



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street, P.O. Box 1192, Jamestown, NY 14702-1192

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WHO IS JACK HARPER?



Former major-league baseball pitcher Jack Harper was inducted posthumously into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2019. Harper, who had died in 1950, had no direct descendants, any distant relatives were unknown and thus was unrepresented at the induction ceremony. Although there can be no argument that his induction was not warranted, he is arguably one of our least known enshrinees. This newsletter endeavors to shine the spotlight on Jack Harper with a reprint of an interview and subsequent articles by legendary *Jamestown Post-Journal* sports editor Frank Hyde from December 26 and 28, 1946

Jack Harper of Jamestown Pitched to ‘Em All, From Nap LaJoie to Home Run Baker; Broke in Branch Rickey, Sr. as Catcher

One sunny afternoon 41 years ago (1905), manager Joe Miller of the Cincinnati Red Stockings, part of the old 12-team National League, walked up to a lean right-hander warming up on the mound and remarked: “Jack, here is a new man. He is going to catch you this afternoon.”

The tall pitcher broke the rhythmic flow of his preliminary tossing, looked at the rather chunky, obviously nervous rookie up and down, grunted “howdy” and went on with his practice deliveries. Baseball history records that the tall fellow pitched and the short one caught that day.

The pitcher was Jack Harper of Jamestown and the catcher was Branch Rickey, Sr., now owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers!

And so four decades and one year later this corpulent typewriter termite found himself trudging up the snow rimmed walk of No. 4 Hall Avenue to punch the bell marked C.W. Harper.

“Yes sir, that’s how I met Branch Rickey, Sr., one of the biggest men in baseball now,” C.W. “Jack” Harper chuckled as he lowered his lanky frame into an easy chair - a frame as angular as it was nearly a half century ago when his whip-like right arm was the nemesis of baseball names that will never die - Honus Wagner, Frank Chance, Johnny Evers, Joe Tinker, Tim Jordan of Brooklyn, the guy who won the home run crown in 1906 with 12-circuit busts; Willie Keeler, Kid Elberfield, Hughie Jennings, Nap LaJoie, Bill Donovan and the like.

“I don’t recall Rickey ever becoming any great shakes as a grabber, but he was a clean-cut young fellow, smart as a whip.... Graduated from a law school at his home town, Youngstown, Ohio, as I recall it.”

Came From Franklin

Jack Harper was born in Franklin, Pa., and, to steal a term from his colorful description of those years before the turn of the century, “all I knew until I was 17 was oil.”

But he discovered baseball as a member of a little-known town team at Gibsonburg, Ohio, and went on to become a name to conjure with in the big show when the game was going through its “frontier” period.

And it takes a lot of digging, but down in the musty files you’ll find the name of Jack Harper listed with the first American League team to compete in the major leagues under the St. Louis banner. You’ll find, too, that Harper, as stubborn as he is genial, was the first player in history to ever share in his deal price.

That Gibsonburg incident was 51 years ago, more than a half century back in the vale of time and years.

Why, Jim Corbett was heavy-weight champ... The old state league was composed of Schenectady, Gloversville, Binghamton, Troy, Johnstown, Amsterdam, Albany and Elmira... Parson Davies was yelling for a match for his Joe Choynski with Steve O’Donnell for a \$300 side bet... Grover Cleveland was president of the United States and Hornpipe won the Brooklyn Handicap. And right here at home the *Evening Journal* blazoned forth with an ad which read: “Men grope but women see the light and use Lydia F. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound”... Billy Madden of Rochester and Jim Daly of Buffalo were a couple of the top pugs and a feature story in our paper was telling of Stonewall Jackson’s gallant charge into the flank of Hooker’s line at Chancellorsville 42 years before... A green, hungry youngster named Kid McCoy fought the veteran Dick O’Brien 25 rounds to a draw at Boston, Daniel Griswald was president of the Chautauqua County Bank of Jamestown and Clark Hardware advertised, “We’ll not crawfish. If you want to buy a ship’s anchor we’ll sell it to you.” And that was the year PN corsets came out with a new feature, cork protecting clasps and if you wanted to buy a lot you called on Lindsey & Lindsey at the corner of Third and Main.

Yep, that was a long time ago.

Oil Strike to Baseball

Anyway, they brought in a famed field called the Kirkwright strike at Gibsonburg in Sandusky County, 25 miles south of Toledo. Harper, feeling his career lay in the oil fields, packed up his meager belongings, bade goodbye to the folks and struck out for the little Ohio village.

