

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BASEBALL AS A MAJOR
SPORT OF THE WISCONSIN STATE
COLLEGE AT LA CROSSE

BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Baseball has long been considered the national pastime for the people of the United States. Since its conception at Cooperstown, New York in the year 1845, the game has survived the crisis of scandal and the glories of success. The story of baseball at the Wisconsin State College at La Crosse has followed a similar pattern of growth. From the first team fielded by the Normal School at La Crosse in the spring of 1910, inter-collegiate baseball at this institution has survived its shaky foundation and charges of professionalism, to stand firm today as a fully sanctioned major conference sport.

The development of baseball as a major inter-collegiate sport at the Wisconsin State College at La Crosse was selected as a topic by the author due to the lack of available information showing the total growth of the sport at this institution. It is possible for a student to glean what literature is available to ascertain the facts of the development, but it is the hope of the author that this work will be available to the student and teacher of this institution to have the story of the development of baseball easily accessible.

The procedure to be used in this study will be a narrative approach of the facts concerned interspaced with

incidents of that particular era. Due to the restrictions necessary as to the length of the study, statistics which are a part of the analysis of the game of baseball, will be omitted.

The story of the development of baseball at La Crosse arranges itself into four chronological divisions: The Pioneers, the Pre-World War One era beginning with the first year of operation of the college 1909-1910 up to and including the year 1916; The Roaring Twenties, the Post-World War One era from the spring of 1921 through the spring of 1926; Maroon and Grey to Khaki, the period before World War Two from 1938 to 1942; and An Awaited Recognition, the Post-World War Two era including the time from 1945 to the present day. It will be possible for the reader to follow the development of baseball from the old Normal School, through the State Teachers College, up to the present Wisconsin State College.

CHAPTER II
THE PIONEERS

The baseball came hurtling through the air, tracing its path toward the catcher with a white blurr. The infielders tensed with anticipation. The ball game was underway. The date: May 3, 1910; the place: the La Crosse High School diamond. What made this game different from any of the other baseball games that these players had experienced that could cause a new apprehension? It was the realization of the men, now playing together as a new unit, that last year they had been rivals playing against one another with the Viola, La Farge, or Trempeleau High School teams. This was the La Crosse Normal School's first baseball team and they were pioneering in the first regularly scheduled game under Normal School auspices.

Baseball at this time was one of the three sports offered to the men for athletic competition at the Normal School; the others being basketball and track. The Normal School's first president, Dr. Fassett A. Cotton, was a loyal baseball fan and often accompanied the team on its ventures out of the city of La Crosse. The schedule was completed with Gale College, which was located at Galeville at that time, and the high schools of La Crosse and the area teams furnishing the opposition.

At this point it might be worthy to mention that

though high school teams were opposed, it could not be compared with the same situation if it existed today. The Normal School received boys who had completed their high school work without any setback which would send them to Normal at a fairly young age as is the situation today. The biggest difference was that there was no age restriction placed on athletic competition within the high school. It was possible for the high school team to be older in age than the Normal School ball players.

"Dutch" Mueller was signed to coach the neophytes in both basketball and baseball.¹ He was not a member of the faculty but just handled the athletic teams. Mueller was a La Crosse resident. By the end of the basketball season of 1910-1911, the Normal School had run out of money to pay Mueller. President Cotton asked the Men's Athletic Association to elect a student as baseball coach. The election narrowed down to two men, these being Lee Griffin of Viola, now a member of Ginn and Company's Board of Directors and a Vice President of the firm, and C. O. Newlun, now President of the Wisconsin State College at Platteville. Newlun won the election and became the student coach of the 1911 nine.² This aggregation won all of their games with the exception of one loss and one tie. The tie resulted from the visiting

¹Personal letter written by C. O. Newlun to the author on July 5, 1957.

²Ibid.

team having to make train connections so that extra innings were an impossibility. There were virtually no automobiles in those days and the few that there were, were not used to transport athletic teams.

