As the Wilmington men polished their craft several became factors in national championship matches, mostly held in New England. James Hickman, a leather manufacturer, won laurels as the best Second Level player in American roque. Enough good players developed that the Wilmington Roque Club established permanent grounds at Jackson, Tenth and Adams streets.

The popularity of roque never expanded beyond this tiny enclave of devotees and disappeared from the scene with the passing of the Wilmington Roque Club. But for a fleeting moment Wilmington stood at the pinnacle of the roque world.



Roque was so hot in the early 1900s it was contested at the St. Louis Olympic Games. America was the only country to field a team and there were only four competitors. That was it for roque in the Olympics.

1910s

The 19-teens were a transitional decade in Delaware sports. A time traveler from the 1990s would feel at home with distinct seasons for baseball, football and basketball, albeit in primitive form. His fellow traveler from the 1890s would still recognize these games as well - before the lively ball, the forward pass and the jump shot - and also find the major sports of his century, trotting and trapshooting, going strong.

Baseball dominated the Delaware sports scene. Pro baseball was sporadic but there were more leagues and teams than at any time in the state's history. Downstate, where sporting diversions were fewer, baseball was an absolute passion. Some games between ancient rivals Milford and Dover drew as many as 5000 fans, including many taking the train down from Wilmington.

In Wilmington the biggest sports day of the year was Baseball Booster Day which marked the end of the long winter and Opening Day of the baseball season. All the teams displayed their colors in a great parade through the city. There was seldom any question when Opening Day arrived as newspaper headlines screamed: THIS IS THE DAY! BASEBALL BUMPS OTHER THINGS ASIDE.

In football Wilmington High School emerged as the leading pigskinners in the state. Grudge matches with Chester High School were the most anticipated games of the day. Only two of the sports fields in Delaware - outside of Delaware College's glorious Frazer Field - had stands for football so the games were for real fans

only - standing several heads deep and battling the elements.

In women's sports Ursuline and the YWCA played the first field hockey in Delaware in 1914. That first contest was taken by the Ursulines 4-3 in front of a large gathering at Rockford Park. Elsewhere, women could be seen competing in baseball and basketball.

In basketball dribbling was allowed for the first time and standardized rules enabled more games to be played. The Wilmington Amateur Basketball League formed with eight teams but bowling remained far and away the leading indoor winter sport. Any club that had any room at all installed a few lanes for members.

The roller polo craze died out by 1912 but was soon replaced by indoor quoits as the Delaware sports rage. The Wilmington Fraternal Indoor Quoit League organized in 1914 and all games were witnessed by large crowds. The game caught on so quickly that two more leagues formed within a month and stayed popular through the decade.

During this time Wilmington was still known around the east as "Horsetown" but the trotter was slowly losing its hold on the public's imagination. In 1915 automobile and motorcycle races became a feature of the Delaware State Fair on the card with the horse races.

For the one-mile race, drivers had to run 100 yards and enter their machines with engines running and circle the 1/2-mile track twice. The winning mile was raced in a fraction over one minute and 24 seconds. Also on the program were three-

and five-mile runs.

Even more insidious to traditional sports than the automobile to the horse was the spreading of the population. By the end of the decade both Wawaset Park, begun as Scheutzen Park nearly a half-century before, and the grounds at Front & Union Streets, Wilmington's leading 19th

century sporting grounds, were sacrificed for housing developments. Downstate the Seaford grounds, the most historic sporting field in southern Delaware, was similarly dispatched for building lots. Not twenty years into the new century, Delaware had severed most of its sporting ties to the 1800s.

The Big Noise

In the first decades of the 20th century the two great sporting passions in America were baseball and trapshooting. Naturally it was only a matter of time before the world's greatest gunpowder concern got into the game. As the dominant supplier of the new smokeless powder E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company maintained a force of 20 men whose sole responsibility was to build up trapshooting clubs across America. And when the DuPont Gun Club organized on November 14, 1910 it was an enterprise befitting Delaware's leading company.

The clubhouse on the grounds at New Bridge, just beyond Rising Sun, was built at the cost of \$3000. President T. Coleman du Pont pledged \$200 a year for trophy spoons which became coveted prizes for Delaware marksmen. At the first shoot on December 17 the DuPont Gun Club boasted 100 members; several months later the rolls swelled to over 500.

The first year over 1.3 million targets were broken - more than any trapshooting club in the country. An enterprising young contractor named Harry Carlon reclaimed 23 tons of lead from the DuPont grounds by skimming one inch of soil and putting it through a grinder. He was able to sell his buried treasure for 4.5 cents a pound.

