

Ball at Camp

Playing Indian Ball at camp from 1968-1985
Written by Milt Moravek, Jr. with input from Chris Eichner

Growing up a Sokol back in the day meant a lot of things. Gym class, the hall on Friday nights, friends, dances, celebrations, heritage, the Camp...it could go on and on. We were so fortunate to have great facilities. The hall was the hub year-round but, in the summer, we had the good fortune of our beloved Sokol Camp in Imperial, MO.

Two weeks during summer were always carved out at Camp, as it still is today, for children's camping. Picnics were more numerous back in the day but they still take place today. The Sokol picnic, Camp Committee picnic, Lodge Washington picnic, Missouri lodge picnic, Board of Directors picnic and not to forget the Hullabaloo (the last picnic each season), were the core picnics. Even the first and last days of Children's camping ended up being mini-picnics. So, there were large groups of members and guests at the Camp at least six times each summer.

Activities at Camp were numerous. In addition to Childrens camping, picnic Sundays always featured good food. Sometimes our favorite Czech ethnic dishes; other times Barbeque/Burgers. There was swimming, music/dancing, card games, horseshoes, camaraderie, and fun for all.

As Sokol's we always sought physical activity. The backbone of all this was gym classes at the hall. Other spinoffs included volleyball and at the camp, Indian Ballgames were played at every picnic.

What exactly is Indian Ball?

Today we live in an era of extreme social consciousness. Let's always be careful not to say anything that offends anyone, or group. Back when we played, Indian Ball was just the variation of softball we played that accommodated our facilities and perhaps the physical condition of our members who played—more on that in a bit. It turns out that Indian Ball is called exactly that and played in many different cities with slightly different rules. The term was never intended to be a slur—it's just a name.

How were our Indian ballgames different than Softball games?

The concept is the same. String together enough hits to score more runs than your opponent to win. However, there are some unique aspects to the game that make it dramatically different. To summarize:

- There was no baserunning—the old-timers really appreciated that!

- There were two markers that created the infield. In the old days, we used large rocks. Later, someone “found” some construction cones to take the place of the rocks. We aligned those rocks between home plate and distant trees in the outfield acting as foul poles. Depending on the number of players in any given game, we either had one, but typically two players in the infield. The remainder of the players were scattered around the outfield with the best outfielders playing deep, especially against the opposing team’s power hitters.
- There were only singles, no extra base hits including home runs. The only way to score a run was to string together four or more hits in an inning.
- Singles were accomplished by hitting a fair groundball past the infielders or a line drive/fly ball that dropped in the outfield without being caught on the fly. If an infielder bobbled a ground ball, it was a hit. Ground balls had to be fielded cleanly to be an out.
- A foul ball hit past the infield markers was an out. The batter was the umpire. Rarely, were there ever any arguments in our games but there always seemed to be some good-natured jousting about generous fair ball calls on behalf of some.
- A foul ball that didn’t pass the markers was just a foul unless an infielder fielded it prior to the pitcher. A pitcher could touch a batted ball prior to a fielder which made it a foul ball.
- There were no balls or strikes. Teams pitched to their own hitters. The objective was to pitch a “meatball” that was easy to hit.
- Three outs to an inning; hitting teams always played two innings prior to the players changing sides. This helped speed up the game. We played nine inning games and always played at least two games in the afternoon at each picnic.
- Just like baseball, the team that had the most runs at the end of nine innings, or extra innings if needed, won the game.

Sounds easy, doesn’t it?

Not so fast. Keep in mind, this was a game played by grown Sokol men (sorry ladies, there is only one co-ed game in recollection) many of which were strong athletes with considerable skills playing sports of any kind. There was also the complication associated with coming of age—youngsters wanting to play so badly but not yet being quite ready. The field was filled with players from ages of perhaps 12 to 75, thanks to Brother Bill Shana.

In the old days we played with mushy, worn-out softballs that were difficult to hit hard or far. As time passed, softball technology advanced and each Sunday someone managed to bring a new softball or two for the games. New softballs are almost like baseballs. There were guys who could really hit the ball hard. Playing infield was borderline dangerous. Deep outfielders had to be adept at judging and catching long flyballs and line drives. Even the middle outfielders had to be alert.

In keeping with our tradition, it didn’t matter if you were a ball player or just liked playing ball. What did matter is that you participated if you wanted and everyone who did was

welcome. Sokol brothers enjoying each other's company and having fun was what it was about.

The Equipment

We didn't need much. There was a green army duffle that had some bats and balls left over from previous picnics. The bats were hilarious. One was a baseball bat, another was a skinny old hickory bat that resembled a fungo bat and a few more less than perfect weapons of choice. In later years we obtained some used aluminum bats. One was bent though! Some players would bring their own. Everyone brought their own gloves. Those who didn't borrowed one from a player on the other team. It always worked!

The only other thing we needed were the foul markers. That's easy, let's play ball!

The Fields

There were three fields that hosted Indian Ball games at Sokol Camp. Everyone knows one, most know two, but many may not know the third.

The Old Field

Located just to the north of the pool is where we played until 1977. This is where a lot of us got our start. It was a rite of passage. Time spent being batboy, retrieving foul balls and so on. Some of those memories fade to black and white but they're still there. A lot of the dads played along with the early born of the next generation. Guys like Bill Shana and Jerry Jetensky playing with gloves like what Ty Cobb used in the '20s. Bill did get a new glove when he was about 60. It's believed Jerry's glove is in Cooperstown near Ty Cobb's glove. Great stuff!