All of the home games and practices were held on the Wisconsin-Minnesota League diamond. This league diamond was the scene of battles waged by the local professional team. It was situated on the old La Crosse Fair grounds near the site of the present college baseball diamond. Home plate was situated in the north-west corner of the present football practice field with the third base-line running parallel to La Crosse Street.³ The lone loss suffered by the 1911 team came at the hands of this same La Crosse professional team in the first of two practice games played before the La Crosse team's season began. Normal was beaten 6-0 by a left handed pitcher named Watson. In July of 1911, Watson was sold to the St. Louis Cardinals where he remained for a few seasons. In the return session, Normal won the contest 4-3. Newlun⁴ recalls that the Normal School players did not always report to the folks at home that in the second game only eight of the college men participated. The professional team furnished Normal with one of their best pitchers whom they believed would be better for their purpose than the amateur pitcher

³ Stated by L. S. Griffin in an interview with the author on July 5, 1957.

⁴ Newlun, op. cit.

who was not quite up to such competition.

Joel Moore,⁵ a graduate of Albion College and the University of Illinois, was added to the faculty in the fall of 1911 to handle the athletics of the institution, which now included football, thus becoming the first professional coach of the Normal School. Dr. Jean Rolfe, retired Chairman of the Elementary Department of the Wisconsin State College at La Crosse, and Carson Hatfield, Wisconsin Assistant Superintendent of Schools, were active members of the 1912-1913 teams.

A graduate of the University of Wisconsin and Columbia University, Fred Garter⁶ replaced Moore as coach in the fall of 1912. Joel Moore remained on the faculty.

By the spring of 1913, the baseball schedule had been expanded to include games with the Normal School at Platteville and Champion College at Prairie du Chien. Hatfield⁷ recalls a particularly humorous incident that took place during the 1913 baseball season following a game at Prairie du Chien after the Normal School had upset the favored Champion College team. Normal had a squad member named Frank McDonald who was the spirit of the team, for his laughter became a familiar sound. The Champion players were upset about losing the

⁵College yearbook, The Racquet, 1912, p. 21.

⁶College yearbook, The Racquet, 1913, p. 21.

⁷Stated by Carson Hatfield in an interview with the author at La Crosse, Wisconsin on June 25, 1957.

game and kidnapped Frank. After holding him for a short period, they released him unharmed. Upon their return to La Crosse, the players feeling elated about their victory and especially confident that the city police would not bother them as President Cotton had accompanied them on their trip and was in their company, cheered and yelled from the train depot to their places of lodging.

Fred Carter remained at the Normal School through the spring of 1915 at which time he resigned to return to school to pursue the degree of Doctor of Medicine.⁸

Carter was replaced by Gustave Heinemann in the fall of 1915.⁹ Heinemann came to La Crosse from the G. G. Normal College of the North American Gymnastics Union. His baseball team of 1916 enjoyed an undefeated season.

The year 1917 marked the entry of the United States into the war to end all wars. The combined pressure of wartime enlistments and draftings, and the pressure for baseball to be self-supporting, forced the sport to be dropped from the athletic offerings.

The timber swinging pioneers had cleared a path to show the beginning of baseball through seven successful seasons. These teams played under the nickname of "Pedagogues" which may be defined as teachers of children or persons of pedantry, dogmatism, and formality.

⁸Griffin, op. cit.

⁹College yearbook, The Racquet, 1916, p. 18.

