

— HISTORY —

For it's 1, 2, 3 strikes you're out at Rec Park

Part one of seven

On June 9, Willimantic's baseball team, the Thread City Tides, starts its 2002 season in the New England Collegiate Baseball League. This local side plays with wooden bats, and recalls the days a century ago when Willimantic was a baseball crazy city.

During the 1880s and 1890s, the city occasionally fielded a professional nine known as the Willimantic Colts. The team played its games at the Fairgrounds, as Recreation Park was then known. In 1901, stock was raised by local enthusiasts and businessmen, led by attorney Thomas J. Kelly and dry goods store owner Hugh C. Murray to form a new professional team in the city, considering the local talent at hand.

The Willimantic Baseball and Athletic Association (WBAA) was subsequently formed.

The American Thread Co. would not grant permission for the team to play at the Fairgrounds, so the association leased Windham Field (Memorial Park) off the Windham

Manufacturing Co. for \$200 a year. A 500-seat grandstand was built with an "awning" to keep the sun from the spectators' eyes. Bleachers were built, bases were laid and the outfield was leveled.

The new team was named the Willimantic Colts for the previous professional outfit. The WBAA purchased new uniforms, and a local reporter noted that, "Nothing so pleases a baseball audience as clean, well uniformed players and it also commands respect out of town for all well organized clubs have neat suits."

On July 4, 1901, "the largest crowd which has ever witnessed a ball game in this city assembled" on Windham Field. Almost 4,000 'rooters' watched Danny Dunn's Colts beat South Manchester 5-2. Spectators in the new stands could not see the figures on the distant scoreboard, and a local wag suggested that the Colts should rent



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out eyeglasses to the fans.

The following Sunday, "over 250 Willimantic baseball cranks invaded Rockville," only to see their team beaten 13-5.

The July 4 crowd at Windham Field was exceeded on Aug. 5, 1901, when the Rockville team was accompanied by "150 rooters" traveling on a special train, and over 4,000 packed into the stadium. Many fans climbed surrounding trees, and many more broke down the wooden fences and got in free. The Colts beat Rockville 12-11, and when the winning run was scored in the bottom of the ninth, "men, women and children danced and yelled and hurraed and the air was full of hats and umbrellas." The Rockville fans, "slunked from the stadium, looking as small as the cast iron water tank that graces the corner of Railroad and Main."

New London brought a strong team to Windham Field in September and won a double header 8-0 and 12-3. The WBAA then decided to spend more to secure better players when top teams were entertained.

The opening season was

reviewed in *the Chronicle* on Oct. 25, 1901.

The Willimantic public had attended the games on Windham Field in large numbers, "and when worthy opponents such as Rockville played here the grandstand and bleachers were packed and deep lines of humanity

fringed both sides of the field." Twenty-seven games were played on Windham Field and two were played in Rockville, giving the Colts 20 victories and 9 defeats (.690).

Continued next week



The 1901 Willimantic Colts: Rear, from left: Mike Healey, Jack Curran, Jim Casey, Danny Dunn (manager), Jake O'Rourke, Jimmy Nichols and Mike Sullivan. Seated: Shaun Sullivan, Mickey Kearns, Jackie Nichols and Al Reeves.

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