All this shooting produced superior marksmen in Delaware. With Alden "Dal" Richardson, Billy Foord, Eugene du Pont, J.H. Minnick and Wardlaw Hammond the DuPont Gun Club team was one of the strongest in

the East.

In 1913 Harriet Hammond organized the Nemours Club for women trapshooters, the first women's shooting club in America. The Nemours Club soon boasted over 100 members, mostly from the agricultural division of the DuPont Company. The Nemours women even toured the country to demonstrate their skill.

Several thousand spectators would arrive for the "Big Noise" on days of important tournaments, which went on year-round. In 1915, to accommodate the huge throng of shooters, lights were installed for night shooting. The popping of guns against the stars pushed area residents past the breaking point. Night shooting was stopped on August 15 but a suit was brought against the DuPont Gun Club complaining that the noise was a nuisance. A court injunction temporarily closed the grounds.

In January 1916 the suit was heard in open court. Over 110 witnesses jammed the courtroom to testify that shot falling into the public road was endangering life and traffic. So many people were on hand to testify that the overflow was sent home. Although the original DuPont Gun Club site was selected for its excellent distance from the city, yet its remoteness from residential areas, the club was disbanded. The former members scattered to the 23 other trapshooting clubs in Delaware, the best forming the Wilmington Trapshooting Association at Old Homestead on the Philadelphia Pike near Bellevue.

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: ALDEN B. RICHARDSON

For want of 543 votes Harry Alden Richardson, canner and president of the First National Bank of Dover, would have been governor of Delaware in 1890. He re-emerged in state politics in 1907 when the Kent County Republican stalwart was elected to the United States Senate. While Richardson was attracting attention in the Roosevelt and Taft administrations his son Alden B. "Dal" Richardson was making noise back home on the trapshooting line.

When he wasn't tending to Dover business Richardson won over 30 trapshooting medals, knocking clay targets out of the sky at a rate of over 93% most years. He was the Delaware state champion in 1909, 1910, 1913, 1914, and 1916. He won at the national level as well, taking first place from the 20-yard line in the prestigious Grand American Handicap in Dayton, Ohio in 1913. He was runner-up for the national amateur championship that year and again in 1915.

Richardson was a member of a world-record setting five-man team described by *American Rifleman* as "the fastest moving and fastest shooting squad in the Eastern States." Richardson shot fourth in the potent line-up.

The Dover marksman was enjoying his best year in 1916 at the age of 40 when he was roundly hailed as the top shooter in America. He ran a program of 200 straight in a Philadelphia tournament on Memorial Day - "he nailed every target in the center" - and made a world's record of 99 from 22 yards at the Midsummer Handicap a month later.

But on the evening of July 30 Richardson returned to his Dover home and reached into a pocket in the side of his car to retrieve a Colt revolver when the gun discharged a bullet that punctured his intestines in eight places. Richardson, known for his graceful and perfect positions at the trap, did not survive.



Alden B. Richardson was Delaware's finest shot in the days when trapshooting ranked second only to baseball as a national sporting pursuit.

The Great Shipyard Teams

During World War I the U.S. government issued a “work or fight” edict that sent many major league baseball players scurrying to the safety of the huge shipyards and munition plants that peppered the Atlantic Seaboard. Enough big leaguers came to work for Wilmington’s Harlan and Hollingsworth yard to mold two teams, including the nine that captured the Atlantic Coast Shipbuilding League title in 1918. Pusey and Jones of Wilmington also fielded a squad of local stars which, while a good club, was not of the caliber of the galactic Harlan team.

Anchoring the Harlan and Hollingsworths were Rogers Hornsby and Shoeless Joe Jackson, two of only three major leaguers to hit over .350 for their career. The 22-year old Hornsby cemented the inner cordon at shortstop while Jackson, a terrific slugger then in his prime, patrolled the outer perimeter in centerfield. He was heavily criticized as a draft dodger but he had been married ten years at this time and supported his mother and crippled sister as well. He had applied for work in the shipyard even before the 1918 baseball season had begun. Unable to read or write, the other players would drive Jackson crazy, it was said, by pointing to something in the newspaper which they told him was his name on the draft list.

All told there were eight big leaguers on the Harlan and Hollingsworth team. The moundsmen were led by Lefty Williams, a two-time 20-game winner who would compile a .631 winning percentage. Both Jackson and Williams would be thrown out of baseball as members of the Chicago “Black Sox” two years later.