CHAPTER III
THE ROARING TWENTIES

Following the completion of the first World War, baseball was not restored to the athletic scene. The athletic organization contained football, basketball, gymnastics, and track. The American boy desires to compete in active team games. The element of competition is present in track but this sport does not contain the closer relationship of the team aspect as is present in the game of baseball. Many people missed the absence of baseball. Gerald Gibson,¹ writing for the 1920 annual, described his interest in the sport and wished to know the reason for its being omitted from the Normal School athletic program. Gibson's desire to know the answer to this question became so strong that "Tubby" Keeler was cross-examined. Keeler was the coach at this time, handling the program of athletics with the exception of the gymnastics squad. The only spring activity was track. Keeler spoke to this effect:

Up to 1917, baseball was a part of our athletics, but had to be dropped because it was such a financial failure. In 1916, the last year the national pastime was with us, the athletic fund suffered reverses, despite the fact that no long trips were taken and baseball material was at that time very cheap in comparison to what it is now. The chief reason for baseball being a losing financial proposition is the lack of interest in the sport on the part of the student body. There are in turn two reasons for this lack of interest, first, track

¹College yearbook, The Racquet, 1920, p. 91.

season runs parallel to baseball season and demands a large part of the students interest and attention; second students are not satisfied with the brand of ball offered by school teams.

The last reason is the most important and Keeler explains it in this way:

Our taste for baseball skill is too high to be satisfied by anything short of league ball, and sometimes not even by league ball, as is shown by the support which our Central Association baseball team received a few years ago. From the time the American boy is old enough to lift a bat, he plays the game. The first gift a father gives his son is a baseball. Our youth plays the game whenever he has spare time and by the time he is of college age he is very well versed in the fine points of the game and will not be satisfied to pay a quarter to see a bunch of fellows go out on the diamond and make a bevy of errors. Errors in football are excused because the game is not so thoroughly understood, but in baseball - never.

As the winter of 1920-1921 drew to a close, the baseball fever broke out anew on the Normal School campus. Baseball had been absent from the athletic program for a period of five years, and had been dropped because it was a financial failure and a feeling that the game could not exist as an amateur sport. President Cotton³ did not believe this to be absolutely true, and it was he who authorized Robert Mohr to select a team and to schedule games for the 1921 season. Thirty men reported for the organizational call and the Normal School again fielded a fighting nine.

Coach Mohr and his team did not have a diamond on

²Ibid., p. 91.

³College yearbook, The Racquet, 1921, p. 97.

which they might practice and schedule home games during this re-organizational period. So taking the task in hand, the men constructed their diamond in the center of the old fair grounds track and on the football field. The diamond was laid out in the same position as the now defunct Wisconsin-Minnesota league diamond, with the axis from home plate to second base facing a south-easterly direction. Nohr⁴ recalls that "Tubby" Keeler was not very happy about the damage to the grass that consequently resulted.

When uniforms were issued from a supply discovered in the athletic equipment room, Nohr found that he had socks and pants enough to outfit the team, but only six shirts could be found. So the team huddled together and decided to wear sweatshirts so that the entire team would be dressed alike. This was necessary as no money would be allotted for the purchase of new uniforms.

The highlight of the season was a 4-2 victory over Luther College. This Luther team, with the exception of one man was the team that had won the 1920 Iowa state championship.

The baseball nines of the early 1920's had an interesting specialist who would cause quite a controversy if he were to pitch today. The Racquet describes this art in that this person "is our other pitcher who usually works a while

⁴ Stated by Robert Nohr in an interview with the author at Madison, Wisconsin on July 20, 1957.

in every game. He is noted for his famous spitters."⁵ The spitter was a legal pitch of a pitcher's repertoire in this era. The pitch described as a spitter resulted when a pitcher applied saliva to the ball to increase air resistance as a ball is thrown to sharpen the dropping affect of the ball.

The La Crosse Normal School became a member of the Western Inter-State Inter-Collegiate Association in the spring of 1923.⁶ Robert Nohr was elected president of the organization. Baseball, as yet, did not receive recognition as an inter-collegiate sport. Sanctioned sports were football, basketball, and track.

The sport was never in a very secure position during its existence in the roaring twenties. Baseball had to be self-supporting to exist. Nohr⁷ recalled that the game was well received in close proximity to La Crosse. So games were scheduled with area town teams such as Trempeleau, Viola, and La Farge where the collegians received an average guarantee of one hundred dollars per game. By scheduling three games with these town teams, it was possible to take other trips and purchase necessary equipment to last out the school year.

