

Once Upon A Team

For a brief moment in 1884, small-town Wilmington was in the big leagues. But it was anything but a major success.

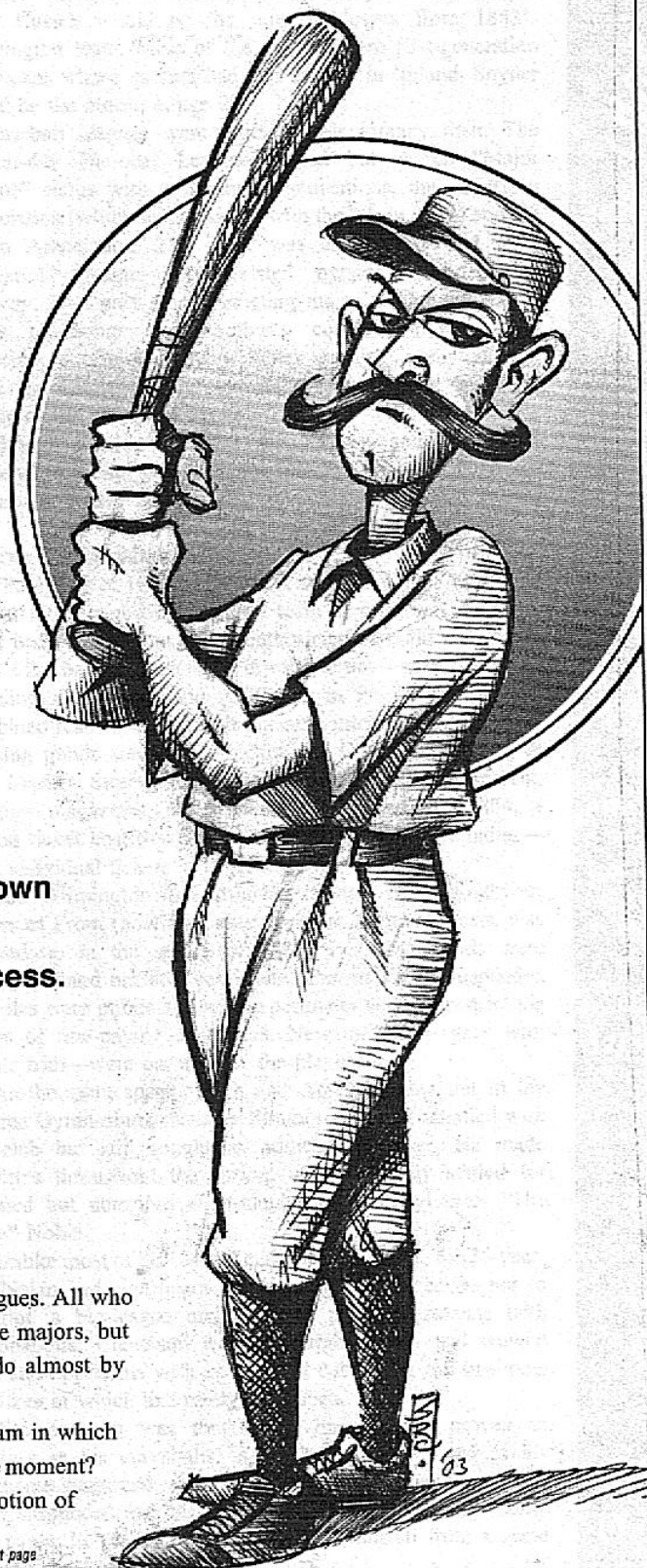
By Jon Springer

Illustration by Steve Cobb

Dreams are the fuel of baseball's minor leagues. All who play share the same dream of reaching the majors, but only a few ever achieve it. Those who do almost by definition will leave most of their teammates behind.

But what if? What if there was a minor league team in which everyone's dream came true, and precisely at the same moment? A flash of magic that allowed not only for the promotion of

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players, but their manager, their stadium and their city—from the minors to the majors in a single fell swoop: A kind of collective dream, achieved on a massive scale.

Believe it or not, it happened here in Wilmington 119 years ago—but the results were anything but dreamlike. In 1884, after dominating its minor league opponents for most of the season, the Wilmington Quicksteps abruptly became Delaware's first and only major league team, and left behind a virtually unassailable mark for futility. Their story is a riches-to-rags tale of a tumultuous and remarkable summer—a team and a city driven and then destroyed by their own dreams of success.

