

THE QUEST FOR THE SILVER BALL: BASEBALL IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY IN 1883

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Introduction

The railroad was integral to population growth in the Dakota Territory, and at the same time the spread of baseball. The Saint Paul and Pacific Railway extended its line to Breckenridge, Minnesota in 1872 and later merged with the Great Northern Railroad with backing from magnate James J. Hill. The railroad eventually followed the Red River north through Fargo, Grand Forks by 1880, and eventually to Winnipeg, Canada. The Northern Pacific Railroad reached Fargo in 1871 and bridged the Red River in 1872. Expansion westward through Valley City, Jamestown, and Bismarck approximated the route that today is US Interstate 94.

Local baseball clubs were formed and once teams could travel by rail to neighboring towns, baseball flourished in the Dakota Territory. Moreover, the expansion of telegraph lines, which usually ran parallel to the railroad, also contributed to the spread of baseball in the territory. With improved communication, local baseball nines could now more easily schedule matches with clubs from other towns, and negotiate the financial arrangements, whether it be a set guarantee, an offer to pay travel and lodging expenses, or a percentage of the gate. The second byproduct of the expansion of the telegraph was that now settlers in the territory could receive baseball news from the eastern states. National League scores and standings were printed in newspapers in the territory since the early 1880s.

Up until the early 1880s, local organizers sold subscriptions and teams often passed the hat at games to defray travel, equipment, and other expenses. Within a short time, local teams began hiring outside professionals to improve their club, and needed additional sources of revenue to pay salaries. Once they were able to enclose their grounds with some type of fence, they could begin charging admission (25 cents was the going rate at the time). Early box scores listed the names of game officials such as the umpire, scorer, and someone identified as the "gatekeeper".

Baseball Emerges in the Red River Valley

The first known baseball club to be organized was the Red River Valley Base Ball Club in Fargo in March of 1875.ⁱ A similar organization was formed in Grand Forks in 1879 and the team was called the Dakota Stars.ⁱⁱ Although the two towns likely played baseball matches earlier, 1883 was the first year newspapers in the Dakota Territory side of the Red River provided any detailed coverage of the town's baseball clubs.

The manager of what was now called the Fargo Base Ball club was A.S. Capehart, an agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad. He was able to finance club operations by arranging for weekend excursions between Fargo and the resort at Detroit Lake.ⁱⁱⁱ As early as 1883, people were leaving the big city (Fargo

boasted a population of 10,000 at the time) and going to the lake on summer weekends. The Fargo club played their games on what was known only as "the grounds north of the Manitoba track."

The Grand Forks Base Ball Club was organized in mid-May, 1883. Three committees were appointed; Grounds, Uniforms, and Placing Stock, with the goal of selling thirty shares at \$10 each. The club drafted a set of bylaws and noted "The object of the club is merely to afford amusement and healthful exercise for the young men of the city..."^{iv} Early season games were played at a location described as "the grounds near the freight depot". Later in the season, home games were played at Eschelman Driving Park, a facility used primarily for horseracing.

No league was organized, but the Fargo and Grand Forks clubs arranged matches between themselves and clubs from several other neighboring towns. There were documented games with Larimore, Grafton, and Valley City in the Dakota Territory. The Grafton nine was reportedly "composed partly of professional players, several of whom were at one time members of the St. Paul Red Caps."^v Grand Forks played games with Emerson, Manitoba with both teams traveling aboard the steamer *Selkirk* on the Red River, and Fargo played regular games with neighboring Moorhead, Minnesota. Several tournaments were also organized, each offering prize money to the winner, along with the right to be called the "Champions of Dakota."