In the spring of 1926, a mixer was held in the school gymnasium; the proceeds from this mixer going to the team

⁵College yearbook, The Racquet, 1922, p. 75.

⁶College newspaper, The Racquet, April 11, 1923, p. 1.

⁷Nohr, op. cit.

to be used to purchase equipment. A total of sixty dollars was presented to the baseball team.⁸

During Nohr's tenure, he recalls most vividly the game played against Columbia College at Dubuque, Iowa.⁹ This particular game was very easy to remember as it was played under such adverse conditions. On May 8, 1923,¹⁰ Columbia College and the La Crosse Normal School played to an 8-8 tie in the seventh inning when the game was called by mutual consent. The day was icy cold and the final innings were played in a blizzard where the players had difficulty distinguishing the ball from the snow flakes. Nohr recalls that the players from both teams gathered what wood was available and built bonfires in front of their benches in an attempt to warm themselves.

Robert Nohr coached baseball during all of its years of existence in the 1920's with the exception of the spring of 1924. Jean Rolfe guided the Normal nine that spring. Nohr resigned from all of his athletic connections when President Cotton left Normal for a new position. When Dr. Ernest Smith became the second president of the La Crosse Normal School, Nohr again resumed his duties as athletic director and baseball coach. During his mentorship, the baseball teams enjoyed some very outstanding seasons. Nohr resigned from the staff of the Normal School in the fall of

⁸College yearbook, The Racquet, 1926, p. 65.

⁹Nohr, op. cit.

¹⁰Dubuque Telegraph Herald, May 9, 1923, p. 11.

1926 to accept a position at the University of Wisconsin.¹¹

The athletic council disbanded inter-collegiate baseball in the spring of 1927. But the athletic council could not ban the desire for the men to play the game and an independent team was formed which played under the name of the Normal Vagabonds.¹²

¹¹Nohr, op. cit.

¹²College yearbook, The Racquet, 1927, p. 66.

CHAPTER IV

MAROON AND GREY TO KHAKI

As the Normal Vagabonds of the roaring twenties faded into obscurity, a new group of independent baseball players rose to the task of trying to reinstate the national game on the campus of the institution then known as the La Crosse State Teachers College.

The Collegians were a group of young men from the college who formed this team out of the desire to play baseball. Ray Lotzer managed this group and also, began a personal drive to get baseball as a sanctioned sport, through his column that appeared in The Racquet, the school newspaper. In 1938, Lotzer wrote that "high schools are restoring the game in their athletic programs. Why should a physical education school fail to see the need of giving prospective teachers an opportunity to actually play the game under the school's supervision."¹

Ray Lotzer's appeal directed to the administration, was intercepted by the La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press and appeared in a column titled Across the Line. The article stated that the majority of the area high schools were starting baseball as an inter-scholastic sport. In quoting Lotzer's article, the writer stated that:

¹College newspaper, The Racquet, January 14, 1938, p. 4.

Coach Howard Johnson is well qualified to direct the sport. He formerly headed the Franz Tires here and has had considerable experience in the semi-pro ranks. The boys really want the sport at the college. Harold Beatty and Barthau Shelley, who conducted a questionnaire, have yet to find a rejection.²

This appeal through the press brought about a meeting of the athletic board in consideration of the advisability of receiving baseball back into the program of athletics. The board invited Lotzer and several other members of the independent baseball team to be present at the meeting to present their case. Lotzer³ reports that the board met on March 10, 1938 and voted against the restoration of baseball because of the lack of funds and the absence of a suitable playing facility. President Snodgrass was reported to be heading a drive to locate and construct an infield on the practice football field. If this site can be arranged, the next sport to be added to the athletic program would be baseball.

Later that spring, Lotzer gave a report of the progress of constructing a diamond on the practice football field and stated that work would begin soon. The lack of this facility was one of the main reasons for not having baseball as an inter-collegiate sport. "Mr. Snodgrass, Howard Johnson, Dr. W. Clover and other faculty members on

²"Across the Line", La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press, January 16, 1938, p. 14.

