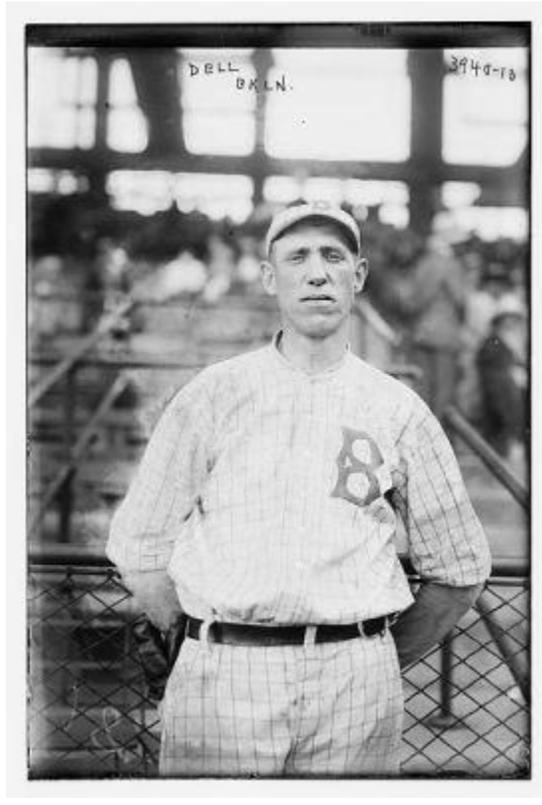


The Little World Series of 1919



Wheezer Dell, hero of the 1919 Little World Series, shown while a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers

Jim Morley, often declared during his time as the father of baseball in Los Angeles, first proposed a “world series” between the champions of the top minor leagues when he was owner of the Los Angeles Angels from 1901 to 1906. His grand idea came to fruition in 1919—even though it would be the Pacific Coast League’s other Los Angeles team, the Vernon Tigers, and not his Angels playing the best five of nine series against the champions of the American Association. Morley, who had been hired as business manager of his old team at the beginning of the season, had once again decided to retire from the game in order to return to his various entrepreneurial interests. Before bidding goodbye, he attended the series and reveled in the fact it would be played in Los Angeles.¹

The Tigers were coming off their first Pacific Coast League pennant—they were a colorful team that had many disappointments during the previous decade but had finally overcome them with a thrilling end of the season, title-clinching victory over the rival

Angels. The Tigers had strong hitters at every position and a deep pitching staff that featured five pitchers who had reached the double-figure mark in wins. Only one pitcher had an earned run average above three runs per game.

Vernon's opponent, the St. Paul Saints, (sometimes called the "Apostles"), had played their way west in a series of exhibitions while waiting for the longer Pacific Coast League season to end. Saints first baseman Lee Dressen was unable to make the trip, so St. Paul manager Mike Kelley substituted Toledo first baseman Ham Hyatt in his place. The Saints best players included centerfielder Elmer Miller, second baseman Marty Berghammer, shortstop Danny Boone, and catcher Bubbles Hargrave. Kelley's team also boasted a deep pitching staff that included Dick Niehaus, Howard Merritt, Dan Griner and ex-PCL veteran Sea Lion Hall.

It was determined there would be two umpires, one from each league, and that the series would alternate games in which the spitball could be used since the American Association had banned that and other trick pitches prior to the 1918 season.² The Tigers won a coin toss giving them the advantage of using the spitter in the deciding ninth game, if necessary.³ That was welcome news since Vernon was somewhat banged up; catcher Clarence Brooks and first baseman Babe Borton were both out of the series with knee injuries. It was also decided that players would split the gate receipts of the first five games, with the winning team awarded a sixty percent share and the losers forty percent.

The first game was preceded by a noontime parade through the streets of Los Angeles.⁴ A baseball was dropped from an airplane and the players entered the stadium carrying an enormous American flag. The Vernon Tigers owner, comedian Fatty Arbuckle, threw the first pitch to complete the festivities. Despite unseasonably cold weather, Mike Kelley pulled out a camp chair and took his position beside the St. Paul dugout, resplendent in a short-sleeved shirt of robin-egg blue.

