

# Diamond Outlaws

## Piedmont North Carolina's Early Challenge to the Professional Baseball Monopoly

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Every baseball historian knows about the Federal League and the Players' League, short-lived early efforts to challenge the monopoly of major league baseball. Every sports fan knows about Curt Flood and Andy Messersmith, whose court cases that brought about the end of the notorious reserve clause -- which bound every player for life to the team that owned his rights until that team released him, regardless of whether the team had a place for him on any major or minor league roster.

But not many people know that one professional league that arose in the 1930s both challenged the monopoly of all organized baseball -- major and minor leagues -- and was as an early experiment in a free player market.

The outlaw Carolina League -- fathered by semi-pro textile baseball and given birth by the fragmentation of organized baseball during the Great Depression -- did both.

Four main forces came together to make it happen:

First, civic leaders and textile executives needed a community enterprise to keep their workers happy, and to keep them from drifting toward organized labor -- an institution that was disliked as much as organized baseball. "Organized" was nearly a dirty word in the South's mill villages. We can't say whether any of these leaders consciously decided to link the two and make organized baseball the villain, thus predisposing workers to mistrust organized labor. But that's certainly the effect it had. And the

independent teams flourished partly because the league had a common villain.

Second, it required opportunity, which the Great Depression provided. After the crash of 1929, the National Association of Professional Baseball withered to half its previous size within three years. Before the crash it had boasted 26 leagues; by the end of the 1932 season it had only 13. That was a lot of ball players at all levels -- Class D all the way up to Double A -- who were out of work but still bound to the teams that owned their rights under the reserve clause. Naturally, a lot of these players were willing to take a little risk in order to earn their living playing baseball.

Third, it required a solid foundation and fertile soil in which to root. The solid foundation was the experience that civic leaders and businessmen in these small towns gained throughout the 1930s in putting baseball teams together, finding and luring high-quality professional players to play on their semi-professional teams. The fertile soil was the Piedmont section of North Carolina, which by the late 1920s was a hotbed of baseball, every crossroads hosting a semi-professional mill team and many of the larger towns fielding teams in the organized minor leagues. It pumped up enthusiasm for baseball and developed local talent, and it made the area ripe for a big baseball effort in the mid-'30s.

And fourth, it needed an angle. The attractions the team owners flaunted were substantial: A player in organized baseball faced an uncertain future; he might be sent up or down at any time, moving not just from town to town but from state to state, and when the season was over he could be on his own in a strange place, looking for work to get him through the winter. Or he could jump his contract with organized baseball, come to the Piedmont, command a salary equal to what he earned in organized ball, settle there for as long as he liked, be guaranteed an off-season job right in that hometown

and be idolized as a community hero. Tough choice, right?

So the Carolina League was born in the spring of 1936, when parts of two former textile leagues -- the Carolina Textile League and the Western Carolina Textile League -- became convinced they could make a go of running their own full-time, fully professional league, completely outside the control of organized baseball.

Before the independent Carolina League was even a month into its first season in 1936, the boss of organized baseball knew he had a problem.

The upstart independent league quickly had become a threat to the organized leagues. Its teams were pirating away talented ballplayers with the lure of higher wages, more enthusiastic fans, hero status in community life and an off-season career. If the talent drain continued, it might jeopardize the complete control that the organized baseball monopoly had held over players for decades.

Declaring the Carolina League "outlaw" and blacklisting its players, the czar of minor league baseball -- Judge William G. Bramham of Durham, N.C. -- began a campaign to destroy the league.

Over the next three years, the campaign waged by the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues gradually backed the outlaw league into a corner but, by itself, could not kill it. The Carolina League -- born during the devastation that the Great Depression brought onto organized baseball -- would thrive for three tumultuous seasons, fueled by the tight-knit community spirit of Southern textile towns. Fans enjoyed the exciting and often unruly play on the field as much as they relished the cunning back-room tactics that team executives used to get the upper hand on their opponents and on organized baseball. But in their insistence on turning their league into a battleground of wits where they could wage their

rivalries, the Carolina League's leaders outwitted themselves. Ultimately the league would die because the same qualities that made it so competitive in its heyday became fatal liabilities when its day passed.

