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The Hartford Dark Blues

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Robert Ferguson (1845-1894) was tough, as Hartford would come to find out. In the summer of 1873 Nat Hicks, catcher for the New York Mutuals, foolishly argued with Ferguson during a game in which Old Fergy was acting as umpire. After a few moments of name-calling and insults, Ferguson, whose no-nonsense umpiring philosophy was, “make ‘em play ball and keep their mouths shut,”¹ grabbed a bat and ended the dispute with one swing, fracturing Hicks’s arm in the process.

Hartford came to know Bob Ferguson in 1875 when he signed a contract to manage and play third base for the city’s entry in the National Association (1871-1875), America’s first professional baseball league. The Hartford Dark Blues had entered the league the previous year under the auspices of Ben Douglas Jr. This was the 24-year-old Middletown native’s second attempt at running a professional team in Connecticut. His first had failed miserably in 1872 when the Middletown Mansfields couldn’t survive a full season in the National Association. Finding it impossible to draw sufficient support in a city of only 11,000 residents, Douglas was forced to disband the team in mid-August with empty coffers and a dismal 5-19 record.

Aware that the National Association still desired a club between New York and Boston so visiting teams could layover midway, Douglas was convinced that Hartford was the answer. Early in 1874, he gathered many of Hartford’s most prominent businessmen, including Morgan Bulkeley, to sell them on the benefits of professional baseball in Hartford. They responded enthusiastically, pledging \$5,000 toward the new ballclub. Douglas was named corresponding secretary for the club, an important and time-consuming job in the days before formalized league schedules and telephones. Gershom Hubbell was elected president. Hubbell’s baseball experience included running the amateur Charter Oaks, Hartford’s first organized club, which he founded in 1862. The Charter Oaks were state champions from 1865-1867, before ceasing operations in 1870.

The Dark Blues, whose uniform stockings were just that, finished next to last in their first professional season. Worse than their failure on the diamond, the players mortified Hartford’s more genteel residents with their lack of decorum off the field. Much of the blame for the team’s embarrassing conduct fell on captain and center fielder,



1876 Hartford Dark Blues. Back row: Tommy Bond, Candy Cummings. Middle row: Tom Carey, Everett Mills, Bob Ferguson, Bill Harbidge, Tom York. Front row: Dick Higham, Jack Burdock, Jack Remsen, Doug Allison.

Lipman Pike. In these early days of baseball, the team captain's responsibilities were similar to that of today's manager. Pike took a laissez-faire approach to managing, convening few practices and, as the Hartford Post reported in July 1874, allowing his men to "cling to their love for strong drink, for a round of pleasure at the hours when they should be abed."

Intent on remedying the shameful situation, the Dark Blues turned to Ferguson, the most authoritarian captain in the game. In addition to being an excellent fielder and solid hitter, Ferguson was an upstanding citizen. At a time when not many ballplayers could say the same, he was a teetotaler and scrupulously honest. However, he was also a domineering, dictatorial captain with a violent streak. Al Spalding, the premier pitcher of the era, who went on to found the sporting goods empire that continues to bear his name, described Ferguson's leadership in his memoirs, America's National Game: "He was no master of the arts of finesse. He had no tact. He knew nothing of the subtle science of handling men by strategy rather than by force."

Ferguson surely improved discipline on the Dark Blues ballclub in his first season in Hartford, but his overbearing ways proved divisive and the team quickly gained a reputation for bickering, or "growling" in the 19th-century vernacular. When the team was losing, or even winning, he found it difficult to keep his temper in check. As the Chicago Tribune reported, if anyone on the Hartford nine committed an error, "Ferguson [would] swear until everything looks blue." He was particularly rough on second baseman Jack Burdock, who on more than one occasion heard his captain publicly threaten "to ram his fist down Burdock's throat."

Some players tolerated their captain's tyrannical leadership. Others, however, refused to comply. Whenever they found themselves the subject of Ferguson's bullying, shortstop Tom Carey and center fielder Jack Remsen did not hesitate to yell back. Burdock and pitcher Arthur Cummings, on the other hand, often sulked; they sometimes feigned sickness and played half-heartedly, or not at all. Despite a talented squad and a record of 54 wins and 28 losses, the Dark Blues' lack of unity confined them to second place behind Spalding's Boston Red Stockings. (These particular Red Stockings were the forerunners of the Braves who played in Boston through the 1952 season before moving to Milwaukee and then Atlanta.)