Traditionally, the losers of each game ponied up money to buy beer and soda for all ballplayers. In the early days, the beer came down from the bar in beer buckets and were passed around to share. It was how it was done.

It was the layout of the field that led to the adaptation of Indian ball rather than softball (running the bases). Based upon where home plate was positioned, it was only about 150 feet to right field. Center and left field could be played deeper so that made more sense. Plus, don't forget the void of running!

The current pool wasn't always there. Prior to it being built, there were large trees that lined the crest of the hill where the pool is now. The hill, as it sits today, was in play and mostly in fair ground. As crazy as it sounds, there had to be at least two guys on the hill

when a big hitter was up. It was best to be at the top then come down if needed. If you had to go up, forget it. You'd never get there. So, between dodging trees and avoiding the concrete step at the bottom, whoever played the hill was a brave soul indeed.

Then there was the chopper rule. The chopper rule meant that you couldn't beat the batted ball into the ground so that it would bounce over the infielder's heads. The old field had a sunken batter's box compared to where the infielders were. Those choppers happened pretty frequently. When we moved to the new field the rule was no longer necessary.

It's unclear whether anyone ever hit the ball far enough to hit the lodge. Then, one year we had a new target, the new pool! It was akin to hitting a home run in a regular ballpark. Only, there was a splashdown. After the third ball got wet (they were still singles) in the first game after the pool was built, Milton Moravek, Sr. was screaming at the top of his lungs from the pool deck that the game was over. We ignored him.

In reality though, the game was over on the old field. Not only was hitting the ball into the pool tempting fun for those who could reach it, it obviously proved dangerous to those in the pool and around the deck. We had the room to do some excavating and build a new field, in its current location. Just as well. There were picnics where cars had to park on the old field after the regular lot filled up. No one liked the third option. So, pick up the rocks, we're moving to the new field!

The New Field

It was hoped the new field could accommodate base running. It didn't quite work out that way though. Besides, why mess with all those years of tradition? We still played by the same rules. The field was much more spacious though. We could spread out and easily fit more players. No elements of danger like the hill either.

It was the early years of the new field that likely saw the most enthusiastic ball games. There were a lot of us that were pretty good ballplayers. We'd all eat lunch, let it digest a bit, then a few of us would head down to the field. The next thing you know, there would be 15-20 of us warming up. Brother Miro Janosik would always take charge so there was no need to pick teams. Miro made that decision, and it was always almost even as the games were close. Miro's enthusiasm was contagious, and he had a knack of keeping the game moving.

There was one picnic, where we dedicated the new field, and played a real softball game—you know, running the bases. We chalked the baselines and there was even a crowd cheering us on from the sidelines. Keeping with the ceremony, it was the old-timers vs. the kids. Hard to say what the age cut off was between the two teams. Likely, younger than 30 were the kids. Both teams were loaded with talent. To be 30 and considered to be an old-timer when you're still in your prime, well, that's not bad. It was hard fought but the kids won the only big league (by Sokol standards) men's softball game played at the New Field.

Unfortunately, the New Field didn't have the lengthy history of the Old Field. Times changed, some moved away, and the interest in playing ball at camp waned. It was hard to find enough to play and by 1990 or so, that was it.

The Third Field

Sokol owns property across Hwy. 61/67 from the Camp entrance. There was a field there that local little league teams would play or practice on. On Sundays, the field wasn't used. It's hard to say how many games got relocated there back in the old days (predating memory) when the Old Field was filled with cars and there were still enough eager to play. Only once did we play there in the time span of this article. It could be that more were played in the early years. It was the only co-ed game played with relaxed rules. Probably should have done more of those!

The Games Ended

It's hard to say when the first Indian ballgame was played at Sokol Camp. Unfortunately, those who could provide an answer have long passed. Guessing by how popular baseball was in St. Louis in the post-war 40's, it's a pretty sure bet that Sokols and guests were playing ball that long ago. And, if the last game was played in the 90's, that's a 50-year run of ball at Camp.

Over that span, there were hundreds of players who took the field in what was a long-standing tradition. You're invited to add your name or the names of others no longer with us who played ball at Camp to the list.

Traditions come and go. Sometimes, they are even rekindled. Who knows when there will be another generation of ambitious ball players who will once again take up the game. If it is to be, hopefully there will be the same cheer and camaraderie enjoyed by Sokol brothers at Camp for five decades.

Ballplayers from our past:

Milt Moravek Sr.
Milt Moravek Jr.
Mark Janosik
Miro Janaosik
Don Breidenbach
Bill Shana
Don Ulmer
Mitch Ulmer
Greg Strnad
Jerry Strnad

Mike Wolf
Henry Rak
Dave Bourisaw
Bob Bourisaw
Buzz Bourisaw
Charlie Vokracka
Craig Vokracka
Jerry Jetensky
Frank Rericha
Bill Rericha
Mike Rericha
Don Kopac
Bob Newcomer
Rob Newcomer
Ron Newcomer
Paul Lat
Mike Duewell
Harry Duewell
Charlie Jerabek
Charlie Schneider
Steve Jerabek
Jeremy Bertz
John Burian
Charlie Boresi
Dave Italiano
Chris Eichner
Mark Scrob
Jim Linek, Jr.
Chris Linek
Jim Ulrich
Ronnie Ulrich
Dan Sulz
Steve Sulz
Ken Hornak
Bill Bade
Gary Kopac

John Dvorak

Steve Stanley
Roy Stanley
Bill Stanley
Ted Stanley