The South's economy, already faltering in the 1920s while the rest of the country prospered, was knocked flat by the Great Depression. Small North Carolina industrial towns often survived on the strength of one mill, the paternal control of its owners and on the stubbornness of working people raised to fend for themselves.

For many in the working class, life in the textile towns of the '20s and '30s consisted of uncertain work in the mills and the open neighborliness of insular mill villages. On the long summer evenings throughout those years, almost the only entertainment was at the ballpark.

Teams of local textile workers drew hundreds of fans for two or three games per week. Rivalries between neighboring mill towns developed and flourished. Games became community social events, not just entertainment for the masses but a place for prominent men and women to socialize. Players became local celebrities. The schoolboy who could boast that a player was living at his house, eating at his parents' table, or working beside his father in the mill had something impressive to brag about. Mill bosses could hire whomever they wanted; often they gave year-round jobs to capable ballplayers just to keep them in the fold. Some of those players used the opportunity to make careers for themselves outside baseball that would last a lifetime.

Through the early 1930s, spurred by inter-town rivalries, civic leaders became more and more practiced at hiring players off organized professional rosters to play a game at a time, a week at a time, a month at a time. By 1935, hiring a whole team of outlaws for the entire season seemed workable.

By the winter of 1935-36, organized baseball was courting the teams of the textile leagues to join its ranks. Local leaders knew they had a winner, and they wanted to make the most of it.

But they were determined to keep their enterprise independent. It built community spirit -- from which the mills could only benefit -- and it was a convenient outlet for workers to let off steam, which they did at the ballpark with relish and abandon. Baseball was the all-popular national pastime at the height of its golden age. So what if a few of the local baseball stars had to be lured to stay with jobs that required no work? It only made things more exciting when an executive could put one over on his competitor by spiriting some richly talented ringer away from a major league organization and bringing him into town to play a couple of games under an assumed name. It only elevated his sense of shrewd prowess -- and his community's pride -- when he was able to extort more players from that same major league organization in exchange for returning the rising star he had swiped.

Perhaps nearer to the heart of these executives' determination, however, was that textile baseball and the textile industry had an important common enemy. Organization from the outside was the only perceived threat to the local bosses' complete control of their industry and of the people who did the work. And to many workers it had become, after the disastrous General Textile Strike of 1934, an equal threat to their way of life.

After a highly successful 1935 semi-pro season, local textile leagues throughout the Piedmont region were more popular than ever, and the play on the field had risen to levels comparable with full-time professional leagues. Moving textile baseball up into a full-time, regional, multi-city, independent baseball league looked workable. Piedmont textile executives had

a chance to show how much more successful an independent league, with independent owners and independent players, could be than an organization beholden to some outside power that could whisk players off the local team as quickly as it bestowed them. Baseball was their workers' favorite entertainment, and there could hardly be any better vehicle to reassure those workers that their own benevolent employers and local community leaders were the people who knew and would see to what was best for their communities. It also would establish that those leaders -- and, by extension, these Southern communities -- could compete successfully against the best in any enterprise they chose.

Thus, on May 18, 1936, Jake Wade, award-winning sports editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, wrote:

"Today is opening day, you know. It's a new baseball picture for Charlotte and this section. Not organized professional baseball ... but something which may prove just as entertaining and diverting. Certainly, it's a noble experiment, and most engaging.

"Charlotte is in the Carolina League. The league abides by the rules and general plan of organized professional baseball. The ball they hit is standard and bears the league president's signature. The carefully chosen umpires are uniformed, draw regular salaries, work under strict supervision. The only difference is the players are not strictly chattels as in organized professional baseball. They can leave on a moment's notice and go to an organized professional league, but they cannot jump from one club to another in this circuit."

