

Optimist ball club champs of pre-war juvenile league

They played baseball together more than 40 years ago and the league they competed in was a forerunner of sorts to minor ball groups such as the London District Baseball Association that exist today.

'They' were the St. Thomas Optimist Club juveniles and team members got together for the first time since their playing days during a reunion at the Sheridan Inn on the weekend.

Nine of the players made it back for the reunion, almost all of the ones that are still alive today, and one came all the way from Philadelphia.

The team was one of four — Talbot Club, Kiwanis and Port Stanley were the others — that competed in the St. Thomas and District Juvenile Baseball League in 1939 and 1940.

Jack Armstrong, catcher and captain of that team, called it "one of the first real city leagues in the area.

"It was for players up to 18 years old and was a good brand of ball. We played Aylmer seniors once and beat them 6-4."

In that 1939 season, the Optimists won the regular season title with a 12-3 record and then took the playoff crown by beating Talbot Club in a best-of-three series.

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The team went on to play London Ealing Redlegs in the Ontario Baseball Association

(OBA) playdowns and lost the best-of-three series in two games straight. The second loss was by a 4-3 score in 10 innings at Pinafore Park.

Ed Saunders, coach of the Optimists, said the final game was played before about 500 fans at Pinafore "and we should have beat London.

"If it had gone three games, we would have won the third."

The Optimists won the playoff title again in 1940 before the league disbanded as many of its players went off to fight for Canada in the Second World War.

Armstrong said the league was originally formed by Jerry Roland, Jack Sullivan and Tom Neving, all now deceased.

He added it was the forerunner of today's minor ball set up in a way "although we hadn't gone into the lower categories like pee-wee and bantam back then."

Bill McArthur, organizer of the reunion, said the league meant a lot to players then "because there wasn't more much for teenage ball players until this was organized.

"And that league wasn't like today. We used to play with taped up balls and home-made bats."

Baseball has certainly come a long way since then, indeed.

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