

Diamond State Base Ball Club re-creates the way the sport was played after the Civil War

By PAM GEORGE
Special to The News Journal

For John Medkeff, the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" was a personal anthem. Growing up in Wilmington, he was seldom seen without a mitt, ball or bat of some kind.

"My friends and I played baseball and its many variations - wiffle ball, step ball and wire ball - from morning until night, from spring through fall," he recalled.

Medkeff's passion for the sport later prompted him to research its roots on the web, where he discovered the Eclipse Base Ball Club, a vintage team in Elkton, Md.

He went to see a few games. "I was immediately hooked," he said. "When I found out that Delaware was one of the last states along the Eastern seaboard not to have a vintage club, I decided to start one of my own." So he did in 2008.

Medkeff is president of the Diamond State Base Ball Club, which will play the Athletic BBC of Philadelphia on Aug. 29 at 1 p.m. at Fort DuPont State Park, near Delaware City.

The team's name, the color and style of the uniforms and the game rules are based on those used by the original Diamond State BBC, which was founded in Wilmington in 1865.

There are no gloves. The ball is pitched underhanded rather than thrown, and there are no fences, so there's no automatic home run.

Medkeff is echoing the start-up spirit of the hometown players who helped make baseball America's favorite pastime.

Although the New York Knickerbockers Base Ball Club has been credited with codifying 20 rules of the game as early as 1840, it wasn't until after the Civil War that baseball caught on. Bored soldiers at base camps took up the game, and after the war, they brought it to their hometowns.

The war ended in April 1865, and in September, a group of attorneys and businessmen formed the Diamond State BBC.

For El Jefe and team, it's a grand old game



Courtesy of SMERJ Photography/Mike Millat

In back (from left) are Jeff "Swampy" Kabacinski, Earl "Rusty" Rutter, Doug "One Finger" Brown, Scott "Stretch" Rawding, Jeff "Farmer" Stepanek, Earl "Stones" Benningfield and Dan "Mini" Minutola. In front (from left) Garrett "Steady" Perdick, John "El Jefe" Medkeff, Kenny "Buzzsaw" Bonsall, Crissie Kabacinski, Frank "Flying Dutchman" Brevoort, Joe "Deuce" Minutola, Brian "Cap" Boulden, Chris "Ring" Goering.

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to Phillies games on radio. "I saw the opportunity for a then-49-year-old to play baseball again," said Brown, an outfielder, who's taken the nickname "One Finger" Brown. (Medkeff is "El Jefe.")

Garret "Steady" Perdick, the third baseman

and assistant captain, read about the team on Craigslist.

"I've always been interested in baseball," he said. "I started playing in first grade. I played all through Little League, on traveling teams, in high school and on a few adult

teams during and after college."

An interest in baseball is one thing. An interest in history is another.

"Over time, it's been rewarding to see that most of our players have really taken an interest in the history of the game," Medkeff said. "It's hard not to."

There are currently 17 playing members. Only nine take the field at any given time, so the team rotates players, and it often plays doubleheaders. As members of the 13-team Mid Atlantic Vintage

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Diamond State Base Ball Club vs. the Athletic Base Ball Club of Philadelphia

WHERE: Fort DuPont State Park off Del. 9, just south of Delaware City. For directions, visit www.destateparks.com/park/fort-dupont

WHEN: Aug. 29 at 1 p.m.; they will also play Sept. 12 in Easton, Md., Sept. 26 at Fort DuPont, and Oct. 10 in Pennsville, N.J.

TICKETS: \$7; seniors, \$6; children \$5; 2 and younger, free.

INFORMATION: www.diamondstatebaseball.org

The team is always looking for players. E-mail diamondstatebc@comcast.net, if you're interested in playing, or simply join the family, friends, the history buffs and the curious who attend the games.

Baseball League, the team has a set schedule of opponents, and it will on occasion play outside the league.

The original Diamond State Base Ball Club played in Wilmington, but the city today lacks the flat, open fields that the vintage game requires. Fort DuPont State Park, a military base from the Civil War through World War II, saved the day.

"The park has the perfect space and historic setting," Medkeff said. "Of course, it's a bonus to us that nearby Delaware City featured one of the state's first baseball teams, the Atlas Base Ball Club of the mid-1860s."

Practice for the club begins in March, and the season runs from April to October. The team is always looking for players.

"I had a vision of what the club should be," Medkeff said, "and I think we've exceeded my original expectations in many ways."