Players in organized professional baseball now had an alternative with full-time pay. They no longer had to move where and when their team owners directed them and play at the salary offered. It was a boon to the players

and fans, who turned up at Carolina League games in numbers that put nearby minor-league organizations in larger cities to shame.

So it's not surprising that the Carolina League was able to attract professional baseball players from all over the country. Many were former major league players. Many others were on their way up and came from Class AA or A1 professional baseball, at that time only one step below the major leagues (until 1946, when baseball's first AAA leagues added another rung to the system). Some came to these Class D-sized towns -- many of which were little more than a crossroads with a textile mill -- for the money, seeking year-round economic security. Others came because organized baseball had cast them out -- suspending them for fighting, drinking or other misbehavior. The league attracted experienced journeyman baseball players in their late 20s or early 30s who had learned every trick in baseball, both legal and illegal.

But the league also incubated its own players. It drew college students and other youngsters who knew they could improve their fortunes in organized baseball if they developed their skills by playing against the seasoned veterans in this fast independent league before casting their lots with particular major league organizations. And it was fertile ground for local players who aspired to bigger venues or who, after moderate success in organized baseball, had dropped out and returned home to Piedmont towns to build new careers and become the heroes of textile mill teams.

So barely a month into the Carolina League's first season, organized baseball had seen enough to know that this league was putting its monopolistic way of doing business on notice. The NAPB took action.

On June 16, 1936, a report appeared in *The Concord Tribune* that baseball players were openly jumping contracts with organized professional

teams to play in the Carolina League, and that organized baseball, based in nearby Durham, N.C., was keeping track of them. The article was couched as a warning from Judge Bramham, president of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues:

"Presence of players on the ineligible list of organized baseball on the rosters of clubs in the Carolina League, an independent organization, has brought forth a warning from President W. G. Bramham calling attention of all players and clubs in the National Association to conditions which exist in this outlaw league.

"Judge Bramham said, 'The Carolina League, composed of Concord, Kannapolis, Salisbury, Shelby, Hickory, Forest City, Charlotte and Valdese, is harboring and playing players under contract or reserved with organized ball. All such players are placed on the ineligible list, and all players and clubs in organized ball are notified that the playing with or against ineligible, or with or against clubs playing or harboring ineligible players, will bring about the ineligibility of any and all players who fail to observe this warning.' "

Like High Point College baseball star Broadus Culler, many of those college players, after a couple of seasons' experience in the Carolina League, went straight to the major leagues.

Joining the veterans and the college players were the same local and area baseball stars who had first made textile baseball competitive. Some of them had organized professional experience but, though still on their teams' reserve lists, had no baseball jobs as organizations scaled back during the Depression. They had returned home for three meals a day and what work they could pick up in the local textile mills; the mills would take advantage of



their talent to build winning teams that would bring the whole mill village together to cheer for the hometown boys.

Behind it all were the men who put together the teams, formed the Carolina League and resolutely kept it independent.

All were prominent businessmen and civic leaders: textile mill owners, textile executives and middle managers, lawyers, doctors, preachers, small businessmen, educators, furniture manufacturers, high school and college coaches.

Nearly every town in the league had to conduct one or more subscription campaigns each season to raise money to pay the players. (At just 25 cents a seat, at least an hour's pay to a mill worker, gate receipts were hardly enough to compete with organized baseball.) Former players and managers Ulmont Baker, Tracy Hitchner, Pat Crowell and Mac Arnett agreed: No one made a penny in the Carolina League except the ballplayers.

Why would businessmen, accustomed to making bottom-line, profit-making operations pay, attempt such a "noble and engaging" experiment? And how could it succeed as well as it did?

