

## York, North Dakota's Improbable 1908 Season

The record for the most consecutive games won by a major league team is 26 by the 1916 New York Giants. The longest streak in professional baseball at any level is 29, which was achieved by the Salt Lake City, Utah Trappers, members of the independent Pioneer League in 1987. In 1908, an independent team in the small town of York, in Benson County North Dakota came close, winning 28 in a row. And it took an all-star team of ringers brought in by their rivals from Brinsmade to finally end the streak. This is certainly the top mark for a team ever in North Dakota, and among the best in baseball history.

### The Town of York

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, just 23 people lived in the town of York, North Dakota. However, a century ago the town was a thriving community. York was founded in 1886 and named after York, England by Great Northern Railway President James J. Hill. It was one of several sites along the Great Northern's transcontinental route between Devils Lake and Minot that were named after places in England (the others were Berwick, Leeds, Norwich, Penn, Rugby, Surrey, and Tunbridge ).

Once the rail line came through, York began to grow rapidly. Among the first settlers were several Canadian families and a few from other parts of the United States. The new settlement teemed with activity. However, after three years of drought in the early 1890s, many families moved away and by 1893 only seven families remained. However, the next two years produced a bumper crop and those that remained became prosperous. The town began to grow again and by the early 1900s the population of York was estimated to be nearly 1,000 people.

The town boasted two general stores, a local newspaper, blacksmith shop, two elevators, two livery barns, a drug store, and two implement dealers. There were four churches, a real estate office, a pool hall, two meat markets, a post office, two dray lines, and two lumber yards. York had its own doctor, lawyer, depot agent and telegrapher. The social side of life was not neglected. A town band was formed along with a literary and debating club, and the citizens of York had neighborhood dances and parties. Included in the growth was the construction of a baseball field with spacious bleachers to accommodate the large Sunday crowds that came to watch the town team.

In the early 1900s nearly every small town in North Dakota had its own baseball team. Many teams would import outsiders, usually a pitcher and catcher, from elsewhere to strengthen their teams. York was one of the earliest towns to do this, and one of the first to employ African-American players. In 1901, a black pitcher named Walter Ball, who would later have a successful career in Negro League baseball in Chicago, pitched for the local team.

The 1902 team featured pitcher Wes Martin and catcher Bud Johnson, both black players. In addition, a black man named Robert Crump, who was the town's barber and a long time resident of York, played on the team occasionally as a substitute. Along with a number of local teammates, the team established themselves as one of the top baseball

clubs in North Dakota when they defeated a strong Grand Forks team that summer. York continued to field a strong team over the next few years.

#### The 1908 Team

One of the earliest settlers in the York vicinity was James L. Johnson. He was born in West Virginia in 1861 and filed on a homestead a mile west of the present town in August 1887. His wife Florence and children joined him a year later. Later James moved to town and was the proprietor of a general store, the first business established in York. He was too old to play on the 1908 team, but in a team photo, he was listed as an assistant. However, two of his sons played on the team.

One son, Jake (William Jackson/Jacob) Johnson, was York's regular left fielder. He was born December 13, 1889 and as a young man worked in his father's general store in town, first as a salesman, then as a clerk, and later as a bookkeeper. He married Carrie Ruby and the couple had five children. By the 1940 Census he was employed as a laborer with Federal Rods, which was a government job, either through the WPA or the war time defense industry. Jake died in 1951 and was buried in Benson County.

First baseman Tom (Thomas Earl) Johnson was Jake's older brother. He was born July 7, 1888 in Kansas. Tom also worked in his father's general store but by the time of his WWI draft registration had moved to Glenburn in Renville County where he worked as a clerk for Goldberg Bros. Tom was married to Inez (Carlton) and they had one daughter, Betty. He was inducted into the armed services in December 1917, served overseas, and was discharged in June 1919 as a Private 1<sup>st</sup> Class. Later he and his family moved to Watertown, South Dakota where he was the owner/manager of a retail grocery store. He died there on June 25, 1958.