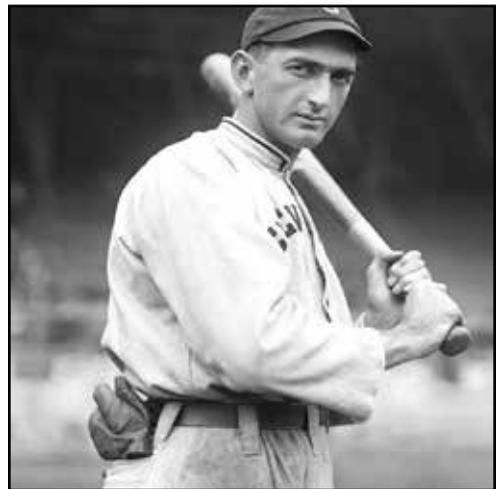
The shipyard ball park was an exceptionally fine playing field and large crowds would turn out for the Saturday afternoon games. When an overflow crowd of 4000 greeted the opener of the Ship League it was observed: “It was a typical Wilmington baseball crowd too, because it ‘panned’ every player who made a misplay and then made him king when he redeemed himself.”

So popular were the contests that the team began playing illegal Sunday games. Police waited patiently until the final out when each player was ceremoniously arrested, escorted to City Hall and assessed a slight fine. Gate proceeds were turned over to the war effort so even strict Blue Law adherents winked at the Sabbath charade.

The Harlan and Hollingsworths met the Staten

Island yard of the Standard Ship Company for the league title in September 1918. The five-game series opened in Phillies Park in Philadelphia and although Hornsby was ineligible for the championship the Wilmington team prevailed 3-2 in Game 1. They won another low scoring affair the next afternoon in New York, 2-0.

Williams took the hill for Game 3 back in Philadelphia and shut down the New Yorkers on two scratch singles. But his service in the 4-0 clincher was overlooked in the excitement of Jackson’s performance. He doubled and scored in the game’s first run in the 4th inning and crushed a long 2-run home run over the right field wall in the 6th. In the 8th inning pandemonium



Shoeless Joe Jackson played ball in Wilmington during World War I.

reigned when Shoeless Joe clouted another circuit blast. When the great outfielder reached home plate he walked around in front of the fan boxes and picked up bank notes which workers, who seemed to entirely disregard them in those days, threw to him. He returned to the dugout clutching a large handful of such notes.

The drives were not hit off a local riveter. Dan Griner took a 2.15 ERA with him that year when he left the Brooklyn Dodgers. Harlan and Hollingsworth thus brought the Coxe Trophy back to Wilmington with a 3-game sweep. The Armistice was signed less than two months later and the greatest baseball team to ever play in Delaware was quickly disbanded.

1920s

The 1920s. Ruth. Dempsey. Jones. Tilden. The Golden Age of American sports. In a poll at mid-century each was named the greatest performer ever to play his sport. For the first time America had national sports stars. Delawareans could listen to their exploits on their new radios and read the first national sports columns in Delaware papers, written by Grantland Rice and Harry Grayson. Non-Delawareans now eclipsed residents as sports heroes. And the legends came a' callin'.

In golf Bobby Jones toured the Wilmington Country Club and the great British golfers Harry Vardon and Ted Ray played a popular exhibition at the Kennett Pike Club in 1920. Walter Hagen, Tommy Armour and Gene Sarazen appeared at Concord Country Club, a satellite of Wilmington Country Club, drawing thousands to their matches. The greatest American woman golfer, Glenna Collett Vare, competed in the annual woman's invitational at the Wilmington course. And Joyce Wethered, who Bobby Jones called the greatest golfer he ever saw, man or woman, appeared in an exhibition before 700 at Wilmington.

For tennis players the Delaware Open was strategically scheduled the week before the national amateur, usually held in Philadelphia. As a tune-up for the big event America's best players competed on the Wilmington Country Club grass courts. Bill Tilden, holder of two Wimbledon and seven United States Open crowns, also had a Delaware Open trophy in his ample showcase. Big Bill was of



Bill Tilden, the first great American tennis player, won two Delaware Open crowns. His father was a Delaware native.

“sturdy Delaware stock,” his father being a native of St. Georges. In the 1920s he played several times in Delaware, helping christen the new clay tennis courts at the Du Pont Country Club and staging several charity exhibitions.

Babe Ruth was a frequent visitor to teammate Herb Pennock's farm in Kennett Square for some foxhunting and golf. The Babe even cracked up his car once on Route 1 near Wawa. The greatest star of them all played in Wilmington once, in a barnstorming game at Wilmington's Harlan Field. When the Babe came into Wilmington for some shopping he would invariably be mobbed on his walks down Market Street.



Jack Dempsey teaches his Wilmington bride, Estelle Taylor, a few boxing moves.