Baseball in 1884

Wilmington's population in 1884 was a little more than 30,000 and growing behind a healthy economy sparked by industrialization. DuPont was making strides in chemicals and explosives, but 1884 would be the year when influential executive Lamont duPont would die in a plant dynamite explosion. Market Street was lively with theaters and saloons, merchants and tradesmen who had more leisure time than ever before. Increasingly, they looked to enjoy the booming popularity of the new national sport.

Wilmington's first professional baseball team, in 1883, finished in last place and nearly disbanded before a minority owner named John T. West rescued the club with a last-minute infusion of capital. The 32-year-old West, described by newspapers of the times as "the liveliest man in Wilmington," owned a saloon on Pennsylvania Avenue but dreamed of becoming a baseball magnate.

West assembled a team of local investors to build a juggernaut for the newly created Eastern League in 1884. He began by hiring Joe Simmons to manage. The 38-year-old Simmons was an 1870s-era professional ballplayer known for his keen eye for talent and an ability to get the most out of players. From '83 Interstate League champion Harrisburg, Simmons secured Tommy "Oyster" Burns, a fiery 19-year-old shortstop and pitcher. Also signed were Charlie Bastian, a smooth-fielding second baseman, and Dennis Casey, a hard-hitting outfielder. Casey brought along

his 18-year-old kid brother Dan, a left-handed pitcher of whom much was expected.

First baseman Emanuel "Redleg" Snyder and catcher Tony Cusick would be the only holdovers from 1883's Wilmington team. Most of the players were first-generation Americans whose parents had fled famine in Ireland. Snyder would be the oldest, at age 29.

Baseball leagues were still in their infancy then. The present-day National League existed but shared "Major League" status with two other organizations, the American Association (which would merge with the NL in 1892) and the Union Association. The latter was created in 1884 as a "maverick" league that existed outside the National Agreement—a pact among existing major and minor league teams to honor one another's contracts. The Union Association offered players better earning potential, but made the league, and its president John Lucas, a sworn enemy of the existing leagues.

Though nobody knew it then, Lucas and his Union Association would play a major role for Wilmington before the season was over.

"The Only Nolan"

The Spring of 1884 was unseasonably cool in Wilmington, but the excitement over the new team in town was palpable. West had gone all out in his enthusiasm to build a first-rate club. Like baseball magnates in other cities—notably, Albert Spalding in Chicago and Al Reach in Philadelphia—West combined team interests with business interests by opening a sporting goods store. West's Sporting Goods Emporium, at 618 Market Street, sold baseball and cricket equipment, sporting magazines, cigars and game tickets. In 1884, a season ticket cost \$10 for 49 home games—\$5 for ladies—with individual tickets at 25 cents each.

The Wilmington ball grounds, located at the southwest corner of Front (now Lancaster Ave.) and Union streets, was gussied up in the spring of 1884. The grandstands were freshly painted brilliant vermilion. Canvas sheets suspended on poles were pulled around the perimeter so as to restrict the views of non-paying customers. New uniforms—grey with purple trim—were ordered for the players.

As the team spent March and April working out in the Warren Gymnasium, manager Simmons seemed satisfied with his club but still sought an additional pitcher. He made inquiries throughout the spring, and eventually settled for talented but notorious right-hander Edward Sylvester "The Only" Nolan.

Unlike most of his '84 Wilmington teammates, the 26-year-old Nolan had significant Major League experience—not to mention a big-league nickname. In previous seasons with Indianapolis, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, Nolan had wowed fans and opponents with an array of curveballs and in-shoots the likes of which had rarely been seen.

The problem was that Nolan himself had proven as baffling as his curveballs. A drinker, carouser, and as his nickname suggested, something of an egomaniac, Nolan had been suspended and blacklisted by baseball employers time and again. In 1881, Nolan had excused himself from a game

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with Cleveland to attend a funeral. As it turned out, he'd just gone drinking. After a year's suspension, Nolan re-entered the majors in 1883 with the Pittsburgh Alleghenys. One night in New York, Nolan was fined \$10 for an undisclosed transgression. He then went on a drinking spree and charged the expenses to the team.

