

Nat Bailey Stadium

“Holy Grass”

VANCOUVER BASEBALL HISTORIAN Bud Kerr, who turns 72 this July, still remembers June 15, 1951 clearly. It was Opening Day for Capilano Stadium, which would later be rechristened after Nat Bailey. The new ballpark was replacing Athletic Park, which had stood at the southeast corner of 5th and Hemlock from 1913 until it was demolished to make way for the elevated Hemlock Street ramp onto the new Granville Street Bridge.

Just 15 years old then, Kerr recalls that, “There was something different in this park.”

It took him a while to figure out what the difference was, but then it dawned on him. It had to do with the smell of the place. “I was used to the old, wooden Athletic Park, where you could smell the hot dogs and the mustard and the roasted peanuts. There was nothing like that in the new ballpark.”

Not yet, at least. Over the 56 years since then, “the Nat”—as the venerable concrete stadium is affectionately called by many Vancouverites—has certainly acquired baseball-related odours of its own. It is a revered spot for local baseball fans, who call it “the best little ballpark in the world” because of its cozy confines (capacity 6500) and scenic location on the edge of Queen Elizabeth Park, with a dense copse of trees towering just beyond the outfield wall.

As Capilano Stadium, it was originally home to the Vancouver Capilanos and later

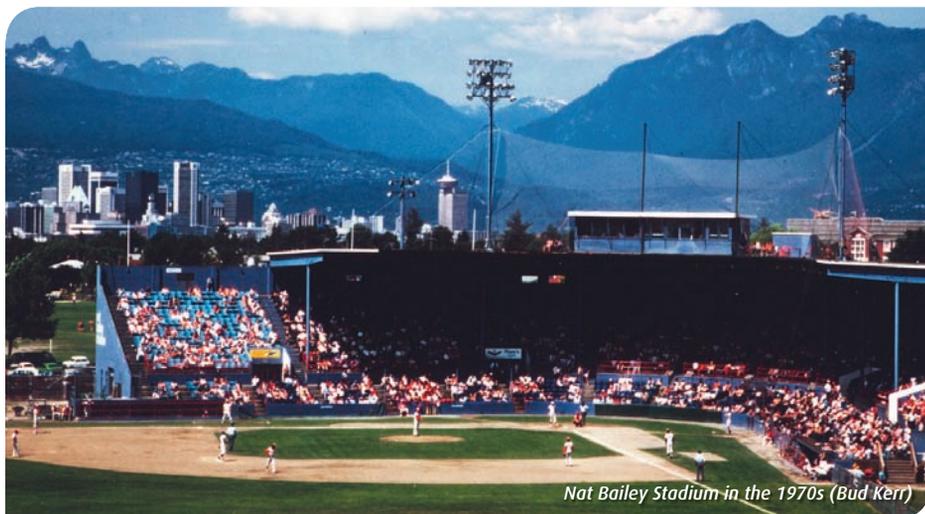
Vancouver Canadians’ left-handed pitcher James Heuser (Paul Yates)

the Vancouver Mounties, who played in the highly competitive Pacific Coast League (PCL) until 1969. When it was renamed in 1978, in honour of restaurateur Nat Bailey, founder of White Spot (see sidebar), the PCL returned in the form of the Vancouver Canadians, who were the AAA Affiliates of the Oakland Athletics. In 2000, the parent club moved the operation south to Sacramento.

The current Canadians team playing at the Nat is still affiliated with Oakland, competing in the Northwest League at the short-season Class A level, the lowest rung on the minor league ladder. The Cs play 76 games (38 at home) from mid-June to early September each summer, competing against seven other teams

The Canadians are the most successful minor league baseball team in Canada.

from Washington, Oregon and Idaho. The stadium is also home to the UBC Thunderbirds baseball team, who play there from February to May each year.



Nat Bailey Stadium in the 1970s (Bud Kerr)



“Take Me Out to the Ball Game” (Paul Yates)

Nat Bailey's Baseball Connections

Best-known as the founder of the White Spot restaurant chain, Nathaniel Ryal ("Nat") Bailey actually got his start selling peanuts, hot dogs and drinks in Athletic Park as a teenager. He was known as "Caruso Nat", because he called out the batters' names in a musical tenor from the bleachers high above the diamond. A lifelong baseball fan, he was part owner of the Vancouver Mounties and worked tirelessly to promote baseball in Vancouver.

The Canadians are the most successful minor league baseball team in Canada. Some of the biggest names in baseball have played for this franchise in its 25-year existence including Ricky Henderson, Jose Canseco, Jason Giambi, Miguel Tejada, Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder, Rich Harden and Nick Swisher.

In spite of all this success, the future of Nat Bailey Stadium was in jeopardy two years ago. The lease the team held with the Vancouver Park Board was running out and the 2010 Olympics had nabbed the property right next to the stadium for their new curling venue.

"I thought they were trying to squeeze this stadium out of here," Bud Kerr says, "so I got a group together called the Friends of Nat Bailey."

The Friends pressed the City to recognize the historical importance of the ballpark. Thanks to their lobbying efforts, the Vancouver Canadians signed a new 25-year lease with the Park Board in February, 2007, which included a commitment to help renovate the stadium.

The Canadians and the City will split the \$5-million renovation, which will take place over the next two years. The first part of that overhaul, which focuses mainly on the concourse and concessions area, will be completed by June 19, this season's Opening Day. The old chain-link fence backstop will also be replaced with invisible sport netting, which should improve sightlines considerably.

"We want to create a much better fan experience," explains Aileen McManamon, the Canadians' new President, who took over the reins in April. "We want it to be very fan-friendly, and to significantly increase the quality and variety of the food."

Rare as a female executive is in sports, McManamon is not only that, she's also local, hailing from West Vancouver. McManamon describes herself as "a lifelong baseball person", and says the position "is something that I have aspired to. I have a great passion for the game."

This year's renovation will cost about \$1 million, leaving \$4 million for a more significant stadium upgrade in 2008. The specifics are not yet known, but McManamon says they will be expanding the seating capacity, possibly replacing the roof and the infield surface.

Bud Kerr has a great story about that infield grass. When Capilano Stadium was built, they moved the turf over from Athletic Park.

"I always call that Holy Grass," Kerr says. "Back on October 19, 1934, Babe Ruth and his All-Stars were barnstorming across Canada to go to Japan, and they stopped off and played a ball game against some of our Senior League players. Somewhere in that turf is their chewing tobacco and their spit."

Three thousand fans showed up to see baseball's bigger-than-life star (as well as seven other future Hall-of-Famers, including Lou Gehrig and Jimmie Foxx) despite the pouring rain. Legend has it that Ruth took one look at the crowd and said, "If these people can take the weather, so can we."

The original grass that Babe Ruth walked on—and spat his chew into—is, of course, long dead, but it still makes a great story, and when it comes to stories about Nat Bailey Stadium, Bud Kerr has plenty more to tell. If you're interested, just look for him there during the season.

"I practically live there," he says with a laugh. "In the last seven years, I've been to every game."
—Joe Wiebe

Vancouver Canadians Info

4601 Ontario Street @ 30th Ave.
604.872.5232
www.canadiansbaseball.com
Tickets: \$7-\$20

Opening Day:
June 19 vs. Tri-City Dust Devils

Special Dates:
6 Fireworks Nights: June 19; July 1 & 17;
Aug. 3, 13 & 30

10 Weekday Nooners (first pitch at 1:05 pm): June 20 & 22; July 18 & 20;
Aug. 1, 15, 22, 24 & 29; Sept. 5



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