St. Paul's Joe Riggert lined a single to center on the third pitch of the game from his ex-teammate Joe Finneran, a former Saints pitcher who did not throw a spitball despite the fact that the game was being played under Pacific Coast League rules. (Tigers manager Bill Essick wanted to prove that his team did not need the spitball to win. He knew that he would still have the advantage of using it in the deciding game if needed.)

Essick made the right decision as the Tigers pounded out thirteen hits en route to a 7-1 victory. To add injury to insult, Bob Meusel lined a ball off the pitching hand of St. Paul pitcher Howard Merritt in the fifth inning, forcing him out of the game.⁵

There was some gamesmanship the next day; Jim Morley displayed his support for the Tigers, countering Mike Kelley's splashy dress by parading around in a garish fur hat. Then the start of the contest was delayed ten minutes by Kelley's insistence on using the Vernon dugout since the Saints were the home team for the game. After a long protest, the Tigers finally packed up their gear and trudged across the diamond. The game itself featured a pitcher's duel between St. Paul's Dan Griner and Vernon's Art Fromme—at least for the first six innings. Then Kelley began instructing his hitters to bunt in order to take advantage of Fromme's trick knee. The Saints scored five times and tied the series at a game apiece.⁶

Before the third game, Fatty Arbuckle made the surprising announcement that he would not exercise his one-year option to purchase the Tigers and was bowing out as president of the team. Short of cash as payment came due, Arbuckle had offered to put up a little more than half of the sixty-five thousand dollar purchase price immediately and pay the rest later, but after a year of waiting for his money, former owner Ed Maier wanted it all up front. Arbuckle could not swing the deal and the team again belonged to Maier.⁷

The game that followed featured a near riot between the Tigers and American Association umpire Jim Murray. Following a disputed call at first base, Vernon's Zinn Beck took a swing at Murray and was ejected. It took three policemen to quell the ensuing melee before play could resume. Spitballer Byron Houck ultimately out-dueled Dick Niehaus and the Tigers took the lead in the series, two games to one.

After the game, Mike Kelley complained loudly about the "bush league" stunt of watering down the area in front of home plate to slow ground balls, an action that favored a spitball pitcher like Houck. He also reiterated his intention to switch dugouts each game, saying that his team did not appreciate the attitude of the Vernon club when they were finally forced to go to the visitor's bench prior to the second game.⁸ The Tigers ignored Kelley's criticism and crushed the Saints in the fourth game of the series, knocking them around in a 12-2 victory.⁹

The Saints rebounded in the fifth game behind another strong effort from Dan Griner, who held the Tigers to one unearned run. More fisticuffs broke out, starting with a fight in the fourth inning between St. Paul's Marty Berghammer and Vernon's Stump Edington after Edington thought Berghammer tried to spike him. Umpire Murray ended the argument by simply throwing Berghammer aside.

The next inning, Saints batter Red Corriden objected to a called third strike by Jimmy Toman, the PCL umpire, and the St. Paul bench rushed the field to argue the decision. In the midst of the ruckus, Saints infielder Danny Boone tore Toman's chest protector off of him, managing to rip the supports.

Later in the game, Tigers catcher Al DeVormer became angry at the way St. Paul pitchers were throwing tight to Vernon hitters and insisted that Rex Dawson retaliate. Dawson refused and Bill Essick replaced him with Willie Mitchell in the sixth inning. When the Saints loaded the bases with the score tied, 1-1, Mitchell promptly beamed Red Corriden, knocking him unconscious. Corriden was eventually revived but had to be helped off the field. However, hitting Corriden with the pitch brought in the winning run for St. Paul as Griner beat the Tigers, 2-1.¹⁰

During the scheduled day off, the Tigers began complaining about the St. Paul pitchers breaking the rules by throwing shine balls.¹¹ Meanwhile, the Saints were invited by Fatty Arbuckle to tour his movie studio and watch him work on a film.¹²

