

## **The Westfield Wheelmen & 1880s Vintage Base Ball**

The Westfield Wheelmen are the rebirth of a town team from Westfield, Massachusetts from the year 1886. In the late 1870s to early 1880s the team was known as the Westfield Firemen and from 1887 until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century known simply as the Westfields. At that time many small to mid-size towns had a “town team” that would often be the major form of summer entertainment and for a town like Westfield, with an east-west and north-south railroad stop it would become a favorite and convenient stop for major barnstorming professional teams. Amongst the fan favorites and perhaps best known were African-American team the Cuban Giants, which were always welcomed and felt safe coming to town.

From baseballs earliest days until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the rules of baseball were constantly changing. As player’s skills improved and equipment evolved the game was in constant evolution, rules had to be changed to keep up. Some “vintage” clubs prefer to play the American Civil War baseball style of play commonly referred to as a “gentlemen’s” simply because the rules called for the pitcher to pitch underhand and make the pitch hittable. As the skills improved so did the desire to win more often than not and so the game started to become aggressive with an importance of winning...aided by the fact the fans or known as “cranks” introduced “wagers” and by the mid-1870s the professional game came about with side arm throwing. By 1884 the game was becoming modern. All restrictions to pitching were removed and the pitcher could throw overhand at alarming speeds...as long as the catcher could handle the speed with his lack of leather or equipment. Rules were constantly being tinkered with to control the game. As the pitcher improved and catchers gear improved there was less scoring and the game became boring. It would be time to tweak the rules, add balls to the count, control the distance the pitcher was pitching from and players would “get around” certain rules and all of a sudden the scores would jump...almost too much. It would be time to calibrate. By 1886 the “gentlemen’s” game was gone in favor of a rough & tough, spikes high, brawling & boozing game. Professional ball player were often described as “ruffians” and although the money was good then too it was not the type of profession parents wanted their sons to aspire to. Besides, the money they earned would be wasted away quickly during the off-season and rarely saved or invested.

But no fear, the Wheelmen are not 100% like that but have been known to have spirited matches but in the end we are a brotherhood of ball players stuck in 1886 that live for the game with a desire to make sure it lives on.

### **Basic Rule Difference of 1886:**

There are seven balls and three strikes. The batter is awarded a base after seven balls.

There is just one umpire, positioned 10-15 feet to the side of batter.

The umpire is always addressed as "sir" by the players.

Bases are loose at each location and filled with sand, sawdust or hay.

Batters request a "high" or "low" strike zone before their at-bat. "Low" zone is from the belt to the knee, the "high" zone is from the belt to shoulder. Pitcher must throw in area requested by batter to earn a strike.

Foul balls are not counted as strikes.

A hit batsman results in a dead ball, with no base awarded. The pitch is ruled a ball.

There is no infield fly rule.

Any foul tip caught by catcher is an out, regardless of the count or number of outs.

Fake throws and "quick" pitches are legal. The pitcher, for example, can fake two throws to first base then quickly deliver the pitch to the batter.

There is no pitcher's mound or rubber. There is a pitcher's box measuring four feet by six feet, outlined in chalk. The front of box is 50 feet from center of home plate. The pitcher must remain entirely in the box on each pitch.

Dropped third strike: If a catcher drops a called or swinging third strike, runners in a forced position (runner on 1<sup>st</sup>...etc) must move ahead or be subject to a force out, regardless of how many outs exist.

The Gentleman's Ruling: In the event an umpire is not able to have a clear view of a play, he can request a "Gentleman's Ruling". Players involved in play tell what transpired and the call can be reversed. The umpire also has the option to ask for input from fans in the stands.

### **Today's Game: Westfield Wheelmen vs Whately Pioneers**



Westfield Wheelmen



Whately Pioneers