



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street, Jamestown, NY 14702-1192

September 2020

Can you imagine having a Major League Baseball team visit your town to play against a squad of local ballplayers? And that your locals would win? That's exactly what happened on August 6, 1930 when the Boston Braves visited Celoron Park to take on Billy Webb's Spiders. The following article by Ford Swanson, who was in attendance at that game 90 years ago, appeared in The Post-Journal on February 5, 1983.

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 almost unbelievable event. The very next day, it proclaimed, the Boston Braves, in the flesh, were coming to Celoron Park to play the Jamestown Spiders. This would be truly 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 they 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? He had to see that game! Well, the first thing he and his friend had to do was to get to the ball park. So on the big day, they paid 10 cents each to the Jamestown Street Railway Co. and, after a transfer uptown, were on the 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 it would be given free admission to the games. 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 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 derring-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!



1930 Boston Braves

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.

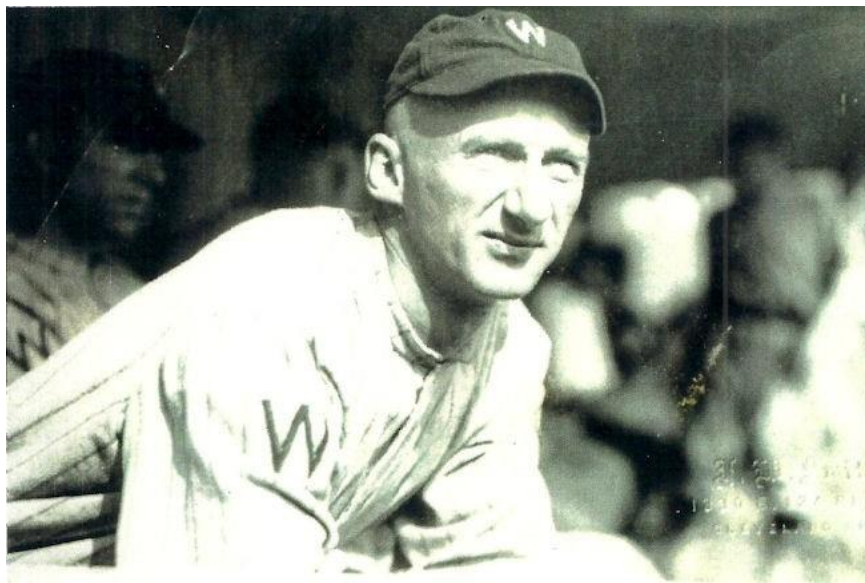
So far no heavy hand had grasped the shoulder no “hey you” shouts could be heard from the gate attendants. At last they plopped to the ground and allowed ecstasy of the moment to envelop them as hearts returned to normal.

Chins cupped in hands and chewing on blades of grass, they had settled into a superior vantage point. Stretching before them were the “skun” infield, the clipped green outfield and the towering trees ringing the field. Parked cars were also evident in center and right field as well as left. Sometimes when the Spiders played, a drive would bounce off a Ford or 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 number of years earlier. Beyond that was the roller coaster and occasional shrieks of delight drifted toward the diamond. Out on the lake a steamer let go on an occasional blast of its whistle. Life was good, couldn't be better

Then came the realizations that those ball players cavorting out there were big leaguers. Every uniform appeared neat and clean and the athletes look like tan gods with flashing white teeth. Why, there was Wally Berger, who had just come up 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 a great season and batting well over .300. 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 took the field – Knapik, Peterson, Lapp, Bateman, Stark, McNamara, Alm, Guinta. Ambling out to the mound was the rawboned **Eric “Swat” Erickson (left).**

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

He added a choice bit of information. “I asked him once how soon he took off his winter underwear in the spring when he was pitching for the Washington Senators. He told me he liked to be warm and always waited for the Fourth of July.” The story drew a raffle 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 came home! What a turn of events!

The Spiders had the Braves on the defensive. Swat’s fast ball was humming and inning after inning he cut the batters down. The Braves were hitless and scoreless as the game entered the fateful ninth.



1930 Jamestown Spiders

Manager Billy Webb is fourth from left in first row.

Swat Erickson is third from right in first row.

All 1984 fans were pulling for a no-hitter as Swat retired the first batter. Then the Braves called on Lancelot "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 good for a hit.

Swat's chance for a no-hitter was forever. The next batter reached first when an errant throw couldn't be handled. The situation was getting serious when Erickson took a deep breath and 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 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 with \$2000 guarantee. Billy Webb, who managed the Spiders and promoted the event, realized a profit of approximately \$200. Not too bad!

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Editor's notes: Swat Erickson and Billy Webb are CSHOF inductees.

For more about Erickson: <https://www.chautauquasportshalloffame.org/ericrickson.php>

For more about Webb: <https://www.chautauquasportshalloffame.org/billywebb.php>