In 1876 Hartford became the smallest of eight cities invited to join a new, more financially stable professional baseball league. The National League (the same National League in which today's New York Mets play) was organized to address the myriad economic and gambling problems that led to the demise of the National Association after the 1875 season. Morgan Bulkeley, who had become president of the Dark Blues in 1875 after Hubbell retired from the post, was named the league's first president. Hartford harbored high hopes of taking the reform league's inaugural pennant. Al Spalding, now a member of the Chicago White Stockings, later to become the Chicago Cubs, told the Chicago Tribune that Hartford would "no doubt share some of the laurels, and it would really astonish some Chicagoans could they hear the manner in which this club is extolled in Hartford... The support given the club by the people of Hartford is of the most liberal character considering the size of the city, and is from the very best class of people."

The Dark Blues debuted in the National League on April 27 in Brooklyn against the New York Mutuals. Through four innings, they played like the championship contender they were supposed to be, as star pitcher Tommy Bond limited the Mutuals to one hit and Hartford built a 3-0 lead. Things went awry in the fifth, however, as the Dark Blues committed four successive errors and the Mutuals waltzed to an 8-3 victory.

The club righted itself with nine consecutive victories before the powerful White Stockings arrived in town to play a three-game series at the Hartford Base Ball Grounds, the Dark Blues' state-of-the-art ballpark located at the corner of Hendricxsen Avenue and Wyllys Street, adjacent to the still-standing Church of the Good Shepherd. An 800-seat pavilion behind home plate provided a covered seating area for stockholders and season ticket holders. On top of the

pavilion was a tower with a domed roof and seating for the scorers, a telegraph operator, and one reporter from each city paper. Underneath were spacious clubrooms for each team. Tiered general admission bleachers stretched down the foul lines, and there was plenty of room for patrons' carriages to be parked deep in the outfield, as was the custom. An eight-foot fence surrounded the entire grounds, which held approximately 9,000 fans. Gambling and the sale of liquor were strictly prohibited.

Against the favored White Stockings, whom the Hartford Times labeled "dignified, pompous, [and] conceited," Hartford took two of the three games. These wins moved the Dark Blues into sole possession of second place, just two victories behind Chicago. Until 1882, wins, not winning percentage, determined the league standings. This was an important distinction since in these sometimes disorganized early days of baseball, teams often played an uneven number of games.

Despite their success on the diamond, the Dark Blues struggled financially as a depressed economy shrank attendance. Searching for ways to increase revenue, Morgan Bulkeley engaged in a fierce battle with Hartford's telegraph operators, who during home games posted inning-by-inning scores on bulletin boards outside their offices. Believing this practice was keeping paying customers away from the actual games, Bulkeley banned Western Union operators from the grounds. The telegraph company refused to comply, however, and sent in an employee whose job was to record the result of each inning on a piece of paper and toss it over the fence to the operator stationed outside. When Bulkeley saw this, he commanded the young boy who was acting as a runner between the telegraph company's "inside man" and the telegraph operator outside the park to disregard the note. Ignoring the command, not the note, the boy took off on a dead run. Bulkeley ordered the police to seize him, but the young lad eluded the slow-footed officers, frustrating the team president.

Back on the field, Hartford hosted three games against the hapless Cincinnati Red Stockings, losers of twelve straight. Ferguson took this opportunity to rest Tommy Bond and give his diminutive backup, Arthur Cummings, some work. In his National League debut, Cummings stifled Cincinnati on a three-hitter as Hartford won 6-0. This masterful performance prompted Ferguson to proclaim, "God never gave him any size, but he is the Candy."² The nickname "Candy," which meant "best" in 19th-century slang, stuck for the rest of Cummings's life. Candy Cummings was later enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame, mostly to honor his claim as the inventor of the curveball.

Even when his team was playing well, Ferguson's temper continued to get the better of his judgment, leading him to holler at his players frequently during games. These public rebukes fueled a simmering dissension that was just waiting for something to ignite it. The trigger came in the form of an 8-2 loss in the second game of the Cincinnati series. This humiliating defeat at the hands of a club that would finish the season with just 9 wins outraged the Hartford Times:

There is something rotten in the Hartford club... These players are paid big salaries and they have no business to let petty jealousies and bickerings interfere with their play. If one of them gets his 'nose out of joint' over some real or imaginary grievance, he shows his spite by mugging on the ball field. One complains because Captain Ferguson talks too much and refuses to play his game; another declares he won't back up Cummings; and somebody else, likely enough, is miffed because the hands of the South Church clock are not clapped every time he makes a passable catch. The men are hired to play ball—not to play baby... [Emphasis in the original.]

