

DUKE BLAZED THE TRAIL FOR ALLENTOWN BASEBALL

By George Pawlush

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It's impossible to talk about the history of Allentown baseball without acknowledging the life and career of Ernest "Duke" Landgraf. His influence on the American Pastime and his contributions toward cultivating professional baseball in the Lehigh Valley have provided a legacy that has gone beyond his 52 years in the sport and his death in 1965.

Landgraf's presence in Allentown began in 1923 when he assembled an outstanding local semi-professional team that is remembered for beating the New York Yankees that year in a hometown exhibition. He also helped launch three separate Allentown minor league teams. Landgraf concluded his professional baseball career thirty years later with the organization of the North Atlantic League, a small-town minor league that included some regional teams.

Born in Zella Mehris, Germany on January 24, 1879, Landgraf grew up in the Yorkville section of New York City. His career started inauspiciously in 1899 as a fringe outfielder with the Youngstown (Ohio) Giants of the Interstate League. A Youngstown sportswriter nicknamed him "Duke" after Duke Landgraf Von Hessen, a European political figure of that era. The moniker would stick for the rest of his life. It also served as the nickname for some of his Allentown teams.

Landgraf's career as a player was short-lived. He advanced to the managerial ranks in 1902 when he joined Wilkes-Barre of the Pennsylvania State League. His keen eye for baseball talent quickly emerged when he signed a then unknown coal miner, Eddie Walsh, for \$65 a month.

The Pennsylvania State League survived just three weeks and Landgraf and Walsh parted ways. However, Landgraf's baseball sense would later hold true as Walsh registered a 40-16 record for the 1908 Chicago White Sox. This and other career statistics later propelled Walsh to The National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Landgraf bounced in and out of baseball's independent and semi-professional leagues as a manager and owner during most of the early 1900s. He returned to organized baseball in 1913 as the owner and manager of the Danbury (Conn.) Hatters of the Class D New York-New Jersey League. He had mediocre success with the Hatters before the team - and that league - folded in 1915.

Landgraf was back four years later, having purchased the financially strapped Newark, N.J. club of the International League. Hoping to turn a profit, and with a promise of a new stadium by political leaders in Syracuse, Landgraf moved the club to New York. His 1920 Syracuse team was probably one of the poorest Triple A teams of all time, finishing in the International League cellar with a dismal 33-116 record, 74 games behind pennant-winning Baltimore.

Syracuse officials later reneged on their stadium pledge. Lacking a suitable playing field, Landgraf was unable to attract the fans and the revenue to build a competitive team. He needed a reversal of fortune. It came in late 1920 when Landgraf discovered and signed a fine New Jersey sandlot infielder. Scouts were overlooking the player, George "Specs" Toporcer, because he wore glasses.

During the following winter a chance meeting on a train with St. Louis Cardinal owner Sam Breadon gave Landgraf the break he needed, providing him the opportunity to talk about Toporcer and his financial dilemma in Syracuse.

Soon Breadon, who also hailed from Yorkville, offered to help out Landgraf with players, money and even buy half interest in the Stars if the Syracuse owner would send him Toporcer and two other "phenoms" to look at during spring training. Landgraf couldn't resist the offer. Toporcer made the Cardinal team and made major league history as the first non-pitcher with glasses in the big leagues.

After three straight losing years, Landgraf sold the remaining half of the Syracuse team to Breadon. This was a significant moment for professional baseball. Until 1923 all minor league teams were independently owned, as is the case today with Allentown and other Northern League teams.

Now, for the first time a major league team owned and operated a minor league team. Instead of trying to outbid more financially able teams for promising major league prospects, the Cardinals decided to develop their own players. They would accomplish this by creating a widespread "farm system."

At its peak prior to the outbreak of World War Two, the Cardinals had assembled a vast baseball empire, operating 32 teams and contracting over 600 players. Unknowingly, Landgraf had contributed to a major milestone in baseball history.

Fortified with the \$80,000 he received from selling the Syracuse team to Breadon, Landgraf settled in Allentown. He chose Allentown because he liked

the area's bustling baseball environment that included teams in almost every surrounding community. Landgraf saw this is a large potential audience to watch his professional team.

Landgraf's goal was to organize a topflight independent team in the Lehigh Valley. Because the Blue Laws were in effect in the state at that time, major league teams could not play on Sundays in Pennsylvania. However, semi-professional teams like Landgraf's broke the law with impunity. To house his team, Landgraf constructed a stadium, Edgemont Field, on the south side at Susquehanna and Second Streets, now the site of St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church.