The answer lies in civic pride, love of the game, rivalry with nearby towns and, above all, desire to offer Depression-suffering employees and fellow citizens a diversion that would make their lives a little more enjoyable and bolster a public spirit that was ebbing. As Concord's Smith Barrier wrote after the close of the league's final season, "The Carolina independent league was what the people wanted .... that's American democracy." It's likely, too, that a chance to prove the capability of independent Southern leaders to conduct business with the best -- to play hardball with the big hitters -- prodded the important financial backers of Piedmont teams. The league had the roguish appeal of a rebel underdog, and

that, too, lay partly behind its ability to raise money and stay afloat.

Of course, back-room deals were also useful in keeping things running smoothly. Resolving conflict often required a league meeting to determine what would happen, when rules would have made it obvious. Once Concord was caught with more "class men" (professional ballplayers) than the rules allowed; Concord should have forfeited the five games its roster was illegal. But teams wanted to play to their own advantage, and more teams stood to gain from an extra in opponents' records than by having Concord forfeit all the games it should have. So they agreed to split the difference; Concord forfeited only three games.

This was typical behavior for the Carolina League: Every time something came up, the teams had to have a league meeting and do some horsetrading. The idea was to get the upper hand over your rival, but not to put him down so low that his team would fold and hurt the league (and your own opportunity to realize revenue as a share of that opponent's gate).

The rules grew looser and looser, even as they were thought to be growing tighter. Spending on players became more and more lavish, especially as organized baseball recovered from the Depression and grew healthier again. At almost every turn, several teams were on the verge of financial collapse. Finally, all the horsetrading and all the spending took their toll. After a convoluted sequence of events and negotiations, the league's final championship playoff ended on a forfeited game.

Byron Speece became the last outlaw.

When it came time for the 1938 playoffs, Lenoir had gambled away a player; the Finishers had chosen to keep six pitchers on their playoff roster instead of five, and only one catcher. But now that catcher, Joe Palm, was

injured, out for the season. The Finishers argued they should be allowed to sign a replacement for him, and they wanted former Concord Weaver Chink Outen, now playing at Hollywood in the Pacific Coast League. Lenoir had offered Outen enough money to get him to risk the blacklist by joining the Finishers. Concord stood in the way, claiming Lenoir had to live with the players it had chosen for the playoffs. Lenoir manager Bobby Hipps, playing chicken with his former employers in Concord, threatened to withdraw the Finishers from the league if they didn't get a replacement catcher. And if the Finishers withdrew, there would be no playoffs and no playoff revenues.

Kannapolis, too, was going to lose a key player: Eric Tipton was due for football practice at Duke University Sept. 1, and the Towelers would be looking for a way to replace him. Meanwhile, Hickory's ace pitcher, Tracy Hitchner, was out sick, and Concord also needed another pitcher. Everybody had something to lose.

The league directors met to try to figure out these maneuvers. They decided to keep the roster limit at 15, but each club was granted permission to add another player if they didn't already have 15 on the roster. Each team also could make one roster substitution even if it already had 15 men active. Inevitably, the vote would become a tangled issue in the season's chaotic finish.

Then on Aug. 28, after those roster moves had been committed, Concord lost its catcher, which meant this time Concord would have to go begging to the league directors. Earlier in the month, when all clubs had been allowed to add an extra player, Concord had chosen a pitcher. Now Concord quickly changed its mind about which position was most critical to fill. But that would take the consent of the other teams.

The league met again on the last day of August to hash out the matter.

Kannapolis and Lenoir -- beneficiary of Concord's earlier compromise -- consented, but Hickory extracted a top player as a precondition: Concord could have its catcher if the Weavers would lend Hickory one of its top starting pitchers for the rest of the season, returning him next season.

Then during the 1938 championship series against Kannapolis, the Hickory Rebels signed pitcher Byron Speece, but the league directors agreed he was ineligible for the playoffs. Even so, Kannapolis gave Hickory permission to have Speece pitch the opening game, because Hickory officials had advertised that he would pitch, and many fans would be disappointed if he did not play. The incentive for Kannapolis's leniency, of course, was revenue: More fans would show up in Hickory if Speece pitched, and that would swell the Towelers' share of the gate. It was stipulated, however, that Speece would not be allowed to pitch again.

Then, with the Rebels down three games to one, Hickory announced that it would pitch Speece again in the fifth game. Kannapolis officials, of course, protested. League president Wade Ison immediately notified Hickory the game would be forfeited if Speece played. After receiving Ison's message, the Hickory team failed to show up for the fifth game. So the championship series ended on a forfeited game, Kannapolis winning.

The Concord-Kannapolis rivalry -- two towns just 7 miles apart -- had kept the league going. Each town was so focused on the other that it couldn't bear not to be in the same league. That was the glue that held the league together for three years. But it also immobilized the league in the winter of 1938-39 until finally, teams had no choice but to join organized baseball and give up their cherished independence.

When the Carolina League finally disbanded, some of its players went back to playing for mill teams in the various towns where they had settled

down. Others went straight into organized baseball, in spite of Judge Bramham's blacklist and in spite of the NAPB's rules, which held that any player who jumped a contract with organized baseball or played with or against such a player would be suspended for at least one year.

The Carolina League was, finally, a product of hard economic times; the ambitious competitiveness and civic pride of its leaders; and a rebellious loyalty that drew Southern mill people of all classes together and united them against outside control. As such it was a facet of the independent, un-Reconstructed spirit that lingered in the South for a century after the Civil War.

Was outlaw baseball killed by organized baseball, or did it kill itself? Probably a little of both.

Without the drastic contraction of the minor leagues during the Depression, a full-time, professional outlaw league never would have been possible. The dozens of top-quality players who left organized ball and joined Piedmont textile teams -- prompting the move to a full-time, professional independent league -- never would have been tempted to look for work outside organized ball. There would have been plenty of demand for their services, and only the very most undesirable players ever would have become outlaws in the first place. Judge Bramham's black list was ridiculed in the heyday of the Carolina League; but it certainly loomed in the backs of at least the younger players' minds in 1938: If the independent league fell apart, as it was showing signs of doing by early 1938, they feared their participation in it would affect their futures in the hierarchical purgatory of the organized minor leagues, and their prospects of rising to the majors.

The mere fact that the NAPB ignored the black list as soon as the Carolina League disbanded does not prove that the list had no effect; it

shows only that after the league folded, the blacklist was no longer needed, whereas the talented players of the Carolina League were.

But the Carolina League did have a strong hand in its own demise. In fact, the very behavior that helped make it a success also helped wreck the league. Spending freely in open one-upmanship and competition against each other and against organized ball, outlaw teams brought in the players who gave the league both of its main reputations: high-quality play and roguish behavior. Fans loved both, at least in the beginning. The league's roots in textile baseball -- players literally rubbing shoulders with fans at work, eating at their tables at home -- gave it a homespun appeal that no organized baseball franchise could equal. And the quality of baseball played by these highly paid players is beyond dispute; salaries that were highly competitive with organized baseball's Class A leagues -- at the time just two steps below the majors -- were drawing Class A-quality and even better players, particularly as long as jobs in organized ball were scarce.

At its most successful, the league represented an attractive balance of popular, colorful veterans such as "Struttin' Bud" Shaney, young collegiate athletes like Broadus Culler and local boys like "Coddle Creek" Taylor. But when the appealing younger stars began abandoning the league, leaving mostly disgruntled veteran outlaws behind, the tone changed. Fans idolized players less and resented them more, and the constant fund-raising needed to support the team began to look less like a grand, community-spirited civic enterprise and more like payoffs to surly, greedy players whose unruliness already had gotten them kicked out of organized ball. As the minor leagues came out of the Depression, higher and higher salaries were needed to keep the kinds of players that had made outlaw baseball possible at such a high level. Soon rising salaries and declining fan enthusiasm became a matter of simple

mathematics; the costs rose too high to sustain, even for teams that were outdrawing their organized baseball neighbors by four or five to one. The chaotic rule-changing that eventually became necessary to help teams survive only hastened the inevitable end.