The biggest sports hero in Delaware in the 1920s was boxer Jack Dempsey, the Manassas Mauler. The heavyweight champ first visited Wilmington in 1921 as a training break for an upcoming bout in Atlantic City with Georges Carpentier. Wending his way through the adoring crowds Dempsey professed a liking for the town. Three years later he found more reason to love Wilmington. Dempsey married actress Estelle Taylor, a Wilmington girl whose mother and grandparents still lived there, and the champ's visits became more frequent.

Dempsey fights would be broadcast live over loudspeakers set up outside the newspaper offices and crowds of over 8000 would jam city streets for four blocks, listening and cheering to the blow-by-blow radio accounts. When Dempsey met Gene Tunney in Philadelphia it was estimated that more than 3000 Wilmingtonians took the train to join the crowd of 125,735. Jack Dempsey was a magical name in Delaware for years.

Professional sports in Delaware suffered

in the shadow of the national sports explosion. In baseball there was minor league action available downstate, albeit by raw rookies, for much of the decade while in Wilmington the best ball was often played by "colored teams" like the Harlan Giants, starring Wilmington's Judy Johnson, and the Wilmington Black Sox. The Hilldale Daisies from Philadelphia, who were the world champions of the Negro Leagues, often played home games in Wilmington. The top amateur leagues were the All-Wilmington and Twilight Leagues.

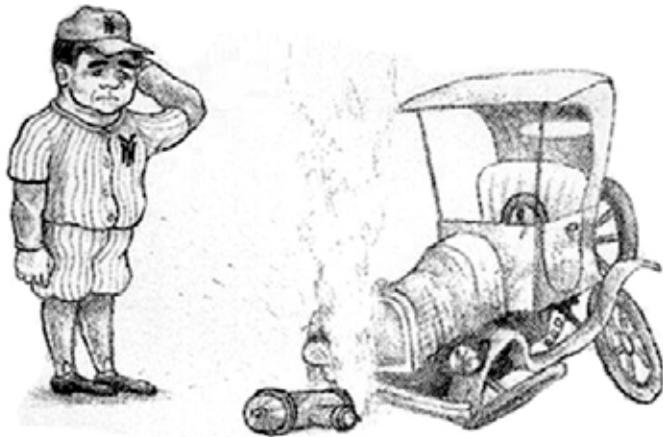
While there was less baseball to watch there was plenty to play. In 1921 Wilmington sported 15 baseball diamonds, three of which were reserved exclusively for the 6 women's leagues in town. Even winter baseball was common in Delaware throughout the 1920s.

Football was the premier spectator sport of the age. It was not unusual for 20,000 people to see games across Wilmington on any given fall Saturday. Baynard Field, with two gridirons, could

host four games on such days. Wilmington High School, which charged no admission, was the most popular eleven and could bring out 8000 rooters on game day.

The best semi-pro football teams were the Defiance Bulldogs and the St. Mary's Cats. In 1925 the battle was joined when St. Mary's broke a three-year Bulldogs' hold on the state title by thrashing them 16-0 on Thanksgiving Day before 6500. St. Marys took advantage of a 75-yard fumble return and a 35-yard interception return for touchdowns to stun Defiance. St. Mary's won on Turkey Day the next year as well to insure the Cats a place among Delaware's best-ever local football teams.

On the whimsical side, casting, fishing-style, became a popular outdoor activity. The Delaware Anglers and Gunners



Babe Ruth was a frequent visitor to Delaware in the 1920s and once even wrecked his car on Route 1 in Wawa across the state line in Delaware County.

Association began staging an annual baitcasting tournament each spring on the Washington Triangle in Wilmington. There were nine accuracy events and six for distance. By the end of the decade the Wilmington Casting Club was hosting invitational tournaments that attracted national distance and accuracy champions.



The Defiance Bulldogs were the state champion footballers of the early 1920s and one of the last great semi-pro teams in the state.

