

# Vintage base ball clubs meet in Bridgton

**By Tom Minervino**  
***Sports Writer***

SOUTH BRIDGTON (July 3): After a fourth straight wild pitch, “Shoeless” Jake Newcomb was getting a bit antsy from his position at shortstop.

“C’mon, Mark. Stop throwing jimjams,” he shouted to the mound as Dirigo Vintage Base Ball Club teammate Mark “Limelight” Rohman readied to throw again.

In the modern game of baseball, the four jimjams would have meant a walk, but not in this base ball (the correct spelling back in the 19th century) game between Dirigo and the Hallowell Red Jackets, Maine’s only two vintage base ball clubs. The teams, which took the field Saturday at Narramissic Farm in Bridgton, played by the rules (and used some of the lingo) of the 1860s when there were no called strikes.

Back in those days, base ball was a popular leisure activity for Civil War soldiers, said Rohman, who founded the Dirigo Base Ball Club in 2005. The team is named after the formidable squad from Augusta — Rohman’s hometown — that dominated play in Maine and New England in the late 1860s.

Games were played on fields much like the one on the grounds of the Bridgton Historical Society’s Peabody-Fitch House. The infield was mowed and relatively level, but the outfielders found themselves knee deep in wet grass with plenty of rough terrain underfoot.

A couple dozen fans — including a three-piece string band playing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” among other tunes — occupied the small space in front of the woods in foul ground along the baselines. Two of those fans, Tom Chandel of Brunswick and Heather Brown of Bridgton, dressed in period garb — her in a dress and bonnet and him in a suit, bowtie and top hat — and set up a picnic of cold chicken, fruit, bread and jam.

“We’ve been big fans of Dirigo for over 100 years now,” said Chandel, also a Civil War re-enactor.

Unfortunately for Chandel’s nice suit, Dirigo was a few players short even after getting two from the Red Jackets. Chandel was recruited to play right field, where he ended up slipping a couple times while in pursuit of batted balls.

“He’s soaked,” Brown said between innings.

“It’s an excuse for my bad fielding,” Chandel said while slicing a watermelon and awaiting his next at-bat. “I appreciate the excuses.”

While the basic premise is the same — hit the ball with a bat, run the bases — the rules of 1860s baseball differ considerably from what one might see on NESN or ESPN today. For starters, there are no gloves in the field. Instead, the ball, roughly the same size as today, is softer, and fielders may register an out by catching the ball on one hop.

Pitchers throw underhand and the mound is 45 feet away, not the 60 feet, six inches it is in the modern game. Bases are still 90 feet apart. A ball is fair as long as it lands first in fair territory. A “fair-foul” hit does not need to stay fair past first or third base, which can lead to some interesting tactics.

“Some of the more experienced players have been known to stand in a left-handed position as though they were going to bat left-handed, then switch their hands at the last moment and hit the ball downward so it goes behind them, bouncing in fair territory first, then back into foul territory to throw people off,” said

Newcomb, a social studies teacher at Medomak Valley High School who currently lives in Biddeford.

“You could hit it fair and make it bounce into the woods over there, then just run until somebody finds the ball,” Rohman said.

While perhaps an effective strategy, neither team was looking to make its opponents rummage through the woods to retrieve any balls. More than anything, the vintage games, which number five to 10 a year, are about having a good time.

George Lapointe of Hallowell, a member of the Red Jackets, said he enjoys reading about history, but has never been involved in re-enactment. He never played baseball as a youth, which he said has actually helped him in the vintage game. He hasn’t needed to unlearn the modern rules, like being able to over-run first base, which can get you tagged out in vintage play.

“It’s just fun,” Lapointe said. “My kids are in baseball. I just like playing.”

Dan “The Professor” Crocker founded the Hallowell team a couple years ago after becoming involved with Dirigo. It all started when he read about an upcoming vintage game in the paper.

“I thought it would be fun for the family to go out and see,” said Crocker, a middle school teacher at Hall-Dale in Farmingdale. “The team that the Dirigos were going to play didn’t show up, so they wanted players from the crowd. My two sons and I played — and it was fun. It was a blast. And I was hooked. It was baseball, which I love, and it was history, which I also love. So I joined the Dirigos.”

After playing some games with the Dirigos, Crocker saw the opportunity to expand and started the Red Jackets to give Dirigo some in-state competition. Many of the other Hallowell players found out about the team through their involvement in Hall-Dale Little League. The team became a good alternative to slow-pitch softball leagues, as it allows the kids to join in as well.

The Red Jackets don’t yet have the replica 1860s uniforms like Dirigo (“They’re half wool, half acrylic, but they try to make them look as real as possible,” Newcomb said.), but the teams are hoping to start a two-team mini tournament in the near future for the Kennebec Cup.

On this day, Hallowell rallied for three runs in the bottom of the ninth inning, but came up short as Dirigo held on for a 22-16 win.

There are over 80 American vintage base ball teams listed on the Vintage Base Ball Association Web site ([www.vbba.org](http://www.vbba.org)), as well as a couple in Canada. For more information on the Dirigo Vintage Base Ball Club, visit [www.dirigobaseball.org](http://www.dirigobaseball.org).

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