Although Boston Red Stockings' manager Harry Wright had heard that "hardly two men in the Hartford nine are on speaking terms with all the others," the club momentarily got past its growling to take the final game from Cincinnati. Over the next two weeks they reeled off six victories in a row thanks mainly to the spectacular pitching of Tommy Bond, who threw three shutouts and two one-hitters during this stretch. Realizing the immense value of Bond, Hartford quickly dropped the idea of signing a new pitcher and contracted him for the 1877 season. When word of Bond's new contract hit the streets, the joy in Hartford was palpable.

As Hartford departed on a long western tour, the Cincinnati debacle was a distant memory. After stops in Louisville and Cincinnati, the club arrived in Chicago (Chicago and St. Louis were the furthestmost western cities in the National League until 1958 when the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants moved to Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively) having won 12 of its last 13 games. The first game between the two pennant contenders was on Independence Day, which in 1876 was celebrated with extra fervor since it marked the nation's centennial. A raucous crowd of 12,000 was on hand, some having purchased grandstand seats at three times the standard 50-cent charge. The rowdy throng loudly cheered the White Stockings' arrival, but some fans went overboard, igniting firecrackers and even firing pistols. The game itself featured no offensive fireworks as Tommy Bond and Al Spalding both tossed shutouts through six innings. In the seventh, Hartford pushed across the game's only runs, scoring three times off Spalding with the help of two critical Chicago errors.

Back in Hartford, 1,000 people had gathered at the Dark Blues' headquarters awaiting word from Chicago. The scores were received three innings at a time. The first two bulletins, covering six innings, showed all zeros. The final dispatch ignited a grand celebration. After sending a congratulatory note to Ferguson, a giddy Morgan Bulkeley provided a sumptuous spread in the clubrooms and ordered a load of fireworks. Later in the evening, Hartford celebrated the Dark Blues' victory and the nation's hundredth birthday with a grand display of pyrotechnics launched from the club's headquarters and the Hartford Times office.

Two days later, with 2,000 supporters assembled outside the Dark Blues' headquarters, weakhitting Jack Remsen led off the second game in Chicago with a rare home run, giving Hartford a lead they would never relinquish. Tommy Bond's curveballs were especially effective on this day, even fooling the umpire, who often called them strikes even when they broke well out of the strike zone. The final score was 6-2.

The Dark Blues were now just a single victory from sweeping the mighty White Stockings and taking a share of first place. To prevent this, Chicago's captain Al Spalding sent versatile first baseman Cal McVey to the pitcher's box to stop the surging Hartford nine. McVey came through against Hartford just as he had earlier in the year, holding them scoreless for the first seven innings as Chicago cruised to an easy 9-3 victory.

Despite the loss, the Dark Blues remained upbeat as they traveled to St. Louis, poised to continue their winning ways. Rumors, backed by the flow of gambling money, were rampant that the Browns, hoping to keep the pennant away from Chicago, would lie down for Hartford. This hardly proved to be true, however, as St. Louis swept the series behind the fabulous pitching of George Washington Bradley who hurled three shutouts, one of which was the National League's first no-hitter.

The three losses to St. Louis quickly erased the benefit of the hard-earned victories in Chicago. When they returned home, the Dark Blues weren't in first place as the Hartford Courant had predicted during the road trip. In fact, they weren't even alone in second place, as St. Louis had drawn even. The excitement that had enveloped the city three weeks earlier had completely evaporated. In a startling display of apathy, only 200 people bothered to attend the Dark Blues' first home game in nearly five weeks.

As Hartford continued to fall off Chicago's pace, more trouble arose. In a 13-4 loss to the Boston Red Stockings on August 19, Tommy Bond struggled while Bob Ferguson committed several errors at third base. After the game, the Hartford Courant reported that the star pitcher had accused his manager of "crooked work."

Bond's allegation was shocking. A charge of throwing games was serious business, especially when leveled against Ferguson, who had a spotless reputation when it came to gambling. In America's National Game Spalding said of him, "Robert Ferguson was... a man of sterling integrity and splendid courage. He knew all about the iniquitous practices which had become attached to the game as barnacles to a ship, and he was sincerely desirous of eradicating them... Could it have been possible to eliminate gambling by physical demonstrations, Robert Ferguson would have cleared the Base Ball atmosphere of one of its most unsanitary conditions at that time...."

Ferguson wrote to the Hartford Times, denying all charges, pronouncing “each and every one false in every particular” and saying they were made with “a malicious purpose.” A day later, in the same newspaper, Bond recanted his statement, saying his charges “were entirely unfounded, and made in a moment of excitement, and I cheerfully acknowledge the wrong I have done both to the club and its manager, and make this the only reparation in my power.”