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: JUDY JOHNSON

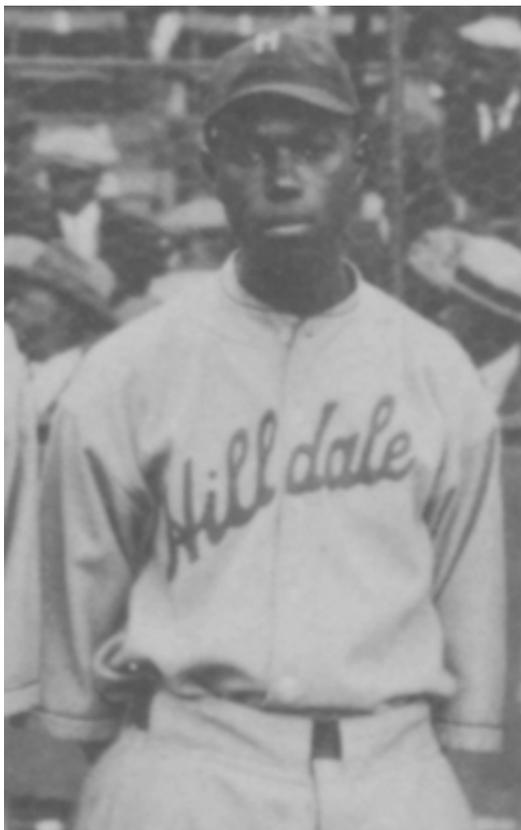
In the first half of the 20th century third base was a waste area of sorts in major league baseball. The only three guardians of the hot corner named to the Hall of Fame from this era were Pie Traynor, Frank "Home Run" Baker and Jimmy Collins, hardly among the first rank of baseball immortals. Perhaps the greatest of all third basemen was a player hardly anyone saw - Judy Johnson.

William Julius Johnson was born in Snow Hill, Maryland in the last year of the 19th century. His father was a seaman and licensed boxing coach who brought the family to Wilmington for work in the shipyards when Willie was seven years old. He wore out the dirt playing ball at the field at 2nd and DuPont streets - now named Judy Johnson Park. He attended Howard High School for awhile but played no sports and dropped out as a sophomore to earn money for his family.

In 1918 Johnson began playing on Saturdays for the Chester Giants for \$5 a game. In 1919 he was asked to join the Hilldale team from Darby, Pennsylvania. As the Hilldale Daisies became a charter member of the Negro Eastern League in 1922, Johnson became a full-time baseball player, earning \$150 a month. With Hilldale his teammates remarked how much he looked like a former manager, Judy Gans, and Johnson became "Judy."

In 1924 Johnson played in the first Negro League World Series, losing to the Kansas City Monarchs. The next year Hilldale and Johnson downed the Monarchs to capture the Negro World Championship, capping off a season when Johnson batted .392.

Johnson - who never weighed more than 150 pounds in his playing career - went on to play with the Homestead Grays and the Derby Daisies of Philadelphia, both of which he also managed.



Judy Johnson, playing for the Hilldale Daisies in the first ever Colored World Series in 1924. Johnson batted .364 in the Series and slugged .614 but the Daisies lost to the Kansas City Monarchs.

In the winter Johnson played in Florida and Cuban leagues - often against the white major leaguers he was excluded from competing against in the regular season.

Johnson discovered Josh Gibson playing on sandlots and mentored the young catcher who would come to be known as the greatest hitter in Negro League ball. Winding down his playing days he joined the Pittsburgh Crawfords - the New York Yankees of the Negro National League. Besides Johnson, who served as captain, the team boasted Hall-of-Famers Gibson, Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell and Oscar Charleston. Not surprisingly, Johnson called the Crawfords, "the best team on which I ever played and the best ever I think in Negro baseball." Johnson played until 1937, hitting below .300 only once, as best as sketchy Negro League statistics can reveal. He was a deadly right-handed curve ball hitter with superb bat control, a peerless fielder and a master thief of opponent's signs.

Johnson retired after the 1936 season and returned to Delaware to work for Continental Can and operate a general store in Millside. He took over the reins of the Alco Flashes, a semi-pro basketball team that featured fellow Negro Leaguers Bill Campbell and Bill Yancey, and won a Delaware state championship in 1937.

He was called back to a now-integrated baseball in 1951 as a scout of black players for the Philadelphia Athletics. In 1954 the A's made Johnson the first black coach in major league baseball. Later he scouted off and on for the Phillies for 15 years until he retired in 1972. The National Baseball Hall of Fame opened its doors to the great stars of the Negro Leagues in 1971 and in 1975 Judy Johnson assumed his rightful place in Cooperstown - the sixth Hall of famer inducted from the Negro Leagues.

This came as a complete surprise to most Delawareans, few of whom had any notion a great ballplayer lived in their midst for 70 years. Delaware fell all over itself to rectify this slight. Johnson was the only unanimous choice in the first voting for the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame in 1976. The Wilmington Sportswriters and Broadcasters Association designated him their Athlete of the Year for 1975, an award heretofore reserved only for active athletes. Governor Pierre S. du Pont IV declared a "Judy Johnson Day" in Delaware. Johnson had a standing reservation at the head table of every sports banquet from Delmar to Claymont and many Delawareans came to know what many who knew Judy Johnson realized all along - he was a Hall-of- Famer off the field as well as on.