For that, Nolan was fined \$100, suspended and blacklisted for the balance of the season.

Considered virtually unemployable by Major League teams, in the spring of '84 Nolan was at home in Paterson, N.J., managing a saloon, when Simmons recruited him just prior to opening day.

It would prove to be a critical addition.

"The greatest work of my life"

The Eastern League season opened on May 1, and Wilmington wasted no time giving the 1,000 fans in attendance a preview of the season to come. Burns led off the game against the visiting Baltimore Monumentals by getting hit with a pitch: He raced around the bases and scored on a succession of wild pitches before a single batter had been retired. Bastian homered, Dennis Casey and Burns hit triples, and Nolan struck out 10 en route to an easy 26-6 win.

A 10-inning, 8-7 loss to the visiting Richmond Virginians would be the only blemish in Wilmington's 10-game season-opening home stand, and as May wound to a close the Quicksteps had already begun to separate themselves from the pack.

Trenton defeated Wilmington 5-4 on May 26 to forge a tie atop the Eastern League, with both teams sitting at 13-5. Leo Smith, the Trenton shortstop who kept a diary of the 1884 season, noted that "several 10 dollar bills that came north with Wilmington found their way into Trentonians' pockets at the conclusion of play."

They weren't there for long. Wilmington won the next two contests with Trenton to re-take first place and they wouldn't look back. Between June 9 and July 9 they reeled off 19 consecutive victories. The streak included winning back-to-back games over Reading on 9th-inning home runs and a July 4 double-header sweep of Trenton: The first game was played that morning in Trenton and

the second in Wilmington that afternoon before a holiday crowd of 3,000—the largest of the year.

The Quicksteps were a complete package of pitching, defense, speed and hitting. Burns, who'd been named team captain, had emerged as a star, leading the league in home runs, triples and runs scored. Dennis Casey was flirting with a .400 batting average. Bastian was not only the league's finest defensive infielder, but also was hitting around .350.

To everyone's surprise, Nolan stayed out of trouble and became a great fan favorite. Despite drawing the toughest assignments, "His Onliness" was to fashion a 19-5 record against Eastern League teams on the year.

At least some of the credit for that belonged to Simmons, who ran a team virtually free of internal dissention and excessive drunkenness, no mean feat for pro ballplayers of the era. In late July, Simmons called the Quicksteps "the greatest work of my life."

Major Trouble

If anything, Wilmington was becoming too successful for its own good. Crowds that numbered 1,000 early in the year had fallen to 500, 400 or 300 by July. Feeling the fans wanted to see better competition, Simmons arranged exhibitions with major league clubs in which Wilmington acquitted itself well.

Nolan pitched Wilmington to a victory over the New York Mets, who would go on to win the American Association title that year, and when he defeated the AA's Brooklyn Atlantics, he was presented with a silk hat and walking cane from admirers. But while the exhibitions drew well, the team was still bleeding money.

Wilmington was far from the only team having trouble drawing fans in 1884. Baltimore, Reading and Harrisburg had dropped out of the Eastern League. In major league cities like Philadelphia, the addition of another big-league club in the form of Union Association teams was diluting attendance for everyone.

The Union Association was the loser in many of those battles, in part because founder Lucas' St. Louis club was treating its opponents much like Wilmington had its Eastern League competition. By mid-August, both

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Wilmington (51-12) and St. Louis (on its way to a 94-19 season) had clinched their league's respective championships.

A solution to crises for both entities came about when the Philadelphia Keystones of the Union Association disbanded for lack of interest in early August. The Union needed a nearby club to fill the Philadelphia schedule; Wilmington desperately needed to draw more fans and felt that better competition was the key. The Quicksteps agreed to join the league—but only after the UA guaranteed to pay for their travel expenses.

On Aug. 18, Wilmington would officially join the Majors. But not everyone would be around for it.

Comedy of Errors

In its thirst for additional revenue, Wilmington management had either grossly underestimated—or simply ignored—the potential cost of breaking the National Agreement. No sooner had the deal to join the UA been announced than teams from the National League and American Association swooped in like vultures to pick off the best players from the Wilmington roster. Burns and Dennis Casey, the team's two best hitters, jumped to the Baltimore Orioles for sizable pay raises and catcher Cusick departed for Philadelphia.