The Saints jumped out to a 4-0 lead in the sixth game against Joe Finneran and Dick Niehaus shut out the Tigers on six hits to tie the series at three games apiece. Not only had the Tigers lost their two-game lead in the series, they had to play without outfielder Hughie High, who was hurt in the fifth game.¹³

Because of injuries to High and others, the Tigers attempted to add catcher Scotty Alcock and Angels first baseman Jack Fournier to their roster and as a result, the seventh game was nearly forfeited to St. Paul. Mike Kelley had no objection to Alcock, who had played for the Tigers that season, but said that Vernon could not use Fournier to replace Babe Borton because the Tigers had already replaced Borton with Willie Mitchell. Kelley also pointed out that Fournier had not been placed on the eligible list for the series. A stalemate developed; Bill Essick refused to take the field without Fournier and St. Paul refused to let Fournier play, so umpire Toman announced a forfeit to St. Paul.

Essick huddled with Ed Maier. After discussing the matter, they agreed to play without Fournier if Kelley would rescind the forfeit. Kelley replied that was fine with him and the game finally started forty minutes late. The Tigers scored twice in both the first and second innings and held on behind Byron Houck to win, 6-2, leaving Vernon one game shy of winning the series. Unfortunately, Bob Meusel injured his leg and had to retire in the third inning, leaving his availability for the rest of the series in doubt.¹⁴

Mike Kelley chose Dan Griner to pitch the eighth game of the series and once again the Tigers were helpless before him. Griner sent the series to a deciding ninth game with a 3-1 win, his third victory for St. Paul. The Saints scored all their runs in the first inning off Wheezer Dell, who retired the first two St. Paul batters but could not get another out and was pulled in favor of Willie Mitchell. Again, the Tigers grumbled that Griner was illegally using resin on the baseball but nothing came of the complaint.

There was of course another fight; Vernon's Joe Finneran got into an altercation when umpire Murray insisted on examining the baseball for irregularities. Upset at the request after complaints about Griner had gone unheeded, Finneran threw the baseball at Murray, striking him in the ribs.

His thirst for retaliation unsatisfied, Finneran picked up another ball and threw it at Murray but missed, so he then threw his glove at the umpire. Players spilled onto the field and as Essick tried to hold Finneran back, the pitcher grabbed a catcher's glove and whacked Murray over the head with it. On his way out, Finneran kicked the umpire's chest protector, which had been discarded during the altercation.¹⁵

With the series tied at four games apiece, Wheezer Dell, embarrassed by his failure to survive the first inning of the eighth game, begged Bill Essick to let him start the final contest. Persuaded by Dell's emotional plea, Essick told him, "You are the man who can do it." Kelley countered with Dick Niehaus and the resulting pitcher's duel was one of the greatest games ever seen on the Coast.

The Tigers scored first, in the fourth inning when Stump Edington drove in Chet Chadbourne, who had singled and moved to third after a sacrifice and a fielder's choice.

St. Paul tied the score in the sixth inning when Danny Boone led off with a triple and scored on a long foul fly ball by Niehaus. Boone then saved the Saints in the eighth

inning with a terrific bare-handed stop of a bad hop ground ball with runners at first and second to record the final out of the inning.

The Tigers were the home team and the game went to the bottom of the ninth with the score tied, 1-1. Edington struck out to lead off the inning. Scotty Alcock then hit a line shot at the feet of Boone, who managed somehow to block the ball and keep it in front of him. However, Boone's throw to first was late and Alcock was safe. Zinn Beck then sacrificed Alcock to second. With two out and first base open, Niehaus intentionally walked Al DeVormer to pitch to Wheezer Dell. With Niehaus facing the opposing pitcher, Mike Kelley was sure he was looking at extra innings.

