

The Rise and Fall of the 1914 Atlantic League

By George G. Pawlush

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It was the summer of 1914. The politics of the world were beginning to boil and the start of a major war involving most of Europe appeared imminent.

Here in the United States, thousands of miles away, people were less concerned about politics and more tuned in to their jobs, silent movies, which were now the rage, and the automobile that was becoming popular across the land. Baseball was enjoying a very special hour. The game was at an all-time high with two major leagues and 43 minor leagues operating in 1914.

Minor league baseball was governed by the National Association that established roster and salary limits, a draft system and league classifications. Leagues were organized in five classifications, according to talent: AA, A, B, C and D, with AA representing the best minor league teams. The major league relied upon the minors to provide them a reliable source of talent while the minor league teams needed to sell players to stay in business.

Here in Connecticut minor league interest was keen with Class B Eastern Association franchises in New London, Waterbury, Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and New Britain. Also in operation were the Danbury Hatters in the fledging Class D Atlantic League.

Yes, there was once another Atlantic League. The circuit was formally launched in 1913 as the New York-New Jersey League. Danbury was not one of

the founding members but came aboard shortly before the start of its maiden season when the Paterson club couldn't secure a field.

Prior to the start of the 1914 season the circuit was renamed the Atlantic League to reflect the further reaches of the loop into Connecticut. Joining the Hatters as league members were the Poughkeepsie Honey Bugs, Newburgh Dutchmen and the Middletown Middies in New York and the Newark/Long Branch Cuban Giants, Perth Amboy Pacers, Paterson Coganites and Asbury Park Sea Urchins in New Jersey.

The Atlantic League adopted a 100-game schedule that began on May 20 and finished on Labor Day. The salary cap for each team was \$1200 per month and rosters were limited to 12 players. Teams were coached by a captain (player manager) who also played an active position. The owner of the club, usually also the general manager, procured players and made all financial decisions.

Teams traveled by bus and played all their games in daylight, usually in late afternoon during the week and doubleheaders on holidays and Sunday afternoons. Visiting teams were guaranteed \$50 per game while game receipts for the Memorial, July 4th and Labor Day holiday games – which were usually the largest fan days of the year – were split between the two contesting teams, instead of pooled.

Similar to the Atlantic League of 2001, teams in the 1914 circuit were not affiliated with any major league organization but unlike the present day version were part of organized baseball (National Association). Owners stocked their teams with young prospects as well as seasoned veterans, who were looking for

one last opportunity to reach the major leagues. It was not uncommon for players in even the lowest level Class D leagues to graduate to the major leagues following the conclusion of their seasons in September.

Danbury was making its third try in professional baseball. Previous teams in 1887-88 and 1898 had failed because of poor management and fan support. Danbury fans had the reputation of supporting a winner but would stay away in droves if their club were losing.

The team played in a park that was built by the Danbury and Bethel Railway prior to the start of the 1913 season. During the early part of the 20th century trolley companies throughout the country were widely involved with baseball teams and amusement parks. Railway owners saw these venues as a perfect opportunity to increase their trolley ridership.

The Danbury ballpark was located on the corner of South Street and Shelter Rock Road next to the trolley barn. The park seated 1800 fans and was encircled by a nine-foot fence throughout the outfield. The field entrance was convenient to the trolley tracks.

At the time Danbury was considered the "Hat Capital of the World." Usually, the fans, many of them hat factory workers, converged on the stadium following their work shifts. Weekday games started at 3:30. Admission was 25 cents and for five cents more fans could get a seat in the grandstand that could accommodate 1000 people.

Danbury's general manager was the colorful Ernest "Duke" Landgraf who broke into baseball as a player in 1898. Landgraf would remain in minor league

baseball for 52 years as a general manager, owner, scout and president of the Class D North Atlantic League before retiring from the game in 1950.

The Hatters also had a hometown favorite in the person of John "Boney" Blake, a former baseball captain at Danbury High School. Blake played college ball at Niagara University during the spring and in the summer competed professionally for Danbury. Blake, who later coached basketball at Niagara and St. John's University, was a fleet-footed outfielder who hit .305 and .286 respectively for the 1913 and 1914 Hatters.

The 1914 Atlantic League season opened on May 20 with games in Perth Amboy, Newburgh, Paterson and Newark. The season inaugurals were very special events with mayors in all cities declaring half-day holidays. This allowed workers the opportunity to attend the games or watch the festive parades that preceded the campaign openers.

As expected, Newark got off to a fast start and by mid-season the Atlantic was all but a two-team race between Cuban Giants and Poughkeepsie. The dominance of these two teams all but killed fan interest in other league towns including Danbury, which started slow but came back with a spurt to reach .500 on June 25.

The Hatters continued their climb and on Aug. 16 had risen to ten games over .500 at 44-34. At this juncture they were just six games behind Poughkeepsie (47-25) and Long Branch (48-26), which had moved back to its former New Jersey coast resort home on July 3 due to poor fan support.

Poor attendance became a growing problem in Danbury. Even with a winning team, the early season skid had cost the Hatters dearly. Rumors began to fly whether the Hatters would be financially able to complete the season. Sunday attendance had dwindled to 600 while the weekly games were drawing just 100 fans. The long trips to opponent parks also ate up most of the \$50 guarantee money. Despite threats to fold the team Danbury owner Landgraf kept the Hatters alive.

The final three weeks of the Atlantic season proved to be forgettable for Danbury as they lost 13 of their final 15 games. Poughkeepsie went 18-6 after August 16, nosing out Long Branch, which won 11 of its final 17 games, to cop the Atlantic League championship.

League management was in continuous shambles throughout the season as two league secretaries quit. This caused chaos and a quick settlement of disputes between teams became impossible. As a result some teams failed to make up games lost to weather while others just refused to play some of their late season games. This is reflected in the league's final standings as the final total of games played by each team ranged from Poughkeepsie's 96 games to Paterson's 86.

The writing was on the wall for the Atlantic League's future. Attendance was down, not only in the League but everywhere in America. Approximately 50 minor league teams shut down in 1914, and in 1915 the number of leagues dropped from 43 to 31.

There were changes in consumer demand. Minor league baseball was very susceptible to the universal business depression that began gripping the world. But, the lower minor leagues were more sensitive to these economic changes. The emergence of the Federal League also helped thin out minor league ranks. The Atlantic League folded with nary a whimper on Mar. 1, 1915. This would also mark the end of professional baseball forever in Danbury and conclude the first era of Atlantic League baseball.

It would be another 73 years until Atlantic League baseball came back to Connecticut. The Bluefish were born three years ago and so was another Atlantic League.

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Editors Note: George Pawlush, a Cheshire resident, is director of public relations at Greenwich Hospital. A rabid fan, he is a member of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) and enjoys researching and writing about minor league baseball in his spare time. He is also the state director of Connecticut American Legion Baseball.