The Quicksteps won their first UA game in Washington 6-4, but it wasn't long before their depleted resources caught up with them in a comedy of error and misfortune.

Scrambling for players, Wilmington signed a pitcher named Jim McElroy, who was bombed by Washington and afterwards disappeared with his advance money. Burns' loss in the infield forced manager Simmons, who hadn't played in nine years, to suit up in one game to play third base. Dan Casey, stung by the departure of his brother, abruptly left the team.

The Quicksteps' woes continued in Boston, where they were charged a forfeit when their train arrived too late for a scheduled game. The next day, Nolan's gamesmanship proved costly: As Boston outfielder Tim Murnane chased a fly ball, Nolan from the bench yelled "look out for the fence!" causing Murnane to muff the catch in the open field. The umpire noted Nolan's poor sportsman-

ship and informed him he would be fined \$10.

"Make it \$50," snapped Nolan indignantly. "I'll make it \$150!" came the swift reply.

Back in Wilmington, a game against Cincinnati was ruled a draw after the umpire was struck in the mouth by a foul ball and nearly died on the field from suffocation. Fans were horrified by the bloody scene—five men fainted, newspapers said—and just 200 showed up the next day to see Cincinnati win a 6-1 decision.

Lucas' powerhouse St. Louis Maroons then came to town and swept four straight. Fans, who earlier in the year stayed away because Wilmington won too much, were now staying away because they lost too often. The fact that they drew just 200 fans to the final St. Louis game could not have sat well with Lucas, who had likely already made up his mind to renege on his promise to pay travel expenses and simply invite a Western team to replace Wilmington for its upcoming road trip.

Wilmington wouldn't last long enough to find out for sure. On September 15, the Kansas City Cowboys arrived for their scheduled game in Wilmington but the smattering of fans in the stands did not provide even enough money for Wilmington to pay the visitors their \$75 guarantee. Simmons called his men off the field, forfeited the game, and the team disbanded then and there. After two wins and 16 losses as a big-league franchise, the Quicksteps were dead. They would be replaced by the St. Paul Apostles.

Once again, Wilmington players went up for grabs: Bastian and recently acquired pitcher Jersey Bakely departed as members of the Kansas City Cowboys, and Nolan took up an offer to pitch in Philadelphia. Simmons, Snyder and a few others went unclaimed and called it a season. West and Wilmington's directors lost a whopping \$3,000 on the year.

Aftermath

The 1884 Eastern League title in the end was awarded to Trenton—one of only three teams to survive the entire season. The Eastern League would undergo many changes in the coming years but still survives today as the

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The Union Association would collapse after its lone 1884 season, but Lucas' champion St. Louis Maroons would be admitted to the National League. That franchise is better known today as the St. Louis Cardinals.

Of Wilmington's 1884 players, Tommy "Oyster" Burns would enjoy the longest and most productive major league career: 11 years spent mostly with Baltimore and Brooklyn. In 1890, Burns would lead the National League in home runs and RBI.

Tony Cusick, Charlie Bastian and the Casey brothers would likewise fashion big-league careers. Joe Simmons would manage in the minors for several more years.

"The Only" Nolan spent a few more years in baseball, marked by clashes with manager George Wright of Philadelphia. He eventually became a police officer back in Paterson, N.J.

The Wilmington Ball Grounds at Front and Union streets hosted baseball games for another 30-plus years. It was given over to residential development following World War I. A used-car lot stands there today.

John West attempted to launch a new Wilmington baseball club in 1885, but the team was under-funded, poorly supported and relocated to Atlantic City in June. His sporting goods store closed and he left town a year later.

Major league record books show that no team in history compiled a worse winning percentage than Wilmington's .111 in 1884. It is perhaps baseball's safest and most unenvied team record. At the same time, it stamps a misleading memory onto a team that for most of the year had played at an .800 clip, a team that could—and did—defeat some of the finest teams in the land. Guilty of dreaming too big, strangled by the rope they thought would save them, the Quicksteps died penniless and anonymous, victims of their own success, hearing nothing but the echoes of cheering fans.

— Jon Springer is a New York City-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to *Out & About*. He can be reached at pax@akula.com

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