

— HISTORY —

Windham Field scene of some tough encounters

Part four of seven

On Labor Day, 1903, Windham Field was the site of a double header. In the morning, 500 spectators witnessed the Willimantic Colts beat Bristol 6-0. In the afternoon, some 2,500 fans filled the bleachers and grandstand to see the contest with their keen rivals from Rockville.

The game was late in starting as the train from Rockville, carrying the Rockville team and its 'rooters' was 45 minutes late. This delay added to the atmosphere, as the crowd eagerly awaited the beginning of the game. The 1903 Colts team mainly consisted of players with Irish ancestry. Their line up for the Rockville game was J. Sullivan, O'Rourke, M. Sullivan, Casey, Kieran, Peloquin and the three Nichols brothers, Arthur, John and James. They beat their keen rivals from Rockville 3-2 in a tight game.

On Sept. 18, 1903, the Colts were due to play at Bristol. The interest in this game was high, and manager Danny Dunn arranged for a special train to

transport the team and its many followers to Bristol. The Bristol nine had a tremendous record in 1903, but the Colts pulled off a surprise 4-3 win.

When the Colts' train arrived back at Willimantic at 8:30 p.m., it was greeted by a crowd of several hundred fans packed onto the depot's platform, to cheer their conquering heroes. One of the Colts' greatest fans was Charles Wheeler, a music teacher and proprietor of Willimantic's largest musical instrument retail shop.

He was also the leader of Willimantic's famed 'Wheeler's American Band.' Wheeler arranged for his orchestra to lead a victory march up and down Main Street. The victorious players were also greeted with a fireworks display as they rode up Main Street waving to the cheering fans thronging the sidewalks.



Tom Beardsley

The baseball fever continued into 1904. The Willimantic Baseball and Athletic Association boasted a full treasury. It again leased Windham Field from the Windham Manufacturing Co. and manager Dunn resigned most of the regular team.

On June 7, 1904, the Colts played their keen rivals from Rockville. More than 3,000 people crowded into Windham Field to watch the Colts win 6-3. The Rockville team and fans believed they had been robbed by the umpire Doyle's decisions. However, two weeks later, Rockville chose the umpire, and the Colts were easily beaten. Before the game, the Rockville fans burned an effigy of Doyle, the umpire at Willimantic. During the game Willimantic player Shawn Sullivan was arrested by the Rockville police, and led off the field for hurling abuse back at the Rockville fans.

The Colts continued on a winning streak throughout July, but in August, local rivals, Manchester and Rockville, offered better salaries to several Colts players.

Star player, Mike Sullivan was offered \$20 a game by Manchester, which was \$5 a game more than the Colts' paid.

Dunn signed replacements, but the "new Willimantics" were no match for Bristol on Labor Day, and were thrashed 9-0. More players left the team, lured away by higher salaries, including Shawn Sullivan and Mike Sullivan who left to play for Norwich.

Dunn had fought to keep local players in the team, and was disappointed that his star players were being lured away. He believed they were unfaithful to their hometown. This was enough for Dunn. He resigned, and went into politics, becoming Willimantic's mayor for the next 12 years.

Continued next week



The 1903 Willimantic Colts are shown in this vintage picture at Windham Field prior to a game with Rockville.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.