Judy Johnson was married for over 60 years to his wife Anita, who died in 1985. He followed in 1989 and their house in Marshallton at the junction of Newport Road and Kiamensi Avenue is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A statue of Judy Johnson, hands on knees, staring resolutely in anticipation of the next pitch, as imagined by Puerto Rico sculptor Phil Sumpter, greets visitors at Wilmington's Frawley Stadium.

The Marshall Marathon

The Marshall money stemmed from the vulcanized fiber products churned out in the family mill in Yorklyn. T. Clarence Marshall was more interested in the plant's steam power than the paper and he built his first steam automobile when he was 19 years old. Between 1910 and 1920 Marshall sold Stanley Motor Carriage steamers.

In 1921 T.C., an avid trapshooter, gathered some friends on his estate for a little tournament. Marshall set up eight traps on the line, along with two practice launchers. The format was unique; when most shoots consisted of at most 200 targets the Marshall shoot was a true marathon: 500 targets.

Wilmington businessman Isaac Turner won the inaugural Marshall Tournament by breaking 492 out of the 500 clays. The marathon format proved to be an exciting attraction and over the next decade the Marshall Marathon grew into the second largest trapshoot in the country behind only the Grand American. More than 500 shooters from across the country would travel to Delaware to test their skill on the

hillside traps at Marshall's estate. In addition to the 500-clay shoot the "Twinkling Star" night shoot proved extremely popular with the target blasters.

With the marathon's exploding growth came a dramatic increase in prize money. The purses offered exceeded \$5000 - more than most professional golf tournaments of the day. With the best target shooters in the country on hand many world records fell over the years at the Yorklyn traps.

The Marshall Tournament was suspended during World War II but starting in 1946 two a year were held to "catch up." But after 30 years the trapshoot just stopped. Tommy Marshall lost interest and his son was too busy with his travel business. The grounds and traps in Yorklyn stood silent but the tournament that grew from obscure beginnings into the nation's second largest lived on. It was adopted by the South End Gun Club in Reading, Pennsylvania, still carrying the original Marshall Trapshooting Tournament name.



The Marshall Marathon in Yorklyn was the biggest trapshooting tournament on the East Coast for thirty years - in prestige, attendance and number of targets. The Auburn Heights property is now a Delaware state preserve.

National Champions at Wilmington High School

In Delaware Leroy Sparks is the Father of Swimming. Sparks was named physical-education director of the Wilmington YMCA in the early 1920s and he quickly became the foremost advocate of aquatic sports in the state. He founded the indoor state championships, which we would be a fixture on New Year's Day for more than three decades, in 1921. He also started swimming as a varsity sport at Wilmington High School.

In 1926 Sparks guided the Cherry and White mermen to eight wins in nine dual meets against top Philadelphia schools. Convinced his swimmers deserved a larger stage Sparks launched a citywide campaign to send the Wilmington swim team to the national high school championships in Evanston, Illinois. Within two weeks the energetic Sparks raised the \$1500 necessary for the trip.

His fervor was well-rewarded as Wilmington High swam to victory in the National Interscholastic Championships. Individually, Jack Spargo won the 100-yard breaststroke and James Fraser upset his teammate Franklin Holt, the Red Devils' top sprinter, in the 100-yard freestyle. The Wilmington schoolboys also shattered a national record in the 200-meter medley relay with William Brown, Franklin Potter, Spargo and Holt.

After the 1926 school year Sparks left Delaware for Battle Creek College in Michigan

where he would build up a national power over the next 35 years. He trailed behind him not only a legacy in Delaware swim history but in training as well. Sparks introduced a revolutionary energy-producing diet to his charges emphasizing carbohydrates and shunning steak.

His successor Tom Allen continued the controversial training regimen in 1927 and with Holt and Spago returning for their senior years Wilmington repeated as national champions, winning the title by three points even though the Red Devils were disqualified from one relay for swimming out of the lane.

The team was properly feted around Wilmington upon their return but graduation quickly brought a close to the Red Devil dynasty. Franklin Holt was the team's star, swimming eight races in two days at the 1927 nationals; anchoring relays, winning the 100-yard freestyle and narrowly missing the 40-yard title. He went to Lafayette in 1928 where he broke many pool records as a freshman.

Desiring to return home he transferred to the University of Delaware, again setting pool records in practice, but had to sit out a season and dropped out of school. But that was not the last of Franklin Holt. After being away from school for nearly a decade he resumed his education in Newark and began to once again win swimming races for the Blue Hens.



