

Baltimore Baseball and Beer

Baltimore's Brewers and Their Early Ties to Baseball

By David Hagberg

The City of Baltimore has almost always been tied to baseball. Baseball was thriving in Baltimore by 1855, just 10 years after the first organized game was played at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey. By 1867 more than 20 amateur clubs were playing in Baltimore. The National Association of Base Ball Players, which represented 237 amateur teams from coast to coast, elected a Baltimorean, Arthur Gorman, as its president. That group was superseded by the National Association of Professional Baseball Players, and in 1872 Baltimore entered the association with its first professional team, the Lord Baltimore. The Lords finished third their first season, but that was their best season. Fistfights often interrupted games, and gambling among players was rampant. The team wound up in last place in 1874, and team officials, disgusted by the squad's behavior and record, folded the team.

By 1882, a formal challenge to the NL (which was formed a few years prior) was under way, and the American Association was formed. A sixth and final franchise (in a last-minute substitution for Brooklyn) was issued to Baltimore for \$50.00. Baltimore was eager for pro baseball, and that summer the search for a local owner led successfully to Harry (Henry R.) Von Der Horst, was a prosperous brewer, who sponsored the team in the new American Association. He named the team the Orioles, after the pretty bird that inhabits the Chesapeake Bay region. His father, John H., of Swedish-German descent, was the builder and owner of Eagle Brewery and Malt Works on Belair Road just above North Avenue. Among Baltimore's

two-dozen breweries at the time, Eagle was one of the largest.

That first season was played with a team stocked in haste from Philadelphia, young players with no major league past or future. The early years were not winning ones for the team; in six of the first ten years the team finished below .500, and four years they finished in last place. The teams of the American Association played the teams of the recently formed National League. Of course, being a brewer, Mr. Von Der Horst took the opportunity to sell plenty of his beer at the



ballgames. The ball club went in for marketing, as on holidays "Von der Horst would present each fan with a picnic lunch, a schooner of his Eagle beer, and an invitation to linger after the game and

dance under the stars on a platform set up in Oriole Park".

Disgusted with the teams performance in its first season, Harry Von der Horst arranged for not only a whole new team, but a new ballpark as well. Von Der Horst built Union Park, and soon renamed it Oriole Park; it was a wooden, six thousand seat ballpark, at Fifth Street (later Huntingdon Avenue, and still later 25th Street) and York Road (later renamed Greenmount Avenue), just off the well-traveled horse car line. This was due north of downtown. Union Park had a big picnic area, beer stands stocked with kegs of Von Der Horst's brew, and a large, clean restaurant that was packed before and after games. Von Der Horst and his general manager, the feisty Billy Barnie, became the toast of Baltimore.

Even though the Orioles were often in last place of the six-team league, they managed to turn a \$30,000 a year profit. The Orioles had some fine players in the 1880's, including Matt Kilroy, who set the all-time season strikeout record of 505 in 1886 (some records claim he had 513 strikeouts that year) and set the record for victories by a left-hander with 46 in 1887. The pitcher's mound was just fifty feet from home plate at the time, compared with sixty feet six inches today. In 1887, John Smith won 29 games for the Orioles, and Oyster Burns batted .341 for the year. In 1889 Tommy Tucker led the league in batting with a .372 average.

In 1890, a new league was born; The Players League featured seven of its eight franchises in the same cities as the National League. Harry Von der Horst decided to have the Orioles leave major-league baseball at this time, and filed for membership in a minor-league, the Atlantic Association (not to be confused with the American Association league they were previously a member of).

The Orioles returned to the American Association later that year, when the Brooklyn team folded and Baltimore played out the rest of Brooklyn's schedule. The Von der Horsts were at odds—John H., the father, finding baseball a poor investment; his son Harry sinking ever more money into it. Not only did Harry spend on players from other teams; he sprang for a new ballpark, supposedly the American Association's largest—and the first in Baltimore to have a double-decked grandstand, on Barclay. It was christened Union Park and the first game there was May 11, 1891. This was also the first stadium in Baltimore with lettered rows and numbered seats, instead of fans just sitting wherever they wished.

In 1892, Von Der Horst and other owners from the American Association teams merged with the National League, creating a twelve-team league. The Orioles finished dead last that first year, winning just 46 games. After an eighth-

place finish in 1893 things started to look up for the Orioles. The opening day lineup for 1894 featured six future Hall-of-Famers (Big Dan Brouthers, Wee Willie Keeler, who when asked the secret to his sensational batting average, replied "Hit 'em where they ain't", Wilbert Robinson, John McGraw—who also gained fame as the manager of the New York Giants, Hughie Jennings, and Joe Kelley). The team was an instant success, and went on to mow down the rest of the National League and winning their first National League pennant with a record of 89 wins and just 39 losses.



As the mid-1890's came, the Orioles were a powerhouse, winning the Temple Cup, the championship trophy of early baseball, in 1894, 1895, and 1896. The team went 87 and 43 in 1895, and in 1896 they posted 90 victories against only 39 defeats. The Temple Cup was a three game post-season series between the top two teams in the league.

