

# Not Yet Ready for the Big Leagues

## The Keokuk Westerns, Iowa's First Professional Baseball Team

by John Liepa

Seventeen small boys flattened their noses against the glass door of a Main street establishment yesterday, perused one of the big posters announcing the forthcoming games, and discussed base ball excitedly."

The editor of the *Keokuk Daily Gate City* probably delighted in describing this scene in April 1875. Baseball had a new momentum in town, and the excitement was shared by adults as well as seventeen small boys.

Baseball had long been a staple in the river town, but the game had remained amateur, and Keokuk didn't play in any of the so-called state championships. As late as 1867, the newspaper acknowledged that a recent game "could not be called a 'match game' by any means. Both Clubs are quite young, the members thereof do not make any pretensions to be fully 'posted' in the various rules, regulations, &c. of the game, and the play of yesterday was intended, more than anything else, to awaken a more lively interest in what has become a National game."

By 1872, interest had grown, such that the amateur Keokuk Westerns incorporated and competed for the state championship. In 1874 the Westerns defeated the St. Louis Empires (Missouri's champions) and the Staten Island Base Ball Club, the best amateur club in the East (some thought the best in the nation). The same year they took on the New York Mutuals and the Chicago White Stockings. Although the Keokuk Westerns lost, they had dramatically improved their level of play, with a record of 23 wins and 9 losses. As the 1875 season approached, they set their sights on becoming the top team in the country. The Westerns applied to join the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, which many historians claim was in fact a major league. The bid was accepted.

The Keokuk team's arc from amateur to professional status followed the changes in American baseball. In the mind of the gentleman player, accepting money sullied the sport and would lead to greed and gambling. Other baseballists, however, had envisioned baseball as a business—with salaried players, keen competition, loyal fans, and lucrative profits.

The move toward professionalization began in two steps. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stocking were formed as the first professional team. In March 1871, ten of the more powerful U.S. clubs met in Brooklyn and formed the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP). In the following years, charges surfaced about player control of the NAPBBP, contract breaking, failure to meet engagements, pool gambling, and even players betting on themselves to make money on the side. Although this soured amateurs even more, formation of the NAPBBP signaled that power was now in the hands of the professionals. A short-lived amateur league lasted only a few years.

In Keokuk, according to baseball historian Ralph Christian, two members of the Westerns' board of directors probably had the most expertise in deciding management issues. Both were from prominent families: John N. Irwin, a bank official; and C. L. Williams, in the businesses of coal and grain elevators. The other two directors were William Trimble, who managed a saloon and other interests; and Robert McGuire, perhaps an employee of Trimble or Williams. The articles of incorporation limited the team's debt load to \$1,000. "To fund the team until the season opened in May and to make needed improvements to Perry Park, management canvassed the city [and raised] 'quite a liberal sum . . . to keep the Westerns running,'" Christian writes.

Keokuk's bold efforts to field a professional team, according to Christian, make sense within "the context of 19th-century boosterism and regional rivalries that accompanied the rapid and seemingly boundless national growth of that era. Keokuk for a time epitomized this kind of boosterism." With growing political power, midwestern cities—even Keokuk—argued for relocating the nation's capital to their cities. "Thus, a baseball team competing at the highest professional level nationally could be utilized to boost Keokuk's chances if the capital were to be moved."

The Westerns' next challenge was the most formidable—recruiting professional players to the relatively small city of Keokuk. But by March 20, 1875, a very re-

spectable group of baseballists had assembled. Five from last year's team stayed on, and five new were hired (four of them had played in the NAPBBP). On March 20, the professional Keokuk Westerns met for the first time. Their outfits were white with blue stockings and trimmings, with the letter K on the chest and cuffs. Small, soft-crowned, brimmed hats topped the classy uniforms. As professionals bent on at least breaking even, they agreed to charge admission for the first time: 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children.

In early April, the *Gate City* assessed the strength of the team. Pitcher Mike Golden "has already achieved a reputation for swiftness. During the Winter months he has been in constant practice, and has succeeded in changing his delivery from an underhanded throw to a regular pitch. He pitches much swifter and accurately than ever before." Catcher Bill Barnie "is quick and accurate, a sure thing on fouls, and a splendid second-base thrower." Jim Hallinan showed speed on the base paths and overall good fielding skills. He, Simmons, and Wally Goldsmith were powerful hitters. "The club practices regularly twice a day. . . . They are all in excellent trim, and expect to be able to give the Chicagos something to do in the game here May 3. The grounds have been enlarged and improved [and] a new amphitheatre built that will hold 1,000 people."

The team's potential also caught the eye of larger newspapers, and the *Gate City* eagerly reprinted their remarks. "The St. Louis Democrat says: . . . 'It may turn out that the Westerns do know more about the yarn and leather than a great many imagine.'" "Golden, the pitcher, is one of the swiftest in the country," the *Chicago Times* had commented, "and is said to be very hard to hit. The base ball excitement in St. Louis and Keokuk rivals that which Chicagoans experienced in 1870." The *New York Herald* had observed that the Westerns "are practicing incessantly, and . . . will doubtless surprise somebody before next October."

On May 2, 1875, the day before the first game, the *Gate City* was both anxious and excited: "The fact that the Keokuks have entered the professional arena, and that a large number of professional games will be played here during the season has awakened a widespread interest in the national game hereabouts, never before experienced. . . . The Keokuks and their capabilities have been discussed all over this country."

In its all-important role as local booster, the paper reminded readers that the team had done "more to advertise Keokuk abroad than any other institution in existence. They are a credit to our city, and we trust that our citizens will sustain them in their efforts . . . by turning out in large numbers whenever there is a game here."