Pitcher Erwin Fude was born November 25, 1884 in Michigan. His parents were immigrants from Germany. Fude was married to Jenevieve (Jennie) and they had six children. It is not known when he arrived in York, but by 1912 he was living in St. Paul Minnesota and working as a watchman. In 1915 he and his family moved back to North Dakota to the small town of Orr in Grand Forks County. For the next several years Fude managed the grain elevator in the nearby town of Agnes. At some point he moved to Washington State where he died in March, 1964.

York's other main pitcher in 1908 was John Babcock. He was also a Michigan native, born October 26, 1881. He was still living in Michigan at the time of the 1910 Census, but in the 1920, 1930 and 1940, was living in Benson County and employed as a farmer. He and his wife Lila had two children. Babcock died February 1, 1969 in Montana.

The team's main catcher was A.H. (Alfred Henry) Engebretson. His parents were Norwegian immigrants and he was born September 23, 1881 in Grant County, South Dakota. It is not known when he arrived in York, but he remained in the area the rest of his life. He was married to Audrey, and they had a daughter Winifred. At the time of his WWI draft registration in 1917, and the 1920 Census, he was engaged in farming. In the 1930 census his

occupation was listed as auto mechanic and in 1940 he was working as a carpenter. Engebretson died in 1957 and was buried in Benson County.

The right fielder was Elmer Britsch. He was born October 13, 1884 in Illinois and was still living in Illinois with his parents in 1900. By 1910 he was working as a salesman in James Johnson's general store in York. There he met and married Myrtle Johnson, who was the sister of teammates Jake and Tom Johnson, and they had nine children. He then began to farm, first in Peirce County, and later in the area around Knox in Benson County. Britsch died in 1936 at the age of 51 and is buried in Benson County.

The team's center fielder was Bill Simmons. Little is known about Simmons other than he was born in Iowa and at the time of the 1910 census was working as a meat cutter in a butcher shop in York and was married to Belle Ruby, a sister of Jake Johnson's wife Carrie. They had one child, a son named Gordon. Simmons may have died young as by 1915 Belle had remarried and moved back to Iowa. She, Gordon, and her second husband later moved to San Jose, California.

The captain of the 1908 York team was S.E. (Samuel Edwin) Arthur. His parents were of Scotch ancestry and he was born November 17, 1878 in Ontario, Canada. They immigrated to Grand Forks County in the Dakota Territory when he was very young and eventually he became a naturalized citizen. In the 1900 Census Arthur was working as a pharmacist in a dry goods store in Walsh County and by 1910 had moved to Albert, in Benson County where he worked as a druggist. He was married to Alice and they had three children. Sometime during the teens they moved to Mandan and at the time of his WWI draft registration he was working as a bookkeeper with the Missouri Valley Grocery Company. Later he worked as a bookkeeper in a bakery and by 1940 was the city auditor in Mandan. He died December 12, 1957 and was buried in Mandan.

## The Season

As the team was being organized in the spring of 1908, there was nothing that suggested they would have the kind of success they experienced. Even as neighboring towns were signing talented outside players to bolster their teams, York decided to field an all-local team that year. When the team got off to a slow start, the local weekly newspaper, the *York Ledger*, had modest expectations for the team saying they could not stack up to "the old York team" and "the present team may not as yet earned the high reputation in baseball circles a few years ago."

However, that spring there was still great enthusiasm about the team and the upcoming season. On May 21 the *Ledger* reported that many of the town's citizens had donated lumber and other materials for the construction of a grand stand at the ball grounds and that the ladies would be "safely protected by the heavy screening." The women of the community were encouraged to attend games as it was thought "the players use greater exertion to play a good game when the ladies are present to cheer them on to victory."