Dell had other ideas. He swung aggressively at Niehaus's first pitch and sent it soaring toward the scoreboard in left-center field. Saints left fielder Duke Duncan sprinted as hard as he could but the ball went over his head, bouncing off the fence and scoring Alcock with the winning run of the game and the series. Dell was hoisted onto the shoulders of his teammates and carried off the field, his satisfied smile evidence of his having clinched the championship as much with his bat as his arm. In the midst of the celebration, Tom Kennedy, a former heavyweight boxer and a "Keystone Cop," peeled away from the crowd, made a beeline for umpire Murray and struck him twice, knocking him down and cutting his face.¹⁶

Despite the bitter feelings, the series was an undeniable financial success, with the Tigers players splitting about \$8,300 and the Saints dividing a pool of \$5,000.

Ed Maier and the rest of the Pacific Coast League also viewed the series as vindication for the quality of baseball in the West.¹⁷ Mike Kelley was less impressed, declaring the Tigers' brand of ball more savage than anything else. He vowed that if his team repeated in 1920 and Vernon did also, he would not return.

Despite Kelley's bitterness, the Vernon Tigers had reason to celebrate. They had won their first clear, undisputed Pacific Coast League pennant and topped it off with a victory over the American Association champions in an unforgettable series of games. It was a year to remember—at least it should have been.

In December, noting the whispers about gamblers and the just-completed 1919 World Series between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds, *San Francisco Chronicle* sportswriter Ed Hughes wrote a column warning about the prevalence of

gambling in Pacific Coast League parks. Hughes said that while no scandal had yet occurred, the situation could lead to one. He urged the league to act.¹⁸

Unfortunately, it was already too late. In a few months it would be discovered that the 1919 Pacific Coast League pennant race had been fixed.

¹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1919.

² *The Sporting News*, December 27, 1917.

³ *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1919.

⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1919.

⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1919.

⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1919. There was speculation that Kelley had gotten wind that the Tigers were superstitious about the dugout they used and that was the real reason for insisting on the switch.

⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1919. Arbuckle, who despised his nickname, was in the midst of a contract with Paramount Pictures that was paying him a million dollars a year. In 1921, at the height of his popularity, he was embroiled in a scandal that ended his career. During a wild party at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, an aspiring actress named Virginia Rappe became seriously ill. She died three days later of peritonitis caused by a ruptured bladder. Arbuckle was accused of causing her injuries through sexual roughhousing. After two mistrials, a third jury found Arbuckle not guilty after deliberating for only a few minutes, part of which was spent writing an apology to the actor. However, Arbuckle's career was destroyed. After directing some short films under a pseudonym and some brief appearances in the films of others, Arbuckle was signed on June 28, 1933 by Warner Brothers to direct a feature-length film. Arbuckle and his third wife celebrated their first anniversary with friends and then returned to their suite at the Park Central Hotel in New York City. Arbuckle suffered a fatal heart attack in his sleep during the night. He had always predicted he would not live to see his fiftieth birthday; at his death he was forty-six years old. (*New York Times*, June 30, 1933; *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1933.)

⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1919.

⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1919. One of the game's few highlights was a spectacular play by St. Paul second baseman Marty Berghammer. With one out and Vernon's Zinn Beck and Hughie High on first and second, Al DeVormer hit a line shot up the middle. Berghammer dove and speared the ball with his bare hand, flipping it to shortstop Jack Martin as he fell face-first to the ground. Martin forced High at second and tried to complete the double play to first, but the throw was late. Zinn Beck tried to come around and score, but St. Paul first baseman Ham Hyatt saw him and threw him out at the plate.

¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1919. After the game, DeVormer caught up with Dawson and called him "yellow" and the two men got into a fight over Dawson's reluctance to throw at the Saints hitters.

¹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 14 and October 15, 1919.

¹² *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1919.

¹³ *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1919.

¹⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1919.

¹⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1919. Murray had already fined Finneran ten dollars during the second game of the series for “alleged uncomplimentary remarks.” (*Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1919.)

¹⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, October 18 and October 21, 1919.

¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1919.

¹⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 21, 1919.