“Men were paying five bucks to sleep on pool tables, steaks were two dollars and a cup of coffee was twenty five cents – it was a typical “Black Gold” boom town.” Harper grinned as he took a prolonged pull on a Christmas cigar and shifted his lean frame in the easy chair.



“They had a ball club at Gibsonburg... I started working out with them, found out I could throw hard with little effort and was immediately called a pitcher. We had a few fellows around who made the big show – Roger Bresnahan and his brother Jim, Irv Week, Art Hoffmeister, to name a few.

“Well, I played a lot of ball through that part of the country during the next three years and finally landed in Montgomery, Ala., in the old Southern League. That was in 1898. The Spanish American war broke out that year and the baseball fans deserted our park to go down to the depot to watch the soldiers go through. Bob Quinn was our business manager and Pop Smith, who ran a plow shop in Columbus, owned the club. No money meant no paydays and as a result no team, so the Montgomery club folded.

Cleveland via Grand Rapids

“Fred Hartzell, the old mainstay of the Philadelphia A’s in the after years, was my roommate. We decided to try Grand Rapids for the rest of the season. I was sold to Cleveland in Sept., 1899 and beat Washington, 3-2, in my first start among the big boys.

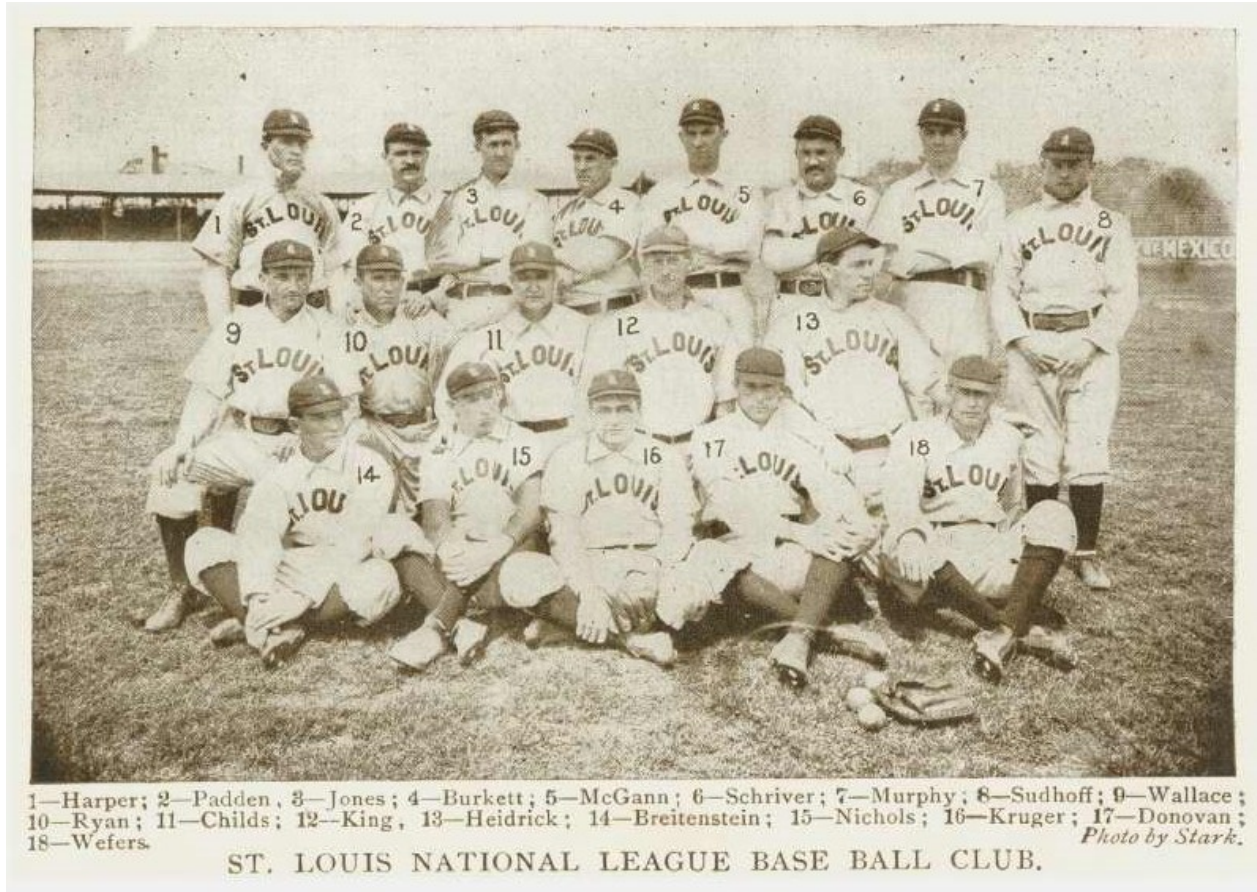
“Just to show you the strides baseball has taken; the Cleveland support was so poor during those years the club never played at home. All of its games were scheduled on the road.

