

1983 - Wiffleball Blast from the Past

Legend of the Blue Ribbon Babys

Before the nation had heard of the World Wiffleball Championship ---- before the more famous Blue Ribbon Builders, Dud's Gang, and The Sure Things ---- before Franz Lidz of Sports Illustrated, or wiffleball in Spain ---- a dominant team rose up in the early 1980s, dispatched all of its competition for three straight years, then disappeared as quickly as it had arrived on the scene.

In 1982, the Homeboys were coming off of their first world championship, and were thought to be invincible. With already legendary power hitter Mark 'Gator' Waumans and future hall-of-fame outfielder Scott Ermeti returning to the lineup, the Homies looked like a shoo-in for a second world title.

Unfortunately, that title would have to wait a long four years. For flying under the radar -- lurked a team so formidable -- that they lost only one game in three years.

In 1982, friends Larry Grau of Normain Park and Jim Bottorff of 1980 World Champion College Park, merged to form one team. They also drafted Larry's Ball State roommate Jim Wiesjahn and his friend Dave Steinhilber. These pickups were somewhat random, more a function of the boys' ability to bring and drink beer, than for any perceived wiffleball prowess. With the roster set, Larry and Jim went off to the mall, in quest of team t-shirts. Inspired by Wiesjahn's love of cheap brew, they picked out four medium-size white t's from the sale rack, each with the Pabst logo. The shirts read: "Blue Ribbon Babys."

In the 1982 tournament, the first at Baker Park, the Babys won three straight games, taking them to the winner's bracket championship. (In the second game, they upset the world champion Homeboys, knocking them into the loser's bracket.) Three hours later, the Homies had swept through the loser's bracket and were back in the championship against the Babys. The Babys again edged the Homeboys 9-8, to win the World Crown.

So, was the '82 victory a fluke, or were the Babys really a team for the ages? Experts were not impressed. The Homeboys went into the 1983 tournament a heavy favorite. In the Babys first game, the critics looked like they were right. A young Normain Park team, led by Mishawaka pitching legend Randy Usenick, knocked the Babys into the loser's bracket in the tournament's first game. The Babys would now have to win six consecutive games to regain the title.

And then, something happened that would put the Babies on the wiffleball map forever.

They began to hit home runs.

And not just your normal wiffleball outpouring of wind-aided dingers. The Babys hit so many home runs, so often, and so far, that their competition that day could do nothing but sit back and watch in pure astonishment. They won their first game in the loser's bracket 21-1, their second game 35-4, and their third game 19-0.

This brought them to the Homeboys --- for the loser's bracket championship. The former champion Homies had also been beaten by Normain Park and were in a bad mood.

It wasn't even close.

The Babys won the game 22-7, putting them back in the championship. They would now have to beat Normain Park -- twice -- to win the title.



In the first game, the Babys destroyed Normain 37-2. In the final game, the Babys led 22-0 in the bottom of the second inning, when opposing batter Usenick walked into the outfield and began shaking the Babys' hands.

It was over! An unprecedeted "no mas" from the winner's bracket champs.

When the dust had cleared, The Babys had finished with an incredible 93 home runs --- Wiesjahn 25, Stein 25, Grau 24 and Bottorff 19. (All-time home run phenom Waumans finished fifth in home runs with 6.) In a single game that day, the team went through the batting order almost three times -- hitting an unbelievable 11 consecutive home runs. The devastation was so complete, the Commission, in 1984, adopted a 15-run rule and reduced the number of innings per game from seven to six.

In 1984, Bottorff and Stein were absent, but Grau and Wiesjahn led the Babys to a third championship, defeating Rose Park in the championship game.

In ensuing years, Grau and Bottorff made several more attempts at the title. But the magic was gone.

Since then:

- * the Homeboys won their second title in 1986.
- * Dave Steinhilber moved to Michigan, rarely to be seen again.
- * Grau joined the Homeboys in 1988.
- * Bottorff joined the Homeboys in 1994, and
- * in 2000, Wiesjahn came out of retirement to join the Homeboy clan, then featuring three entire teams of former Homeboys and friends.

All four former Babys are now in the hall-of-fame and Dave Steinhilber was voted the Player of the '80s. Unlike the still active and competitive Homeboys, however, the three-time champs were now but a team for the ages.

Or were they?

In 2003, Wiesjahn, Grau, Stein and Bottorff reunited, together again, 20 years after their unforgettable three-peat. Yes, they had out-grown those medium-size t-shirts. Yes, they had no skills. And yes, their best player was Jim Wiesjahn's 14-year-old son, Nick.

Nevertheless, there they were ---- the first three time world champions.

The Blue Ribbon Babies -- back in 2003! □