³College newspaper, The Ragquet, March 25, 1938, p. 4.

the athletic board seem to be of the mind that the school will insert baseball as a major sport next spring."⁴

Through the groundwork prepared by Ray Lotzer, by means of the ink of his column in the Racquet, people began to talk of baseball again appearing on the campus, shortly after the turn of the year 1939. For Walter Wittich was quoted by a Racquet reporter as saying that false rumors of baseball being one of the official sports of the college this season have been circulating around the campus. "The only way that baseball can be entered in our sports is that if sufficient funds can be carried over from other events."⁵

In March of 1939, word was officially received that baseball, the long awaited sport, was once again on the athletic program, and was considered by the athletic board as a major sport. Baseball had been absent from the campus as a sanctioned sport for a period of thirteen years. Coach Clyde Smith⁶ was selected as the mentor. Smith arrived at La Crosse in the fall of 1938 from a previous assignment at the University of Indiana. Besides piloting the varsity in baseball, Coach Smith also organized the first freshman baseball team.

As far as equipment was concerned, the team had to furnish most of their own. The college had catching gear

⁴College newspaper, The Racquet, April 29, 1938, p. 4.

⁵College newspaper, The Racquet, February 17, 1939, p. 4.

⁶College newspaper, The Racquet, March 24, 1939, p. 1.

available that had been borrowed by the Collegians for two seasons prior to this and now the Collegians reciprocated with the use of the Ashland city team uniforms that belonged to one of the players.⁷ Spring of 1940 brought with it a change of dress for the baseball team. New uniforms were purchased for the first time since the year 1910.

Coach Clyde Smith enjoyed four successful seasons prior to his enlistment in the Navy in 1943. During his mentorship, three conference championships in baseball were brought home to the college.⁸ The conference during this era was composed of La Crosse, Stout, River Falls, and Eau Claire.⁹

The highlight of this period in the development of baseball at La Crosse was the pitching of Arnold Wilhelm. During the 1941 season, Wilhelm pitched a no hit-no run game. This was the first and only nine inning feat in the history of this college baseball team. The win was garnered against River Falls by a score of 5-0.¹⁰ During Wilhelm's¹¹ career at the college, he posted seventeen victories against

⁷ Stated by Gordon Bahr in an interview with the author at La Crosse, Wisconsin on July 22, 1957.

⁸ College newspaper, The Ragquat, February 5, 1943, p. 1.

⁹ Bahr, op. cit.

¹⁰ College yearbook, The La Crosse, 1942, p. 121.

¹¹ College newspaper, The Ragquat, December 18, 1942, p. 4.

one defeat.

Although Clyde Smith departed for the Navy, baseball again appeared on the campus during the spring of 1943 as Walter Butterwick guided the Indian nine that spring.¹² An abbreviated schedule of six games was completed.

The war had taken such a toll on the manpower of the La Crosse State Teachers College by the fall of 1943 that all inter-collegiate athletics, with the exception of basketball, were dropped from the program. The college enrollment had dropped from over eight hundred students in 1941 to three hundred and fifty nine in the fall of 1943.¹³

¹²College newspaper, The Racquet, April 16, 1943,
p. 4.

¹³College newspaper, The Racquet, September 30, 1943,
p. 1.

CHAPTER V
AN AWAITED RECOGNITION

The armed conflict with the Axis came to an abrupt halt with the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August of 1945. The completion of the war released the warriors to again take up their peace time activities.

Spring of 1946 saw the La Crosse State Teachers College Indians take to the diamond for the first time since 1943.¹ Clyde Smith was again guiding the fortunes of the Indian nine, starting his fifth season as baseball coach. Coach Smith remained as the baseball mentor for two successful seasons after his return from the Navy until news was released in March of 1948 that he had been appointed head football coach at the University of Indiana succeeding Bo McMillin, whom he served under as line coach before coming to La Crosse.²

Clyde Smith left La Crosse in the spring of 1948 before the start of the baseball season. For the second time in the history of inter-collegiate baseball at La Crosse, a student was selected to coach the team. Robert Bauer combined directorship as student coach with V. E. Rasmussen, faculty manager, to guide the fighting nine to the conference northern sectional championship.³

¹College yearbook, The La Crosse, 1947, p. 81.