Grand Forks dominated local competition, including Fargo, their neighbors to the south. The two teams did not play again that summer after a June 13 contest won by Grand Forks 36 to 7 of which the local weekly newspaper reported "the Fargo club did not bat a ball outside the diamond."^{vi} By late June *the Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer* boasted that the local nine was "the best base ball club of any city in Dakota or Minnesota, which has not yet been downed, and which accepts and challenges all clubs in the twins sisters separated by the Red River or the mighty Manitoba."^{vii}

In late June of 1883, Fargo manager Capehart traveled to the Twin Cities and was able to arrange a match game with the Minneapolis Brown Stockings. The Minneapolis nine offered Fargo half of the gate receipts for the scheduled June 28 match and 5,000 fans were expected as the occasion was the opening of the Brown Stocking's new grounds on 26th street. The *Fargo Daily Argus* reported "Mr. Capehart proposes to take the boys down and make what he can out of the venture." The *Minneapolis Journal* added "The boys [the Minneapolis club] have fitted up the grounds nicely with a grandstand that will hold 1,200 and, as they are on the motor car line, can be easily reached."

The Fargo Blues, as they were sometimes called, boarded a first class Pullman car for their trip to Minneapolis. They purchased new blue suits with white caps which "will give them a much improved appearance on the diamond."^{viii} Club director C.T. Abbott was to accompany the boys "to see that they get their meals and return safely." They even brought a substitute player, Kirkham, "if any of the players get sunstroke or are exhausted by the hard work on the field." The June 28 issue of the *St. Paul Daily Globe* reported "the Fargo base ball club will arrive on the Northern Pacific road this morning, and will make the Nicollet House their headquarters during their stay here. The match with the Brown Stockings will occur at the park of the latter at 3:30. People can reach the grounds by the three o'clock motor. It will be the occasion of the opening of the park."

The Brown Stocking decisively defeated the Blues 26 to 3. The *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, in an obvious snub at their Fargo rivals, ran a front page story of the game. A sidebar, under the heading "Minneapolis Ignorance", took exception when the *Minneapolis Tribune* described the Fargo club as the "crack nine and champions of Dakota." The *Herald* went on to take the city editor of the *Tribune* to task by stating that he "should devote a little time to posting himself on Dakota affairs. If he would do so he will learn that the Grand Forks nine are the acknowledged champions of Dakota, have never been downed, and furthermore, that the Fargo club dare not enter into a contest with them."^{ix}

Grand Forks officials got the opportunity to back up their claim as the "best base ball club of any city in Dakota or Minnesota" when they were able to secure match games with the Browns Stockings and the St. Paul Red Caps. Grand Forks manager Fishleigh went to St. Paul in late June to finalize arrangements for the games, but his report upon his return revealed a bit of overconfidence. He had tried to get a commitment from the St. Paul club for a return game in Grand Forks but, according to Fishleigh, "the captain of the club positively refused to arrange for a game however, saying the Grand Forks boys are too much for them and they would not accept the challenge until they had more practice."^x

Grand Forks was scheduled to play the Brown Stockings on July 4 and the Red Caps the next day. On July 6 the *Globe* reported "The members of the Grand Forks base ball club were registered at the Merchants yesterday" and according the *Herald*, "thousands of dollars were wagered", not that they would beat the clubs from the Twin Cities, but that "they won't get as badly left as Fargo." One report had the Grand Forks club losing to Minneapolis 10 to 6, while another source reported the score as 10 to 7.^{xi}

The St. Paul Red Caps defeated Grand Forks 20 to 10 on July 5. The Dakota club, clad in uniforms of red hose, caps, and belt, white shirts and breeches, with the letters "G" and "F" on the breast of their shirts, actually led 4 to 3 after four innings before the Red Caps broke the game open. The hitting star for Grand Forks was Walter Wilmot who "distinguished himself by a three bagger and a home run. To get the latter he knocked the ball over the right field fence."^{xii} The nineteen year old Wilmot would later have a long career as a player and manager in Minneapolis.

