



# Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

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Randy Anderson, editor

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## An Unforgettable Baseball Game in Celoron

# The Day the Spiders Beat the Braves



The headline on the sports page of the *Jamestown Evening Journal* on that Wednesday, August 6, 1930, promised an unbelievable event. The very next day, it proclaimed, the Boston Braves (with future Hall of Fame first baseman George Sisler, left) were coming to Celoron Park to play the Jamestown Spiders. This would truly be the thrill of a lifetime for any kid who lived and dreamed baseball.

The talk swelled swiftly all over town about the momentous happening. The Spiders were a highly regarded group of semi-pros, but were given little chance to beat the vaunted Braves. Fans in all walks of life planned to see the contest and game time was set back to 4:30 to accommodate workers who otherwise could not attend.

But even amidst the excitement, anxiety began to trouble the heart of a 14-year-old boy whose cash assets were practically nil. Price of admission would probably be \$1 or more and that was a lot of money for families beginning to feel the pinch of depression.

What to do? We had to see that game! Well, the first thing he and his friend had to do was get to the ball park. So on the big day, they paid 10 cents each to the Jamestown Street Railway Company, and after a transfer uptown, were on their way to Celoron Park. It was a hot day and the breeze on the careening open-air street car felt great. They jumped from the car at Celoron and eagerly took positions outside a wooden fence from inside of which sounds of batting practice emanated.

Occasionally a foul ball would pop over the stands. Any stalwart who pounced on it and returned the ball would be given free admission to the game. But most of the time, bat

met ball solidly and foul balls were infrequent. Desperation now began to flood over the young men. Game time was nearing and the two boys were still outside the ball park.

Some fairly responsible talk had leaked out that access to the ball park could be had by wading in the lake around the huge wooden ice house in left field where harvests of Chautauqua Lake ice were once warehoused. The two mustered all their daring-do and took the first trembling steps into the water to begin the hazardous trek around the ice house. The white sand felt soft on the toes and, with shoes and socks held high, they made steady progress toward the promised land. Water lapped at pants pulled way up. Hearts pounded as the last corner was skirted and there before them in all its glory lay the field resplendent. Oh, happy day!

But safety was not yet insured. A low profile was a must in order to complete the caper successfully. Now, ducking behind the weeds at the edge of the water, the boys hastily donned shoes and socks. Then, they moved furtively between the cars parked in left field. Next, they were casually strolling toward the area near third base where legitimate spectators sprawled on the ground.

So far no heavy hand had grasped the shoulder, no “hey you” shouts had been heard from gate attendants. At last they plopped to the ground and allowed the ecstasy of the moment to envelop them as hearts returned to normal.

Chins cupped in hands and chewing on blades of grass, they settled into a superior vantage point. Stretching before them were the “skun” infield, the clipped green grass outfield and the towering trees ringing the field. Parked cars were also evident in center and right fields as well as left. Sometimes when the Spiders played a drive would bounce off a Ford or a Studebaker. Then a batter was entitled to as many bases as he could get.

Far out in right field was the bath house for swimmers. The fabled Babe Ruth was said to have dented that a few years earlier. Beyond that was the roller coaster and shrieks of delight drifted toward the diamond. Out on the lake a steamer let go a blast of its whistle. Life was good – couldn’t be better.

Then came the realization that those ball players cavorting out there were big-leaguers. Every uniform appeared neat and clean and the athletes looked like tan gods with flashing white teeth. Why, there was Wally Berger, who had just come to Boston that year and was hitting homers galore and batting over .300. He was a giant of a man and really seemed like a nice guy.

And then there was the grizzled Hank Gowdy, the famous catcher. He looked pretty old with skin like leather, weathered by many years of catching under a hot sun. George Sisler appeared to be enjoying himself, too. He was in the midst of another great season and had twice batted over .400. Boy, those guys could really hit! When the Braves took infield practice they threw the ball with authority and enthusiasm as they showed off their wares to the appreciative crowd.

Now the game was about to begin and the familiar Spiders of Manager Billy Webb took the field – Knapik, Peterson, Lapp, Bateman, Stark, McNamara, Alm, and Giunta, Ambling out to the mound was the raw-boned Eric “Swat” Erickson.

“This is just the kind of weather ‘Swat’ likes to pitch in,” a hopeful fan confided to anybody within earshot. The temperature was about 90 degrees.



He added a choice bit of inside information. “I asked him once how soon he took off his winter underwear in the spring when he was pitching for the Washington Senators (photo left). He told me he liked to be warm and always waited for the Fourth of July.” The story caused a ruffle of laughter, which obviously pleased the story teller.

The colorful Swat had never been in finer fettle. He quickly erased the Braves in the first two innings. In the bottom half of the second, the doughty Spiders filled the bases. Destiny directed that Swat should bat at this time and the crowd acclaimed the gangly pitcher as he strode toward the plate. He “took” a couple of pitches, then laced a shot to right center for two bases and three runs scampered home. What a turn of events!

The Spiders had the Braves on the defensive. Swat’s fastball was humming and inning after inning he cut the batters down. The Braves were hitless and scoreless as the game entered the ninth. All 1,784 fans were pulling for a no-hitter as Swat retired the first batter. Then the Braves called on Lance Richbourg to pinch hit. He was an excellent ball player with a batting average over .300. The crowd grew tense. A huge groan welled up as Richbourg sent a bleeder between first and second for a hit.

Swat’s chance for a no-hitter was lost. The next batter reached first base when an errant throw couldn’t be handled. The situation was getting serious when Erickson took a deep breath, struck out Sisler and forced Berger to fly deep to center. The Braves were beaten 3-0.

What a day it had been! Now the sun was diminishing on the lake as the crowd left the ball park. A state of euphoria gripped the young fellow as he and his friend rode home on the open street car jammed with exultant fans.

The day had inspired a natural high that stayed with him until school’s opening in September brought him to earth. Later on, he read in the paper that the Boston club had come to Celoron for a \$2,000 guarantee. Billy Webb, in addition to being the manager, was also the promoter of the event. He realized a profit of approximately \$200. Not too bad!

*Written by Ford Swanson for the Jamestown Post-Journal in 1983.*

# Inductee of the Month



**Eric "Swat" Erickson** was born in Goteborg, Sweden in 1892. He moved to the United States and spent his early childhood in Johnsonburg, PA, before moving to Jamestown where he received all his education.

He began playing pro baseball for Leo's Semi-pros at Celoron in 1912 for \$3 a game. Soon Dallas of the Texas League offered him a contract of \$60 a month in 1913 and he moved into organized baseball. At Dallas the young pitcher Erickson won 20 games in 40 days.

In 1914 he pitched one game for the New York Giants before joining the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League. The Giants then sold him to Detroit, but his career was interrupted in 1917 because of World War I. When he returned to the United States, Erickson pitched for Detroit in 1918 and then was traded to Washington in 1919 where he spent four seasons. His best season was 1920 when he had a 12-16 record.

1914	New York Giants	1 game
1916	Detroit Tigers	8 games
1918	Detroit Tigers	12 games
1919	Detroit Tigers/Washington Senators	23 games
1920	Washington Senators	39 games
1921	Washington Senators	32 games
1922	Washington Senators	30 games
7 years	3 teams	145 games

Erickson left the major leagues in 1922 and played semi-pro ball in Falconer and later with Billy Webb's Celoron Spiders where he had his last great game.

He continued to live in the Jamestown area until his death in 1965. Eric "Swat" Erickson was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 1984.

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