

Interviews with the Old-Timers

Comments on Striking Incidents in Baseball History

By HANS WAGNER, Etc.

THE ANCIENT BAT

"THERE was never yet a perfect bat," said Hans Wagner, reflectively, "and I don't suppose there ever can be. Not while the shape has to remain perfectly round and fouls can slip off the curving surface, and not while the material breaks just as you are administering a sure home run with the bases full. I have had bats break when I met the ball fair and square—break deliberately, after months of faithful service—and a feeble grounder would go trickling off the treacherous stick, when the force I put into the wallop had spelled at least three bases. Again, I've had bats break and the resulting tap would be so short that the infielders couldn't get it to first ahead of me, when it would have been a pop fly but for the breakage. Bats are strange and moody things, and sometimes I think Pete Browning was right when he used to talk to his bats and credit them with human understanding.

"As I said, there never was a perfect bat, but, some years ago, I handled one that was almost perfection. I had that bat for just a little while, and can never handle it again—it isn't in existence now. It was one day back in 1898, when the Louisvilles were playing an exhibition game against some small club in an Ohio river city. As luck would have it, our batbag, instead of being shipped to this little town, was sent on to the next big league stop and we found ourselves batless in the village. We figured, of course, that we would borrow bats from the locals, but we didn't need to.

"On arriving at the local ball-park, we found some urchins knocking flies. One of the kids was using a curious-looking bat, long, finely shaped, and of a peculiar red-brown color. I took it from the youngster, examined it, and found that, while it was very heavy, it balanced nicely in the hand. I slipped the boy half a dollar for the loan of his bat, and we started the game, with the red stick and three or four others of the ordinary pattern, which had been scared up by admiring natives.

"We never had to use the ordinary bats. That red stick proved to be the proper

medicine. Of course, there wasn't any big league team against us, but the pitcher was one who was destined to be a mighty star in the after years, and he had something that day, believe me. Nothing doing for him, though. The least tap with that red bat, and the ball whirred out in the field like a bullet. There was a spring and a texture to the wood that gave incomparable hitting power. Tap a fast ball with that bat, and it would go for two bases. Meet a curve, and you could send it to the bleachers. With that bat, a man who ordinarily hit .200 would be a .300 hitter, easy, and I blush to estimate the record I could have made with it.

"All of us batted with that stick, rapping about twenty-eight long hits during the matinee. Between innings, I chatted with the kid who owned it, and he explained that he had laboriously turned the wood to proper shape himself, and that it was, originally the leg of an old fashioned, brokendown table that his grandfather possessed. It was some strange Oriental wood, somewhat like mahogany, but much heavier and of firmer grain.

When the game ended, I turned to find the boy, intending to hand him good money for that bat, but the kid was gone. Apparently afraid we intended to steal his bat, he had caught it up and run like a whitehead. I never saw the boy again, and, although I twice played games in that town years after, he never came near the park. The mysterious bat, brimful of hits, vanished the same afternoon it first appeared, and its equal has never been discovered."

SOME BASEBALL UNIFORMS

"BASEBALL uniforms," says Jesse Burkett, the grand old veteran, "should always be distinctive, and, in some manner, peculiar to their respective clubs. The law requiring all teams to wear white on their home fields was an excellent idea, but previous to the time of its adoption there were some strange mistakes and mishaps, owing to the confusion of uniforms.

"Back in 1885, the champion Chicago White Sox wore a dark blue suit with white stockings—same suit both at home



Arlie Latham, former big leaguer, now playing ball in England

and abroad. But each player was specially identified, and the scheme might not be a bad one to revive today—each wore a special cap, that was peculiarly his own, and could be distinguished from the cap of any other athlete, while a brief description of the caps was set down on the official program. One man had a plain red cap; another wore a white cap with a blue peak; another had a black cap with a red stripe, and so on for the whole team.

"Up to the time of the statute requiring the home costume to be white, every club was costumed at will, and some amusing errors resulted. Once, for example, the Giants were at Chicago, and the New York uniform, that year, was black. At a critical point of the game, a Chicago batsman hit into deep right, and the fielder, throwing in, shot the ball at a Chicago coacher who had on a black sweater. The coacher, of course, dodged, and three runs came in.

"Even nowadays, absurd breaks will happen, but they are seldom serious. The climax, however, came off in Worcester some time ago. Some undiluted jassass connected with the New Bedford team, managed to equip the Whalers with white uniforms for both traveling and home games. Thus newly arrayed, the New Bedfords came over to play us, and the trouble

which followed would turn the hair gray on a cigar Indian. Before the game had gone half an inning, both teams began to make breaks that seemed utterly childish, and yet were wholly understandable. If you have been accustomed to throwing the ball to your pals in white uniforms, you simply cannot help going up in the air when an extra suit of white is suddenly injected into your field of vision. In the very first round, our shortstop grabbed up a grounder, and calmly threw it to the hostile baserunner as he tore down to the initial cushion. The baserunner ducked, and then sped on to third.

"We were at bat a few minutes later, and had a man on first. This time the ball was hit to the New Bedford shortstop, who dashed for second to make a force-play. Ho had to cover the bag himself, as his second baseman had been playing way over, and as he neared the base our runner came charging up from the opposite direction. "Turn quick and make it a double play!" squalled the New Bedford shortstop, thrusting the ball into the hands of the baserunner—and my man, mechanically, stone-headedly, whirled and threw to first, the ball beating the batsman to the bag by seven feet!