The Prices Run pool was the most popular recreation spot in the city of Wilmington for much of the first half of the 20th century. This shot is from 1926.

Life in the Minors

Matt Donahue could well be the best hitter of a baseball Delaware ever produced. But he came along at a time, between the World Wars, when there were more than 40 minor leagues in operation across America. With more than 300 teams rifling talent to only 16 major league squads many great baseball players never got a chance to showcase their talent in the big leagues.

Matthew Donohue earned 13 letters in football, basketball, baseball and track at Wilmington High School from 1911-15. After high school he played on many teams around Delaware and competed against major leaguers in the Shipyard Leagues during World War I as a member of Pusey and Jones.

Donohue started his professional career with Rochester of the International League, only a rung below the majors. He would climb no further. It was said of Donohue that "he could slash the apple but his arm was a trifle weak."

In 1921, the 23-year old was a reserve outfielder for the Baltimore Orioles, considered the second best minor league team of all-time by MILB.com. He went 7 for 10 in the Little World Series that year.

For the next ten minor league seasons the hard-hitting Donohue averaged .331, never winning even a big-league trial. His minor league travelogue included Mobile, Des Moines, Kansas City, Seattle, and Elmira.

He sat out a couple of years in the late 1920s but staged a comeback in 1930 as a flyhawk for Wilkes-Barre in the New York-Pennsylvania League and made the all-star team by knocking out 202 hits for a .377 average. Still no calls from the bigs.

Perhaps the biggest headline Donohue received in the 1920s came from *The Evening Independent* in his adopted town of St. Petersburg, Florida in 1925 when he remarried his wife five years after the couple's divorce: **MATT DONOHUE WINS THE CAKE FOR HIS BRAVERY.**

The First Delaware Sports Movie

The first sporting event in Delaware to be captured on celluloid was, of all things, a motorcycle hill climb. In the summer of 1922 more than 4000 speed fans gathered in a field in northern Delaware about 1/4 mile northeast of Smith's Bridge near Granogue.

The Smith's Bridge Hill Climb attracted motorcycle clubs from around the East, including several national champions. Also in the crowd was a motion picture director who filmed the primitive cycles roaring up the steep grass slopes above the Brandywine River.

His resulting movie began appearing shortly thereafter in area theaters as one of the "weeklies," the short reels screened before the main feature.

1930s

If an historian researching the 1930s read only the sports pages he could easily conclude there was no such thing as a Depression. Never had so many sports entrepreneurs attempted new ventures as they did in this decade. On a typical summer day in 1937 a sports fan could spend the afternoon at Delaware Park with the thoroughbreds and that night enjoy outdoor boxing or auto racing in Elsmere or perhaps drive down to Dover for some minor league baseball.

Hard times did not inhibit hard play. Rock Manor Golf Club issued a record 35,247 golf permits in 1931, at the height of the Depression. And in the 1930s, like the first tiny mammals that scurried under the feet of the dinosaurs, softball began appearing in Delaware. The game was tailor-made for the Depression. At the time only the catcher and first baseman used gloves so with a bat, ball and two gloves you had a game.

In 1933 only 14 teams entered the first state softball tournament but by 1936 there were 15 leagues and 2000 softballers, including Milford and Dover. In 1937 the All-Wilmington baseball league, which had been a fixture in Delaware for a quarter-century, stopped play. By the end of the decade baseball was nearly extinct as an adult recreation. There was not even a decent baseball diamond left in Wilmington. One observer concluded, "People aren't satisfied just to watch sports in this day and age, they want to take part. Golf and softball (the fast-pitch variety)

are drawing tremendously in this respect."

And if you couldn't afford to go to a game or play a game you could always listen to a game on the wireless. The University of Delaware began radio broadcasting its football games in 1936, the first regular Delaware sports programming.

The Depression's most direct effect on Delaware athletics was on the sporting laws. Boxing was legalized in 1931 after an 18-year battle and in 1935 ballplaying on Sundays was OKed in Wilmington. Both measures helped provide jobs and stimulate the economy to a small degree.

But the biggest boon to the state coffers was the passing of legislation to allow betting on horse racing. It was no secret why Delawareans were now allowed to go to the track and drop \$2 on their favorite nag. Prominently reported along with the race results was how much money was sent to the Delaware treasury. And it wasn't just Delawareans who were encouraged to bet. The state placed signs all along Delaware's borders to instruct visitors of the way to Delaware Park.