Stormy weather delayed by one day the first professional game played in Iowa. The next day, May 4, was a huge disappointment for the 1,500 fans: the team was soundly defeated, 15-1, by the Chicago White Stockings. The *Gate City* looked back a few days to when "confidence was entertained that our boys would give the white hosed gentlemen a close game, if indeed they did not succeed in scooping them. After the first few innings, however, all hope of that was abandoned." Observers blamed "very loose fielding," Golden's "wild pitching," and an "erroneous decision" by the umpire. The catcher was blamed as well: "Barnie threw low to second base every time."

The next day "the Keokuks settled down to business and partially redeemed themselves," though they lost again to Chicago, 7-1. But the *Gate City* had more to worry about. "So far only about half of those who have witnessed the games have paid. Men and boys who would scorn to steal into a circus under the canvas, will sit on an adjacent fence and take in a ball game that other people pay their 25 or 50 cents to see. The fence surrounding the grounds can certainly be kept clear of intruders, and we presume that the owners of adjoining property would readily give authority to drive trespassers from their premises. With the aid of two or three good policemen, we think the gate receipts could be materially increased."

Although the Keokuks scored a victory against the St. Louis Red Stockings, the newspaper pointed out sharp differences: "Our boys are nearly all stalwart, muscular, and some of them rather fleshy, while the Reds are all small, and comparatively slender, and [appear to be] puny, half starved boys. . . . [But] they have been in training all Winter . . . developing their muscle. [Our team's] lofty stature and massive mold are not essential to success in the diamond field."

More losses followed. Commenting from upriver, the *Burlington Hawkeye* kindly reminded its readers that "Iowa ought to be proud of this club. It is the only one of professional standing in the State, and it has never received outside of the city of its birth, the encouragement and recognition its merits have deserved. . . . Let the people of Iowa who are pious and athletic, pray that our Keokuk boys may come back from their [road] trip covered with glory a foot thick."

An ominous pattern was developing: a few good innings at the start, followed by erratic pitching, fielding errors, and finally, blaming the umpires for bad calls. The losses were piling up. "The telegraph brings the announcement of another defeat," the *Gate City* sighed.

"We have been waiting very patiently for the Keokuks to find a nine that they can beat. The indications are now that we will have to keep on waiting until the Washingtons or some little club like that comes along." After yet another loss, the headline said it all: "The Same Old Story." The team "either lacks nerve, or confidence, or discipline, or all three." Patience was wearing thin with the home crowd and the editor, and excuses were no longer enough. "Boys, for Heaven's sake come home and practice awhile."

Less than one month into their season, the Keokuks had a dismal record of 1-10 against professional teams, and 2-1 against amateur teams. Juvenile clubs in Keokuk were considering challenging them. Troubled fans looked ahead to the three home games on June 10, 11, and 12 against the best professional team—the Boston Red Stockings, with a record of 23-0, and its superior pitcher A. G. Spalding. Iowa-born Calvin McVey was also on the Boston team and had established himself as a premier player.

Keokuk club officials informed their fans that the team was being reorganized for the first game with Boston. But despite heavy promotion and team restructuring, the results were the same, a Boston victory, 6-4. The *Gate City* made the best of it. "Everybody was induced to believe that the red legs would be able to make as many runs as they wanted to, and that the Keokuks would be kept so busy chasing leather that they wouldn't have time to do anything else. But that's where they made a mistake. The Bostons themselves were doubtless surprised to find in the Westerns such formidable antagonists. For some reason the attendance was not as large as anticipated. Not over one thousand persons were present, but they were fairly alive with enthusiasm. . . . After the first inning, the game was an exciting one throughout, every inch of the ground being hotly contested."

The close game had surprised Keokuk. The bigger surprise was that Boston decided not to play a second or third game and left the next morning. The Keokuk Westerns filed a formal protest to Red Stockings manager Harry Wright over the "act of bad faith to us, and on account of the disappointment it will be to parties

desiring to witness the game. . . . We will claim a forfeiture of the game."

Boston "evidently got weak in the knees and there is every reason to believe that they entertained a fear of being defeated here as well as in Chicago," the *Gate City* chortled. "The Keokuks went to the grounds yesterday afternoon, placed themselves in position, chose an umpire, and went through the formal proceedings of claiming the game. It was given to them by a score of 9-0, and will go upon the record of their credit." The Red Stockings had a different story; they left early because

of poor gate receipts and their need to rest up before playing Chicago.

On June 17, after another loss, the *Gate City* announced glumly that the directors had disbanded the Keokuk Westerns, principally because a "professional baseball club cannot be sustained here. The population isn't sufficient to furnish the audiences necessary to induce professional nines to come here and play the full series of games. The two last clubs [that played here] undoubtedly lost money. . . . The Keokuks have had a protracted run of hard luck,

and the interest in the game hereabouts has in consequence decreased instead of increasing. The boys accept the situation gracefully and are fully satisfied the managers have done the best that they or anyone else could have done. A number of them have already secured positions in some of the best professional clubs in the country, which demonstrates, the fact that the nine embraced some first-class material."

The directors elaborated: "The club was formed in good faith, the men were hired in good faith, and the Directors acted in good faith to the end—and right here is the time to settle the rumor now afloat, that the club is badly in debt. It does not owe a dollar that it has not the money to pay. Every player received his pay in full up to date, and some were overdrawn, and every debt owed by the club will be paid in full. Its outstanding liabilities [are] now less than one hundred and fifty dollars, and the money is on hand to meet these. We disbanded because the people of Keokuk generally failed to support us. We do not blame them, however, for this. If they did not choose to go to the games, that

KEOKUK GATE CITY, JUNE 8, 1875

**BOSTONS**  
VERSUS  
**KEOKUKS**  
AT  
**PERRY PARK,**  
**KEOKUK,**  
**THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, JUNE**  
**10TH AND 11TH.**