

## PLAY BALL! MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL IN BLOOMSBURG

Did you ever dream of seeing major league baseball in Columbia County? It happened once in the past. During the recent American League Divisional Championship series between the New York Yankees and the Detroit Tigers, a few Columbia County long-time baseball fans were reminded of the series played between those same two teams at the Bloomsburg Fair in October 1925.

The two major-league teams were scheduled for a three-game series during Fair week. They played on an improvised field on the racetrack infield in front of the grandstand. Each squad brought to town only the bare minimum of players; the Yankee pitchers when they were not on the mound played in the outfield. Two games were completed; the third day's game was rained out and couldn't be rescheduled because the teams left town for an engagement in Wilkes-Barre. The Tigers won both games, but both were close, exciting contests.

The games were slated at 10:00am each day so as not to conflict with the trotting races held in the afternoons. Apparently, the Fair Board was hoping that the major leaguers would draw folks to the Fair in the usually-slack morning hours. And the scheme worked – the games drew upwards of 10,000 fans each day. At the time, the grandstand capacity was only 2,000, so the other fans crowded the railing around the oval track.

In 1925 the Yankees were in the middle of their storied 1920s championship era. With Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig as mainstays, this was arguably the greatest baseball team ever assembled. In that decade they won the American League pennant six times and were World Series champs three times. In this parade of glory years the lone exception was 1925 when, inexplicably, with the same roster and manager (Miller Huggins) the team slumped to a losing record (69 Wins, 85 Losses) and a 7<sup>th</sup>-place finish out of eight teams.

The Tigers were not as successful as the Yanks in the Roaring Twenties, but they were no slouches either. In 1925 they finished in 4<sup>th</sup> place in the American League, well ahead of the Yankees. Their featured star was 38-year-old player-manager Ty Cobb, who lasted in that dual role for six seasons, 1921–1926.

As it happened, neither Cobb, Gehrig nor Ruth made the trip to Bloomsburg with their respective teams. (The top stars usually did not go on out-of-season barnstorming trips with their teams.) But the two teams did bring a number of genuine first-string players and even some recognized stars. Among them were three future Hall of Fame players: outfielder Heinie Manush of the Tigers, and from the Yankees outfielder Earle Combs and pitcher Herb Pennock. Six of the Yankees were first-stringers in 1925; among them during their careers the six played in an impressive total of 100 World Series games.

The key person in making this series happen was Yankees pitcher Bob Shawkey. He had a connection to Bloomsburg because in that town he had played his first season of organized baseball, on a semi-pro team in the obscure Mountain League in 1910 (no records of that season survive). Somehow he had retained ties to Bloomsburg through his major league career. And he was remembered proudly by former Columbia County teammates and fans; according to the Bloomsburg newspaper he was “the idol of local fans.”

Representatives of the Bloomsburg Fair apparently negotiated through him to bring selected players from two major league teams to the Fair for the series. We don't know what kind of payment was worked out, but it was sufficiently attractive, along with Shawkey's amiable personality, to bring some recognized stars to the little town in mid-Pennsylvania. The *Morning Press* reported on Saturday, October 3, that “after several weeks of effort to get the teams” negotiations had been completed just in time for the Fair the next week.

The two teams traveled from their respective cities by train – their customary mode of travel during the season – and were put up at the town’s principal hostelry, the Hotel Magee. The Tigers arrived the day before the first game, alighting from the 12:25 D. L. & W. (Delaware, Lackawanna & Western) train at the Fifth Street Station. They spent the afternoon pleasantly on the golf links at the then-Bloomsburg Country Club. The Yankees arrived the next day on an early-morning train just before the opening game.

That first game, on Wednesday, October 7, was a “thrilling contest” that went to twelve innings before Bob Fothergill’s long home run to left center pulled out a 7 to 6 victory for the Tigers. Rip Collins, a “big colorful Texan,” pitched all twelve innings for the Tigers, and Bob Shawkey did the same for the Yankees. The lengthy game offered lots of highlights for baseball enthusiasts: each team had 13 hits, the lead changed hands several times, and defensively there were five double plays. There were also notable miscues: the Yankee third-stringer at second base, Josephs, was razzed by the crowd when he committed three errors.