Despite the casual retraction, the ill will between the two men lingered until finally Bond informed Bulkeley that he wouldn't play with Hartford so long as Ferguson was captain. Forced to choose between the two adversaries, Bulkeley annulled the remaining portion of Bond's 1876 contract and released him from his 1877 commitment. Incredibly, less than three weeks after the initial charge, all connections between the Hartfords and their brilliant pitcher were severed.

On the field, Ferguson quickly deployed Candy Cummings in the pitcher's box. Despite pitching well enough to keep Hartford on the margin of the race for the pennant, he couldn't prevent the White Stockings from taking the championship with a 7-6 victory over Hartford on September 26. Hartford closed the season with a nine-game winning streak that gave them second place over St. Louis. Several Hartford players produced excellent individual statistics. In his abbreviated season, Bond amassed 45 complete games, 31 wins, and a 1.68 earned run average (ERA). Cummings posted 16 victories, a 1.67 ERA, and 5 shutouts. Right fielder Richard Higham put together a 24-game hitting streak while batting .327 and tying for the league lead with 21 doubles.

These personal accomplishments notwithstanding, lack of team harmony was the root cause of the Dark Blues' failure to capture the pennant. With Ferguson's constant badgering and the resulting backlash from his men, Hartford's record suffered. Still, if the Dark Blues could have just managed to beat a part-time pitcher named Cal McVey, the National League pennant would have landed in Hartford. The strong Iowan, who started only six games for Chicago, won all four of his starts against Hartford. These victories provided the winning margin for the White Stockings who finished just five victories ahead of the Hartfords.

The 1876 season was the Dark Blues' last in Hartford. In hopes of better gate receipts, Morgan Bulkeley moved his club to Brooklyn for the 1877 season, forever removing Hartford's status as a major league baseball city. The club's finances were no better in its new location and the club was dropped from the National League at the end of the season. Bulkeley himself soon severed his ties with baseball. In 1879 he became head of Aetna (which his father had founded); a political career followed. He was elected mayor of Hartford, served four years as a controversial governor of Connecticut, and was a U.S. senator from 1905 to 1911. He died at age 84 in 1922. Robert Ferguson also managed the team in 1877. After the Dark Blues were disbanded he played for Chicago, Troy (New York), and Philadelphia, ending his career in 1883. He died in 1894 at age 49.

Since the Dark Blues' departure after the 1876 season, only minor league clubs have called Hartford home, none since 1952. Only an active imagination, aided by a tour of the site of the old Hartford Base Ball Grounds, can rekindle the city's brief major league days. The ballpark no longer exists, of course. In fact, even the corner of Wyllys Street and Hendricxsen Avenue has disappeared as both streets have been reconfigured. But nestled against the grounds of the Church of the Good Shepherd and its grand companion building, the Caldwell Colt Memorial Parish House, is a beautiful expanse of green lawn that was once the Dark Blues' home. Standing in the shadow of these two grand monuments to Hartford's past evokes memories of an era when baseball was young and Hartford was a major player in its development. One can picture opposing batters vainly flailing at the curveballs tossed by Bond and Cummings, the “hurrahing” of Hartford resident Mark Twain who often attended games, and captain Bob Ferguson booming out his usual admonition, “Have a care, boys!” and threatening to exact physical punishment if they did not. Despite the interceding decades, one can almost see the players' dark blue stockings and hear the growling that once filled those hallowed grounds.

In recent years there's been a move afoot to revive the actual game of oldtime baseball, especially in greater Hartford which has become a hotbed of vintage baseball. During the July 4th weekend the city will play host to the third annual

Hartford Vintage Base Ball Invitational—which this year is held in conjunction with the Riverfest Celebration. Teams from five states with oldtime monikers like Hartford Senators, Providence Grays, and New York Mutuals will compete at Bushnell Park for the Capital City Cup. They'll reenact how the game was played in the 19th century—the biggest difference being that players in baseball's earliest incarnation caught the ball bare-handed. For more information visit www.hartfordvintagebaseball.com.

1. Jonathan Fraser Light, *The Cultural Encyclopedia of Baseball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997).
2. Joseph M. Overfield, "William Arthur Cummings (Candy)," in *Baseball's First Stars*, edited by Frederick Ivor-Campbell, Robert L. Tiemann, and Mark Rucker. (Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1996), p. 43.

David Arcidiacono, a member of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), lives in East Hampton, Connecticut. This article is adapted from his new book, *Grace, Grit, and Growling: The Hartford Dark Blues Base Ball Club, 1874-1877*, which can be obtained from the author at Darcidiacono@snet.net or online at the Vintage Base Ball Factory Web site, www.vbbf.com.