The team's opening game was a 7-6 loss to Leeds on April 19. The games scheduled for the next few weeks were cancelled due to rainy spring weather, and other than a practice game against the town's second nine, they didn't take the field again until May 17, beating Leeds in a return match 16-3. They split their next two games with Esmond and on Sunday May 31, Rugby defeated York on their home diamond 13-9, leaving the team with a 2-3 record.

York evened their record at 3-3 with a 17-3 win over Mylo on June 5. Earlier that spring the *Ledger* reported that a former York citizen and player, Wes Martin, had taken a job in the Mylo barber shop of Marshall Crump, brother of Bob Crump, York's town barber. Martin was also married to the Crump brothers' sister. The Crumps and Martin were African-American, but their race was not noted in the *Ledger*. Both men were in the lineup for Mylo in this game against York.

York lost their next game to Minnewaukan and dropped two to Brinsmade, and on June 9 their record stood at three wins and six losses. Then the streak began. The team would not lose again for two months until their last game of the season played on August 11.

John Babcock had ten strike outs in a 5-1 win over Brinsmade on June 14, and the club swept two from Mylo at the Old Settler's picnic in Dunseith. Two more wins at Devils Lake brought the winning streak to five games. Their sixth win in a row was over the Bloomer Girls, an all-female traveling team based in Boston. They were named for the bloomers they wore while playing, at the time the latest fashion in women's clothing. To close out June, the club beat Wolford and Minnewaukan at home.

On July 1, they shut out Rugby 4-0 behind 10 strikeouts by Babcock and Erwin Fude had 16 strike outs in a 3-2 win at Towner the next day. They beat Mylo and the Bloomer Girls again in a doubleheader played during the July 4 celebration in Rolette and the next week won three in a row at the Cando fair to push their winning streak to 16 games. Three triples, a double, and a home run by first baseman Tom Johnson helped the club beat Brinsmade 8-5 on July 12 for consecutive win number 17. The *Ledger* noted the game involved a \$400 purse as well as numerous side bets.

Win number 18 came over Granville and number 19 was a 3-2 win in Minot before an estimated crowd of 1,500. The 20<sup>th</sup> straight win was over Mylo, again at Rolette, and then the team left for Kilarney, Manitoba, Canada. There they played, and won, four games against teams "made up from the fastest players from the Canadian ball teams." According to the *Ledger*, the team had now won 25 "without a slip" and boasted "if there is any other amateur team in the state that can come up to this record, they will have to 'show us'".

When the team returned home, the editor of the *Ledger* wrote to his counterpart with the *Kilarney Guide*, asking for more details about the team's games played there. He responded and said that with all the other activity (a fair was held at the time of the ball games) little space was allocated to baseball in his paper. But, in is response to the

*Ledger*, he made a point of saying he wanted to “convey [our] compliments to you having a splendid base ball team. They played a good snappy article of ball and there was no kicking or growling at decisions of the umpire, which is often found among ball teams. The writer wishes you and your team every success and hope to have the pleasure of seeing them play at some future time.”

After their return from Canada, the win streak continued with victories over Minnewaukan (26), and Granville (27) at the Granville fair. The team took a break from competition and played an intra-squad game, dividing into teams of single men and married men at the local grounds on August 2. The following week they defeated Minnewaukan again at the Benson County fair in Leeds for their 28<sup>th</sup> consecutive win.

Two days later, on August 11, the streak finally came to an end. According the *Ledger*, the York team “played a conglomeration of ball players gathered from five or six of the fastest teams in the state, but who were all bedecked with Brinsmade uniforms, and with the help of two umpires, finally beat us ... 8-2” With harvest now fully underway, the team disbanded, and baseball ended in York for the summer. However, they claimed the unofficial amateur championship of North Dakota, and because of their victories in Canada, declared themselves international champions as well.

Note: The team claimed to have won 27 straight with a .882 winning percentage. Further research has revealed they actually won 28 games in a row and had a season record of 31-7, a .816 percentage.

#### Sources

*York (ND) Ledger*

<http://www.net54baseball.com/showthread.php?t=84278>

<http://www.ancestry.com>