After the 1896 series, Willie Keeler reported the Orioles discovered that the cup held seven quarts; to make sure, they repeated the test, in all filling it with champagne three times. Advertisers fell in love with the team, and everyone wanted to be associated with the Orioles. Of course, Von Der Horst advertised his "Purest Extra Pale Standard" beer on the game programs. Other business soon jumped on the advertising bandwagon, including the City Steam Bottling House, who in 1895 proudly announced in the Baltimore Base Ball Club's Official Score Book that "The Famous Elk Brand Club Ginger Ale in the future would be called Challenge Ginger Ale." Other businesses included Pointer Maryland Rye, the George Brehm Brewing Company, and the Baltimore Branches of both the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company and the Bartholomay Brewing Company. By the late 1890's the Orioles were losing steam. They scraped through the 1898 season, finishing second, and finished third in 1899.

As an aside, on July 4, 1894, John H. Von der Horst, at age 69, died of cancer at this home on 1204 North Caroline Street, leaving two sons, Henry R. (Harry) and John H. Jr., and a daughter. His obituary rated page one, this German-born, well-to-do brewer who had undertaken to give Baltimore membership in the American Association. Von der Horst did not live to see and enjoy the finally triumphant Orioles; rather, in old age he had soured on baseball; he even went to court to seek restraint on his son spending money on futile pennant chases.

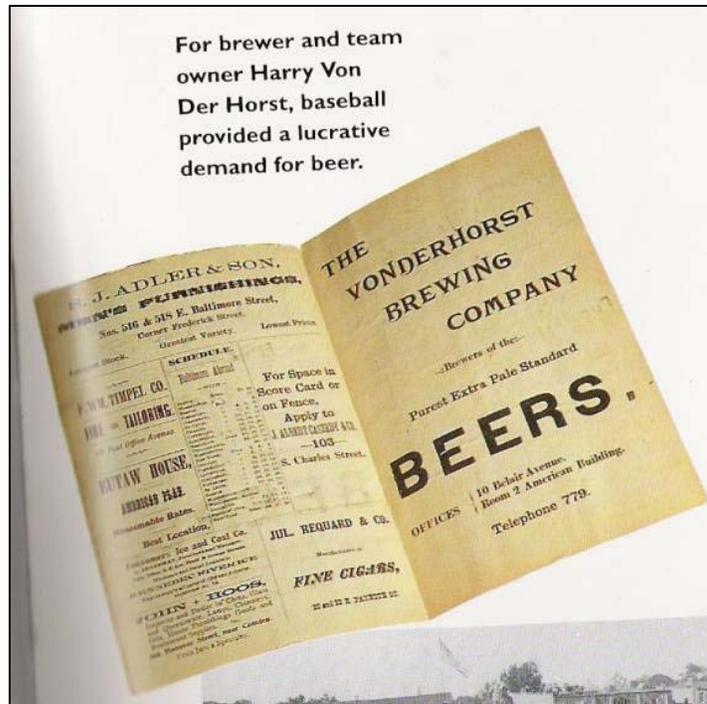
The turn of the century brought about even more changes for the Orioles. The last year of the nineteenth century was the last year for the Orioles. The Spanish-American War was putting a dent in ticket sales, and determined to be more profitable, National League owners dropped four of the twelve teams, trimming Baltimore, Louisville, Washington D.C., and Cleveland. Baltimore fans were stunned: one summer day they had one of the greatest teams in the short history of baseball, and just a few years later they had a vacant ballpark.

Several owners of the now defunct American Association were trying to regroup and start a new major league, however, the Western Association, a minor league, began taking over teams to go into major-league ball with what would become known as the American League. Local businessmen Sidney Frank and Harry Goldman backed the Baltimore team, and in the spring of 1901 baseball was back in Baltimore, though not for long. After the end of the 1902 season, with most of the players and the manager leaving the club to join National League teams, the Orioles were moved by the league to New York, and became the Highlanders, later known as the Yankees. Most people know that the

modern-day Orioles used to be the St. Louis Browns, but not many are aware that the St. Louis Browns were formed when American League President and league founder Ban Johnson decided to move a disappointing Milwaukee Brewers team, who finished in last place in 1901, to St. Louis to challenge the National League's Cardinal's, who then were a consistently weak team.

Emblazoned with photos of players and ads for beer, scorecards were as flamboyant as the team. On this program you can see ads for the George Brehm Brewery (whole bottom row), Pointer Maryland Rye

(top left), and City Steam Bottling House (top right). The ad in the middle of the top row is for Spaulding's Supplies, with the ad mentioning that they supply the Orioles manager Ned Hanlon with bicycles. The ad also mentions Baseball, Golf, Hockey, and General Athletic Supplies.



Sources:

- * The Baltimore Orioles: Memories and Memorabilia of the Lords of Baltimore, by Bruce Chadwick and David M. Spindel, pages: 15-35
- * Baseball in Baltimore, The First 100 Years, by **James H. Bready**, pages 34-71, 105-197, Authors Note: I would highly recommend both books for reading, though the **James H. Bready** book is much more in-depth and "serious" reading.