The second game in the series, on Oct. 8, was also close, with the Tigers coming from behind in the ninth inning to win 7 to 5. The Yankees pounced on the Detroit pitcher, Jess Doyle, for five hits, a walk, and five runs in the opening inning. But Doyle settled down and allowed no more runs for the rest of the game, which developed into a pitchers’ duel. The Yankee hurler, Bob Meusel, was in trouble in several innings and allowed two runs in the first inning and three more in the fourth. He pitched out of a bases-loaded no-out jam in the third and generally threw well enough after a shaky start to pull out the Tigers’ second successive victory. When the third game was canceled, the fans were disappointed but the Tigers left town with their heads held high.

The grand idea of the Fair Board was to make a similar series an annual event; the plan was to have the second-place team from each League playing mid-week at the Fair at the same time as the World Series. (The Fair was then held in early October, coinciding with the World Series.) The local paper, the Bloomsburg *Morning Press*, featured its report of the Yankee–Tiger games on its front page beside the report on the previous day’s World Series game between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Washington Senators. (In that era, World Series news was too important to be relegated to the sports pages of the paper.) As far as is known, though, no major-league series was played at the Fair in later years.

Along with the four Hall-of-Famers and other noted players, the Fairgrounds teams also had a few unknowns. Infielders Malone and Josephs are not listed among the Yankee team rosters for 1925 and, in fact, they cannot be surely identified among the complete major-league player lists on the Internet. Other lesser-known players included Pee-Wee Wanninger, a 23-year-old rookie shortstop for the Yanks in 1925 whose major-league career lasted only one more season. His nickname was a natural: he was the smallest man on the field at 5’7” and 150 pounds. The diminutive infielder earned extra cheers from the Fair crowd when he garnered three hits in the first game.

Umpires for the two games were two local men, Raymond G. Rinker, age 39, and Edward J. Splain, age 62. They were ordinary working men, respectively a watch-factory worker and a machine-shop laborer. They were chosen, probably, for their long experience umpiring games for the Mountain League or other local leagues.

The roster and record for each team in the two games are as follows:

PLAYER	POS.	AGE	1925 AVE.	GAME 1			GAME 2		
				R	H	E	R	H	E
YANKEES									
Combs, Earle	cf	26	.342	0	3	0	1	1	0
Paschal, Ben	lf	29	.360	1	1	0	0	0	0

Meusel, Bob	rf/p	28	.290	2	2	0	2	3	0
Schang, Wally	c	35	.240	2	2	0	1	2	0
Malone, ?	3b			0	1	0	1	1	1
Wanninger, P.	ss	22	.236	0	3	0	1	1	0
Pennock, Herb	p/1b	31	.202	0	0	0	0	0	0
Josephs, ?	2b/3b			0	0	3	0	3	1
Shawkey, Bob	p/lf	34	.147	0	1	0	0	0	0
TOTALS				7	13	3	6	11	2

#### TIGERS

Burke, Les	2b	22	.289	0	1	1	0	1	0
O'Rourke, James	3b	30	.293	1	0	0	1	2	0
Fothergill, Bob	rf	27	.353	4	3	0	3	2	0
Wingo, ?	lf	27	.370	1	2	0	1	1	0
Manush, Heinie	cf	23	.302	0	3	0	2	2	0
Blue, Lu	1b	28	.306	0	1	1	1	2	0
Tavener, Jackie	ss	27	.245	0	1	0	0	0	0
Stanage, Oscar	c	42	.200	0	1	0	0	0	0
Collins, Rip	p	29		1	1	0			
Doyle, Jess	p	27					1	0	0
TOTALS				6	13	2	7	10	0

#### SIDEBAR – A LOCAL ‘IDOL’ – BOB SHAWKEY

Shawkey was born at Sligo, PA and raised there in the vast woods of western Pennsylvania. At age 15 he left school to work as a lumberman. As an axeman he developed unusually strong arms, so that on the baseball field he became a power pitcher with a blazing fastball. Entering the major leagues in 1913 at Philadelphia, he was traded to the Yankees in 1915 and remained with the Gotham team for a dozen years.

Shawkey was the ace of the Yankee pitching staff for several years; over a span of eight seasons he averaged 18 wins a year, won 20 games four times, and in three seasons had the team's lowest ERA (Earned Run Average).

At the 1925 Bloomsburg Fair, Shawkey served as player-manager of the Yankee contingent, a warm-up for his year-long stint as manager of the Yankees in the 1930 season.