The opening of William du Pont's magnificent Delaware Park in 1937 was a watershed in Delaware sports history. The racing plant in Stanton cost a million dollars; \$50,000 was spent on shrubbery alone. It was big league sports in little Delaware. And it blazed a trail for other sports. Within three years there would also be professional baseball, football and basketball in Delaware.

Delaware Falls Hard for Tom Thumb Golf

Garnet Carter was a traveling salesman with a promoter's soul. He left the road in 1928 to settle on Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee to build a resort and golf course. He also added a small miniature golf course on the property he called Tom Thumb Golf.

Carter's Tom Thumb Golf was so popular that the grass greens wilted under the foot traffic. A new product made of ground cotton hulls called GrassIt was the ideal remedy. He added a patent for a miniature golf course design with hollow logs as hazards to the grass carpet patent and sold "Tom Thumb Golf" kits for \$2,000, including shipping. America was about to be swept up in miniature golf mania.

By 1930 there were an estimated 25,000 miniature golf courses across the United States, set up in office buildings and vacant lots and college campuses. Miniature golf made its appearance in Delaware in 1930 when John Metz opened a course at 32nd and Broom Streets in Wilmington. In quick order there was the Rodney Square Miniature Golf Course at 12th and Market, the Robyn Hude Course at 10th and West streets and The Premier on 3106 Market Street. In Newark a Tom Thumb course was laid out on the University Green.

The Delaware state championships, with both the men's and women's winner going to the national Open in Chattanooga, were organized with qualifying targets set - 52 for the men and 62 for the ladies. Hundreds of Wilmingtonians, including the mayor, tried their luck at this new putting game. The eventual men's champion was David Killinger, a 28-year old wire operator for the telephone company, who shot a 123, three under par for three tours of The Premier course.

Mrs. Louis Haywood survived the woman's final, 150-154, when her opponent suffered through an 11 on the 27th hole - no mandatory 6 here. At the nationals Killinger finished five rounds of play at 264, 40 over par and 41 behind the winner. Mrs. Haywood shot a 302 to stumble home 25 strokes back of the leader.

The miniature golf mania spawned what was said to be the largest indoor layout in the United States in the former basketball court and skating rink at 11th and Madison streets. The Auditorium Country Club encompassed 9000 square feet. Spacious felt fairways stretched four feet across with plenty of sporty obstacles including traps, rough and water hazards. The highlight of the loop was a 50-foot putt across a long wooden bridge. The ceilings were painted an azure blue to enhance the illusion of real golf. A mini-clubhouse on the stage overlooked the course.

But like roller skating before it the putting craze in Delaware subsided almost before it began. Tom Thumb Golf was but a brief diversion from the dreary days of the Great Depression.



*A familiar sign in 1950,
not so much in 1951.*

FIRST STATE SPORTS HERO OF THE DECADE: JIMMY CARAS

Like another fellow who would one day become famous, Jimmy Caras was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania but grew up in Wilmington. After his Greek immigrant father moved to Delaware to run a pool hall Jimmy earned money as a teenage hustler. His prowess earned him an exhibition match in 1926 against Ralph Greenleaf who the *New York Times* would remember as doing for pocket billiards “what Babe Ruth did for baseball, Dempsey did for fighting, Tilden did for tennis.”

Greenleaf himself had honed his game in Wilmington after his father had moved from Monmouth, Illinois to manage the Royal Billiard Parlor at 8th & Market in 1915. By the time he won his first world pocket billiards title in 1919 at the age of 20 - the youngest champion ever - Greenleaf was already acclaimed as the “greatest white ball player in the history of his game” for his knack at positioning the cue ball. Greenleaf would hold the world title for nine years in the 1920s. In a decade of dominant sports champions none was more impregnable in his game than Greenleaf.

Greenleaf dismissed young Caras as too inexperienced for his exhibition. Still, when no one else of compatible skill showed up to challenge the champion Caras was called into the 100-ball match. Up first in front of a crowd of over 300, Caras ran off a string of 87 balls before missing. Greenleaf took the table and appeared to be a winner when he pocketed his first 97 balls. But a miss on the 98th ball proved fatal as Caras dropped his final 13 balls to stun the world champion.

Caras was hailed as the “Boy Wonder of the World” and later remembered that Greenleaf’s wife, a vaudeville actress named Princess Nai Tai Tai admonished the stunned stickman, “What? A world champion? And you let a high school kid beat you?”

Six years later the two men would meet again - this time in the national championships. At the nationals ten men would gather, playing each competitor once in a game to 125; the player with the best nine-match record winning the title. In 1932, Caras, playing in his first nationals, was



Jimmy Caras won the first of five pocket billiards world championships in 1935. He would become a charter member of the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame.