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THE INTER-SOCIAL LEAGUE:
1943 SEASON

By WES SINGLETARY

Through its ongoing task to support every war in which the United States has been a participant, Baseball has gained chauvinistic recognition for its morale boosting, which in turn, has enhanced its claim to being the national game.¹

Such recognition does not fall upon "organized" baseball alone. During World War II, the long hours served working at shipyards and in defense factories by many citizens rendered the game an almost essential means of relaxation and entertainment. Regardless of the quality presented, the demand for baseball was extremely high in wartime America. However, due to limited communication, organized baseball was unable to reach the amount of people it does today. This was particularly true in the South, where the major exposure to big-league baseball had been spring training. With the wartime relocation of all spring training sites to the north, as the result of fuel and travel restrictions, many southern cities and towns had only their local amateur leagues to turn to.²

Tampa, Florida had long been a winter home to baseball, its principal occupant being the Cincinnati Reds. With the 1943 pullout of the Reds came the realization that big time baseball would remain a remembrance of the past until the war was over. Citizens of Tampa, many working tiresome shifts at shipyards or in cigar factories, were as baseball hungry as any in the nation and were not about to do without it. Consequently, they turned out weekly, in numbers ranging from 1500 to 2000³, and witnessed their own brand of baseball; the Inter-Social League.

The Inter-Social League was made up primarily of Latin players living in both Ybor City and West Tampa. Their games were played on Sunday afternoons at Cuscaden Park in Ybor City⁴. The League was comprised of four teams, Centro Asturiano, Cuban Club, Loyal Knights and the Italian Club, which were all sponsored by well known mutual aid societies and social clubs of the same names. League play had begun in 1938, with the Italian Club proving dominant by winning three of the first four championships.

The 1943 season featuring the Italian Club promised to be a great year. The Italian Club however had lost many of their top players to the service and other defense related endeavors. As such, when the start of the season was trumpeted in the Tampa Tribune, the Cuban Club and Centro Asturiano were listed as co-favorites.⁵

That prediction proved accurate as the two teams raced to early season victories and exchanged the league lead time and again. By midpoint in the season the teams were locked at identical 6-2-1 records, the lone tie coming in their first head-to-head meeting.⁶

The season was marked by player shifts and managerial changes primarily due to conflicts in work schedules. The Loyal Knights club suffered through two such changes in the early months of the season.
When the original manager of the Knights was obligated to resign, Marcelo Maseda, a sure hitting second baseman for Centro Asturiano, assumed the Knight's reins. However, Maseda proved to be a short lived helmsman as he quickly returned to the Asturians. Maseda, who would go on to play for the Atlanta Crackers of the Southern Association as well as the Class A Tampa Smokers remembers the league for its competitiveness and would later coach again at the University of Tampa.

In early August, Arnold Holmes, who had been leading the Loyal Knights, left town to join the Marines and Louis Piniella, a well known pitcher with an excellent mind for baseball, became the new leader of the cellar dwellers. Upon arrival, Piniella quickly inserted himself into the Knights starting rotation and an immediate improvement was noted. Piniella also brought with him his brother-in-law, hard hitting Joe Magadan, to help man the outfield and to provide some needed punch on offense. These additions to the Knights helped improve their record significantly and ended their year on an up note. Piniella and Magadan would also prove to be gifted in rearing baseball playing sons as "Sweet Lou" Piniella, the manager of the Cincinnati Reds and David Magadan, the New York Mets third baseman, have grown into quality major leaguers.

The season came to a close on September 26, with the Asturians, who had gradually pulled away from the others, winning the regular season championship. The Asturian's catcher, "Big" Manual Fernandez, was named the regular season outstanding player. Fernandez however, was unable to participate in post-season play as he was inducted into the Navy. As a catcher, Fernandez was "terrific" with the bat as well as the glove and played minor league baseball with the Tampa Smokers and others upon returning from the service.

League playoffs then commenced with the second and third place teams vying to win the best 3 out of 5 games, and the winner moving on to play the Asturians in a best of seven "little world series". As the games were played only on Sunday afternoons, the tournament continued into the latter part of November.

In the playoffs, the Cubans, relying on strong pitching by their duo of Charlie Cuellar and Alston McGahagin and the slugging of first-baseman Benny Fernandez (the brother of Asturian catcher Manual), bested the Italians thereby earning the right to face the Asturians. Charlie Cuellar, who in the playoffs was rebounding from a hard-luck season, was a pitcher of some talent and later pitched for the Class A, St. Petersburg Saints, of the Florida International League. Benny Fernandez, like his brother Manual, went on to play and manage in minor league baseball. He was a first baseman of such merit that "if he were playing today, with his glove and hitting, would almost certainly be in the big-leagues".

The series proved to be much the same, as the Cuban Club continued its strong end of season run. Centro Asturiano, with Willie Paz behind home-plate substituting for Manual Fernandez, and the hot hitting Marcelo Maseda, jumped out to secure the series lead with an opening game victory. However Maseda, who in the past had hit McGahagin so regularly that the latter took to throwing at him when he came to bat, and his teammates could only watch as the undaunted Cubans battled back to sweep the next four games and capture their first Inter-Social League crown.
While the quality of play in this league and others like it was never assumed or presented as being that of major league, it nevertheless provided good baseball and served the purpose of detouring the minds of the local citizenry away from the larger events at hand. The relaxation provided by the game made the effort of returning to the job not quite as taxing. This in itself, was -a purpose well served; and perhaps gives us yet another indication of why so many "true" Americans believe the last eight words of the "Star Spangled Banner" to be "and the home of the brave ... play ball".  

ENDNOTES


4 Id.

5 Tampa Tribune, March 15, 1943.

6 Tampa Tribune, May 17, 1943.

7 Maseda.

8 Tampa Tribune, August 8, 1943.

9 Tampa Tribune, August 29, 1943 and Maseda.

10 Maseda.

11 Id.

12 Tampa Tribune, September 26, 1943.

13 Maseda.

14 Id.

15 Id.

16 Tampa Tribune, October 17, 1943 - November 29, 1943.