On July 10, upon the teams arrival home from the Twin Cities, the Grand Forks papers provided a detailed injury report. "The base ball club returned today and to say that they are all broke up would express it but mildly. Captain Fishleigh is suffering from injuries received, the ball striking him in the pit of the stomach in Wednesday's game, and yesterday a tooth was loosed by a foul ball. Webster has a sore hand and is generally broke up, while Frank Brown caught a foul tip yesterday in the neck and was obliged to let some other party umpire the game. They say they were in no condition to play after their long trip ... and Captain Fishleigh says the Grand Forks boys can get away with either St. Paul or Minneapolis when the return games are played here."^{xiii}

After Fargo and Grand Forks had difficulty scheduling matches, Fargo's chief rival in the territory became the Eclipses of Valley City, a small town on the Northern Pacific line sixty miles west of Fargo. The clubs split two early season games and played a third in Fargo on July 31 to decide the "championship of Dakota." Fargo won the game 12 to 6 but Valley City accused them of using three members of the Grand

Forks club in disguises and under assumed names. Fargo denied the allegations and there was no information in either of the Grand Forks papers to substantiate the claim.

The Valley City club wrote a letter to the editor of the *Argus* dated August 5 that laid out their evidence and issued a challenge by stating that "any time Fargo wants to play the nine she played in the second game with Valley City, we will accommodate her on neutral ground, with neutral umpire, for any amount desired." That loss, and another a short time later, signaled the end for the Eclipses in the 1883 season. The *Valley City News* wrote "The base ball club, which once aspired to be the champions of Dakota, have virtually disbanded .. and ... have gradually withered and died."

The Silver Ball

Outside of Grand Forks, one of the best nines in the area was the club from Ada, Minnesota. They claimed to be the "acknowledged champions of the diamond in the Red River valley ... and have successfully held the silver championship ball against all contesting clubs." The Ada club traveled to Fargo on July 4 and were beaten by the locals 9 to 8, but because Ada would only put the silver ball on the line in games at their home grounds, they retained the ball. However, Fargo realized \$92 in gate receipts "which was very gratifying to them."^{xiv}

A week later the Grand Forks club challenged the Ada club for the silver ball in a game in Ada. Considerable money was bet in favor of Grand Forks but they lost 18 to 11 and Ada kept their silver ball. The team and its fans were described as "despondent", and immediately rumors began to circulate that certain members of the Grand Forks club threw the game. Club director Smith adamantly denied this in a letter to the editor of the *Herald* on July 11. The loss to Ada still stung nearly two weeks later when the *Herald* reported in a lead up to a game with Emerson scheduled for July 23, that "the boys are determined to recover some of their lost laurels and restore the supremacy of the white plug hats."^{xv}

The Fargo club decided to hold a tournament in August, and the clubs from Ada, Grand Forks, and Valley City were invited. Ada and Valley City declined because of bad blood between them and the host club, so Fargo and Grand Forks played a series of three games for "first and second money and the silver ball."^{xvi} (It was not clear how the silver ball was wrested away from Ada and why it was at stake in this series.) Grand Forks easily dispatched Fargo by scores of 12 to 4 on August 8 and 8 to 2 the next morning. The *St. Paul Daily Globe* reported that "As far as known there was no heavy betting, although considerable money changed hands in small bets on points of detail in the plays. The game yesterday was full of errors, but today the scores were mostly earned." The third game in the series, scheduled for the afternoon of August 9, was rained out.

On August 17 the *Herald* reported that the silver ball, won by the Grand Forks nine at the Fargo tournament, would arrive in a few days. Under the headline "The Championship Ball", the *Herald* reported on September 4 that J. Huet, a jeweler on Demers Avenue, had beautifully engraved the regulation size ball with the following inscription: "Awarded to the Grand Forks Base Ball Club at the

Tournament, August 8 and 9, 1883." The *Herald* went on to say "it is a magnificent trophy and it is hoped the boys will hold it against all comers."

Hosting Aberdeen and St. Paul

By the early 1880s base ball clubs were also being formed in the southern part of the territory, and the team from Aberdeen, in present day South Dakota, "had gained quite a reputation ... by beating several clubs in that section."^{xvii} The Aberdeen club toured the Red River valley in late August, playing the first known games between teams from what would later become North and South Dakota. Fargo reportedly had been strengthened with "new men and steady practice", but Aberdeen, also known as the "Brown County Nine", defeated Fargo 9 to 7 on August 31 and 18 to 6 on September 4.