“In 1900 I was sent to the St. Louis Cardinals and a short time later I was talking to John McGraw and he said, ‘Jack, they are going to farm you to Ft. Wayne, but you’ll be back.’ I was, too. Pitched and won so many double-headers down there that the Cards called me up again in 1901 and I won ‘em 23 games while losing eight.”

Jack Harper Held Out Against Herrmann And Became First Player Cut In On Sale

Jack Harper arose, walked around the room and paused in front of a big picture hanging on the wall of the comfortable Harper apartment of 4 Hall Avenue.

“That,” he said putting his hand up on the frame, “is the first St. Louis team in the American League when it was formed in 1901.”



It might be well to pause here and give a thumbnail sketch of the National and American Leagues for the edification of the younger generation and also to show the part the Jamestown man played in the “pioneering” of baseball.

The National League was formed in 1876 and consisted of eight teams, Chicago, Boston, Hartford, Brooklyn Mutuals and Philadelphia Athletics, in the East and St. Louis, Cincinnati, Louisville and Chicago in the West. In 1892 the circuit changed from to eight to 12 teams following the disbanding of the American Association at the end of the 1891 season. The lineup now consisted of Boston, New York, Philadelphia Baltimore, Brooklyn and Washington in the East and Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Louisville and Cincinnati in the West.

Thus the National League went along without opposition until 1900 when Ban Johnson, leader of the Western circuit, changed the name to the American League and demanded recognition. The Nationals refused flatly and did not yield until 1901, bringing about the formation of the two loops as we know them by name today although the roster has changed many times in both circuits.

Jump to Brownies

The picture Harper stood before was the St. Louis entry in the new circuit. The players sporting the conventional “choker” collars, button shoes and middle hair part of the day lounged and stood in street clothes. Harper stands perkily in the last row.

When the American League was formed Harper and six others jumped to the new circuit, catching on with the Browns. The Cardinals immediately got out an injunction and the players went to court prepared to fight their case with one of the top attorneys of their day, Governor Johnson of Minneapolis, handling the defense. The Cards claims were tossed out of the court.

In 1902, St. Louis was beaten by Philadelphia by one game, the closest a St. Louis American League team ever came to winning the bunting until the modern Brownies coped the A.L. flag two years ago (1944).

After serving for two years with the Browns, Harper received “feelers” from Cincinnati. The Red Stockings finally coming out with a good bonus and two-year contract offer. Harper took the jump to Cincy and remained with the Red Stockings through the 1902 to 1906 seasons.

In 1904 he again won 23 and lost eight. His record that season also included two ties and nine shutouts.

Ned Hanlon took over as manager of the Reds in 1906 and started a purge that eventually broke up the club.



Gets First Player Cut-In

One day Garry Herrmann, owner of the Reds and a member of the First National Commission (1903-1920) called Harper into his office.

“Jack,” he said, “we have traded you to Chicago for two players, Hans Lobert and Bob Wicker.”

Manager Frank Chance of the Cubs had approached Harper earlier to ask him if he would play ball for Chicago in the event a deal were made, so the announcement came as no surprise to the lanky pitcher.



“What did you get in cash or on the side, Mr. Herrmann?” Harper queried.

“Not a dime, I told you it is a straight player deal,” Herrmann answered bluntly.

“I don’t doubt your veracity Mr. Herrmann,” Harper persisted “but I don’t believe it is a straight deal and I am not reporting to Chicago.”

Turning his back he walked out, fully intending to quit baseball and return to Oil City where his brother operated a shoe store he controlled.

Herrmann, with visions of one of the biggest deals of the day, falling through, finally called Harper into conference again and asked, “What will you take to go to Chicago?”

“Just \$1000,” the hurler answered.

Turning to his secretary, Herrmann ordered “write out a check to Mr. Harper for \$1000.”

That is how what is believed to be the first player cut-in on a sale price in history of organized ball came about.

Next month’s CSHOF newsletter will have the concluding portion of Frank Hyde’s interview with Jack Harper.