"The riot that followed was something never to be forgotten, and it was finally patched up by the New Bedfords borrowing the gray traveling jackets of my men, thus changing their appearance enough to avoid further trouble."

HAPPENINGS AT DAYTON

"FOR a Minor League park," says Bob Bescher, the lightning base-stealer, "the arena at Dayton, Ohio, has seen more exciting things and curious accidents than any other park I ever heard of. When I was playing in the Central League, it seemed as if something was always sure to come off every time we played upon the Dayton grounds, and it finally got so that if nothing weird had happened the boys would think the day was wasted. "Out in left field at the Dayton park was one tottery section of fence, and the club management sent for a carpenter. He quickly constructed a brace, a sort of A shaped contrivance of wood and iron, and it held the fence perfectly, while it didn't seem likely that the left fielder would ever have to back into it in pursuit of a ball. On the third day after that brace had been put in, Dick Bayless, the outfielder, who was a good hitter in the Minor Leagues, blazed away at a ball, and sent it sailing out over the suburbs. The left fielder chased it, and suddenly stopped

short—another step, and he would have stumbled into that brace, over which the ball was already falling. The ball struck on top of the brace, rolled up the contraction, and vanished into the street, giving Bayless a home run.

"This was odd enough, but it was positively hair-raising when, the very next day, Bayless again raised a fly, it again fell upon that brace, and once more rolled up and out. And, believe me or not—the old papers on the Dayton files will back me up—Bayless made his third home run on the third day, and the ball bounded up that brace once more. Never again during the entire season did a ball as much as graze that brace, but Bayless made homers off it on three successive days.

"Under the right field fence, one day, a bunch of small boys dug a hole, a sort of gopher tunnel, and just before game-time in they came afflooding. The ground-keeper caught them coming in, and chased out as many as he could capture. He hadn't time to fill in the hole, but stayed near to watch. Ever and anon, a small boy would come popping in, and the groundkeeper would shoo him back again, and after three or four innings the kids gave it up as a useless job.

"Dayton was three to the good in the eighth, and the situation was an exciting one: sacks crowded with the enemy, and two down. The batter sent a red hot liner out into right field, and Tommy Daley, who was on guard, scurried across to intercept the hit and cut it to a single. As he came up to the ball, it lurched lazily, faded away, and rolled gently into the hole the kids had dug under the fence. It lay in plain sight, and Daley, of course, dove for it, flinging himself full length, and spearing after the ball with an eager hand.

"And just as Daley's fingers tipped the leather, a small boy on the outside reached in, grabbed the ball, and fled at a record-breaking gait, while Daley roared with rage, four runs came in, and the victory was snatched away by that fresh juvenile."

A JAG BY ORDERS

EVER hear of a big league manager ordering, compelling, forcing his players to get drunk?" queries Big John Powell, the veteran pitcher. "Seems absurd to even think of, doesn't it? And yet it happened, with the St. Louis Browns as the compulsory jags, James McAleer as the manager, and the 1908 season as the period.

"We were going strong in 1908, the best

season the Browns had since the American League was formed. Good pitching—oh yes, I was one of them—strong batting, and hard, gingery playing held us well up in the race, and it looked as if we had more than a reasonable look-in for the flag. So determined were we all, and so faithful to our duties, that not a man in the crowd tasted anything stronger than coffee, and tin angels were not in it with the St. Louis Browns.

"Midsummer came, and still we held that desperate pace. We were playing our hearts out, that was the truth of it, and suddenly we broke under the strain. We began to go downhill. Game after game was lost. Our pitchers were hit all over the surface of the earth; our fielding was shaky and miserable, and none of us could bat. One night, after supper, in Washington, I think it was, and just before we were due to retire, Jim McAleer called us all together.

"'You fellows,' said McAleer, 'are worn out, all in, and gone stale. You have been playing beyond your strength, and living like fighters in strict training. Now, then, listen to my orders: Every man on this ball club will now go out and get roaring drunk. That goes for everyone. If any man on this team comes into this hotel tonight sober, I will fine him \$50.

"Oh, such a night, such a night! Twenty-two players with the team, and twenty-two frightful jags came rolling back at all hours from 2 to 7. McAleer himself, ory-eyed and wobbly, stood by the desk to see that no man came back sober, and no man did. There were drunks that night who never drank before, and there were drunks that had been overdue for many a moon.

"We went on the field next day with twenty-two hangover jags. I saw blue moons and black roses round them while I warmed up to pitch, and one infielder insisted that his base had been moved to a spot behind the water-cooler. Wobbling and staggering, we went into the game—and won it hands down. Nothing could stop us. I pitched one of the best games of my life, and the batting was glorious.

"On the train that night, every man had his pockets bulging. One fellow had ten quarts of whiskey hidden in his clothes. All the way to St. Louis we were stewed, piped, polluted, spificated, and bunned. And when we landed in St. Louis we won five straight games without the slightest difficulty. The jag by orders had brought back our spirits and our energies, and for the balance of the season, sober again, but happy, we played corking good ball."

A GOOD EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW

We are pleased to announce that the following Major League clubs have each subscribed for 500 copies of the *Baseball Magazine* to be sent monthly to our soldiers and sailors. These patriotic donors are: The New York Giants, the Chicago White Sox, the Chicago Cubs, the Brooklyn Nationals and the St. Louis Cardinals.