Aberdeen traveled north and beat Grand Forks 6 to 4 on September 6, but Grand Forks won the final game 12 to 10, which was billed as their closing game of the season. The *Plaindealer* reported that "considerable money had changed hands on the game, most of which was won by the home men" but also added "the Aberdeen boys are good fellows, from first to last." The second baseman for the Aberdeen club was named Cantillon. This most likely was Joe Cantillon, who would go on to have a 25-year career as a player, manager, and umpire in professional baseball.

The *Minneapolis Journal* reported on August 31 that the St. Paul Red Caps had departed on their "northern trip" through the Red River valley and would play at several places including Wahpeton, Fargo, and Grand Forks before returning home. The *Journal* went on to say "The Reds had been greatly strengthened last week, and it is generally conceded that they will wipe the several up-country nines out of existence."^{xviii} The Red Caps began by clobbering Wahpeton 17 to 4 on September 1 before moving on to Grand Forks. Prior to the game, the *Herald* reported "Our boys remember their kind reception in St. Paul in July and no pains will be spared conducive to the pleasure of the Red Caps while here."

Saint Paul beat Grand Forks 14 to 7 on September 3 and again the next day by a score of 27 to 11. The only explanation for the losses given by the *Herald* was "there was something amiss with the home team." One reason for the poor showing by the home club may have been that the Grand Forks boys were reportedly smoking cigars while out on the field, although Captain Fishleigh quickly put an end to this practice when he found out.

The Red Caps completed their sweep of the Dakota Territory teams by taking two from Fargo. Before returning to St. Paul, the Red Caps beat Aberdeen 20 to 9 in a game played in Fargo. After the game, the *Argus* reported that the Brown County nine accompanied the Red Caps back to St. Paul. On September 16, the name Cantillon appeared in a St. Paul box score^{xix} and he continued to play for the Red Caps the rest of the season. Aberdeen's weekly, the *Saturday Pioneer*, reported on September 20 that "Cotillian" had signed with the St. Paul club.

No record has been found of these two teams playing any other games in the Twin Cities, but there is evidence the Aberdeen club did get to St. Paul. On September 19, the Red Caps wrote a letter to the

editor of the *St. Paul Daily Globe* answering allegations that they had been offered \$300 to throw their game against Aberdeen in Fargo. if they needed corroborating evidence to back up their denial, the Red Caps offered " ... there are also men from the Aberdeen club in town."

Conclusion

Grand Forks wound up their successful season by winning two games at the county fair in Crookston, Minnesota. The 1883 season in Fargo, however, was a huge disappointment. On September 17 the *Globe* wrote "The base ball roundup is finished and the Fargo ball players have retired from the diamond with an unprecedented record of defeats. It has been a hard season for them, and they have at last got the swelling out of their heads at a time when it will do them no good. The Red Caps lunched on them two days last week, and there isn't enough of them left to swing a club."

Fargo and Grand Forks would continue to field base ball teams throughout the 1880s and would form the nucleus of independent leagues organized in 1887 and 1891. Fargo had the dominant team in North Dakota during this time because, according to their opponents, they ignored league rules regarding the number of professional players they could carry, and the amount they could pay them. Both Red River valley cities would be key members of the first league in Organized Baseball with teams from North Dakota; the 1897 Red River Valley League. This league would form the foundation of the Northern League which would operate for decades in the upper Midwest.

Notes

i *Fargo Star*, March 31, 1875

ii Protoball

iii *Fargo Daily Argus*, June 27, 1883

iv *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, May 22, 1883

v *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, May 30, 1883

vi *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, June 13, 1883

vii *Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer*, June 23, 1883

viii *Fargo Daily Argus*, June 28, 1883

ix *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, June 29, 1883

x *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, June 22, 1883

xi *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 5, 1883

xii *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 5, 1883

xiii *Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer*

xiv *Fargo Daily Argus*, July 5, 1883

xv *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, July 22, 1883

xvi *Fargo Daily Argus*, August 7, 1883

xvii *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, August 27, 1883

xviii *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, August 31, 1883

xix *St. Paul Daily Globe*, September 16, 1883