²College newspaper, The Racquet, March 18, 1948, p. 1.

³College yearbook, The La Crosse, 1949, p. 163.

E. William Vickroy,⁴ a graduate of Ohio State University, was added to the faculty in the fall of 1948 to serve as line coach in football and to be the ninth baseball coach of the team as a sanctioned college sport. The baseball season of 1949 saw the Indians scalp one conference opponent after another to run the string of conference victories to eleven without a setback. This of course brought home the second consecutive sectional championship in baseball to La Crosse.⁵

Winning teams in baseball became the habit of the La Crosse State Teachers College. After a nine year stretch, in 1956, La Crosse first failed to win or tie for the conference title.⁶ One of the highlights of Vickroy's tenure was the second no hit-no run game in the college baseball history. This did not match Arnold Wilhelm's feat of 1941 as Bob Olson only pitched a seven inning game.⁷

In 1950 the college constructed a new baseball diamond located in the north-east corner of the practice football field.⁸ This diamond has become the home field of the La Crosse Indians with all home games being scheduled on

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

⁵College yearbook, The La Crosse, 1950, p. 118.

⁶College yearbook, The La Crosse, 1957, p. 123.

⁷Stated by E. William Vickroy in an interview with the author at La Crosse, Wisconsin on July 25, 1957.

⁸Ibid.

this diamond since the spring of 1955.

Baseball had made extensive progress since its inception in 1910 as a college sport. After a rather hard climb up an interrupted slope, the sport reached a firm plateau with its re-establishment as a sanctioned college sport in 1939. The sound foundation was due to an abbreviated conference where by four teams, River Falls, Eau Claire, Stout, and La Crosse comprised the northern section of the State Teachers College Conference. In order to win a sectional title, it was necessary for a team to play a minimum of five conference games.⁹ Also adding to the stability as a college sport, was the practice of scheduling games only with recognized college teams, with no high school or independent teams competing with college men. During World War Two and the Korean Conflict, games were contracted with Camp McCoy but these teams were augmented by ex-college players and professional ball players so that the level of competition was above the high school and independent team level. Vickroy¹⁰ recalls that during the time that Camp McCoy was re-activated for the Korean Conflict, games were played with the camp team and St. Cloud at places other than the home field. The college team was playing their home games in the afternoon and people from the La Crosse area were unable to witness the team play its games. There was a high interest

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

in the Coulee Region to see the Indians play, as the team was composed of many area ball players. 50 games were scheduled for night contests with Camp McCoy furnishing the opposition at Tomah and St. Cloud at Sparta.

Though baseball had progressed to its solid stature of the 1950's, it was not until the fall of 1956 that it received full conference ranking as a competitive sport. In September the faculty representatives of the Wisconsin State College Conference moved that:

The conference adopt baseball as a recognized conference sport. Ratings will be determined by a college playing a schedule of a minimum of eight games in the southern section, and a minimum of six games in the northern section.¹¹

The conference coaches then met in November and made arrangements for sectional divisions with:

A three game play off between the North and South; to be played on a neutral field centrally located to the schools involved in the play off. In the event of a tie within a section a one game play off will be played to determine the sectional winner.¹²

In May of 1957, the Wisconsin State College at La Crosse completed its first baseball season as a

¹¹Meeting notes of the Faculty Representatives of the Wisconsin State College Athletic Conference held at the Wisconsin State College at River Falls on September 14, 1956.

¹²Meeting notes of the Coaches of the Wisconsin State College Athletic Conference held at the Whiting Hotel, Stevens Point, Wisconsin on November 15, 1956.

recognized conference sport with Vickroy completing his ninth year as mentor.

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