The crowning moment for the "Dukes," as they were known, came on September 7, 1923, when they beat the New York Yankees and legendary Babe Ruth in an exhibition game in Allentown. More than 4,000 fans witnessed Dukes pitcher "Scrap Iron" Papsin strike out Ruth with the bases loaded to enable the win. Buster Dell hit a two-run home run in the bottom of the ninth inning to clinch the 8-7 victory.

The triumph helped Landgraf and the Dukes get invited to tour Puerto Rico. They became the first American team to ever visit the island and posted a 46-2-1 record on the tour. Landgraf disbanded the Dukes in 1926.

After another brief respite from the game Landgraf returned to organized baseball in November of 1928, buying the Waterbury (Conn.) team of the Eastern League for \$12,000. Landgraf wanted to move the team to Allentown for the 1929 season. Unfortunately, before he could open the season John H. Farrell,

secretary of the National Association of Professional Baseball, the ruling body for all organized minor leagues, barred him from owning the team.

Farrell cited Landgraf cited for using a restricted player on his semi-pro team some years before. The player, former Chicago Cubs pitcher Claude Hendrix, had been blacklisted by major league owners in 1920 for allegedly placing a \$5,000 bet against his own team. Hendrix, who denied fixing any game, never played again in organized baseball after the Cubs released him in February of 1921.

Rather than sue the Eastern League and organized baseball, Landgraf relinquished control of the team to other Allentown stockholders. He assumed the role of advisor. The Dukes, later renamed the Buffaloes, played in the Fairgrounds. They remained in the Eastern League until the middle of the 1932 season when the circuit folded.

During its three-and-a-half years in the Eastern League, Allentown enjoyed its best success in 1930 when it won the league championship with a 95-75 record. They also won the post-season playoffs, besting Bridgeport (Conn.), four-games-to-one.

Allentown stayed out of minor league baseball until 1935 when Landgraf, then working in the Boston Brave's front office, persuaded Boston owner Bob Quinn to move his Reading team to Allentown. As members of the New York-Penn League (renamed Eastern League in 1937), Allentown also played at the Fairgrounds. They finished last place that year with a 49-87 record. Despite a

vastly improved 71-68 fifth-place record in 1936 the club still had problems at the gate. They moved to Elmira in 1937.

Landgraf spent the 1938 season in Tennessee as general manager of the Kingsport Cherokees of the Appalachian League. He returned to Allentown the next year to help organize the Interstate League. Landgraf became part owner and business manager of the club, one of the circuit's four inaugural members along with Trenton, Sunbury and Hazleton.

Allentown won the first 1939 Interstate League all-season title with a 54-48 record and defeated Sunbury in the post-season playoffs. Sadly, Landgraf wasn't on hand to enjoy the fruits of his labor again running afoul with baseball hierarchy.

On June 17, Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Landis suspended him because of a salary dispute claim by Bert Meissner, a former Allentown player. Landgraf never rejoined team management.

Allentown had a 14-year run in the Class B Interstate League, winning additional league titles in 1944 and 1950. They played their games at Fairview Field (now Bicentennial Park), which was next to the trolley barn.

Landgraf's final hurrah in baseball came in 1946 when he organized the Class D North Atlantic League. Unable to resist the lure of the post-war minor league baseball boom, Landgraf served as its first and only president. He established league headquarters in Allentown.

For the next five years Landgraf kept minor league baseball alive in the small Northeastern Pennsylvania towns of Bangor, Nazareth, Mahanoy City,

Stroudsburg and Carbondale as well as in other towns in New Jersey and New York. But, by the end of 1950 season, the Korean War and the upstart television industry began to take its toll on the entire minor league system.

The war took many of the players while television gave fans a reason to stay home and watch shows like “Milton Berle” and “I Love Lucy” rather than go to the minor league park. The North Atlantic was among several leagues to fold prior to the 1951 season. The Interstate League and the Allentown franchise died in 1952.

Landgraf was honored by National Association in 1951 at its 50th Anniversary Convention in Columbus, Ohio for his contributions to the game. He continued to stay active in Allentown baseball circles until his death at the age of 86 in 1965.

Few men devoted as much time to baseball as he did. Few loved it more. Thanks to diehards like Duke Landgraf minor league baseball today is alive and flourishing in Allentown and in other cities across the nation.

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Editor's Note: George Pawlush, a baseball historian, lives in Cheshire, Conn. He follows the Northern League by attending Waterbury Spirit home games. A native of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Pawlush is a graduate of Wilkes University. He is director of public relations at Greenwich Hospital, Greenwich, Conn.