

FEATURE

# TAKE ME OUT TO THE *Ballgame:*

A NEW ERA AT THE NAT

[ BY JOE WIEBE ]





WHEN IT COMES TO SUMMERTIME ACTIVITIES IN VANCOUVER, NOT MUCH CAN COMPETE WITH A 'NOONER AT THE NAT' ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON. THIS TRADITION IS AN ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE FOR MANY RESIDENTS AND AN ENJOYABLE INITIATION FOR NEW ARRIVALS TO THE CITY.

CANADIANS

▲ PHOTO CREDIT: JESSICA HAYDAHL, VANCOUVER SPORTS PICTURES (ABOVE). ALL OTHER IMAGES BY PAUL YATES, VANCOUVER SPORTS PICTURES.

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The sun shines down and a breeze ruffles the tall trees on the slopes of Queen Elizabeth Park behind the outfield fence. There's a cold glass of Granville Island Pale Ale to go with a ballpark hot dog and some peanuts or popcorn. Listen to the crack of a well-hit ball off the bat, the pop of a pitch in the catcher's mitt, the umpire's loud "Stee-rike!" call, the crowd's murmur and the swell of cheering as the game on the field unfolds.

When it comes to summertime activities in Vancouver, not much can compete with a 'nooner at the Nat' on a sunny afternoon. This tradition is an annual pilgrimage for many residents and an enjoyable initiation for new arrivals to the city.

Nat Bailey Stadium, home to the Vancouver Canadians, is a beloved local gem with a history dating back 60 years. When it opened in 1951, then called Capilano Stadium, it replaced Athletic Park, which had stood at the southeast corner of Fifth and Hemlock from 1913 until it was demolished to make way for the

elevated Hemlock Street ramp onto the new Granville Street Bridge.

In 1978, the stadium was renamed in honour of Nat Bailey, the founder of the White Spot restaurant chain, who got his start selling peanuts, hot dogs and drinks in Athletic Park as a teenager. A lifelong baseball fan who worked tirelessly to promote baseball in Vancouver, Nat Bailey was part owner of the Vancouver Mounties, the stadium's resident team from 1956 to 1969.

In recent years, fans have come to embrace some new traditions, including Fireworks Nights and the popular Sushi Races, featuring three costumed mascots—BC Roll, Kappa Maki and Chef Wasabi—racing around the ballpark to entertain the crowd. (It was big news when Chef Wasabi, notorious for always trying to cheat his way to victory, finally won a race fair and square on the final day of the 2009 season.)

Since the Canadians and Nat Bailey Stadium were bought by locals Jake Kerr and Jeff Mooney in 2007, the business side of

the club has been significantly improved. Team president Andy Dunn says, "We've seen steady growth for the last three years. We've broken franchise attendance records each year."

And the stats back him up. Back in 2000, the team's first season in the Northwest League, the overall season attendance was 109,566 and over the last two seasons it

Canada to be with the only minor league team in Canada."

At the same time, he stresses, "We had a great relationship with the A's and they wanted to renew and continue our relationship. We weren't opposed to it, but we wanted to look around a little bit. We were always keeping an eye on what might be going on with the Blue Jays and it just came down

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has grown to 149,297 (2009) and then to 156,490 in 2010.

Building off that growth and the organization's long history, the Canadians are now entering a new era. Last fall, after a decade spent affiliated with the Oakland A's organization, they signed a four-year deal with the Toronto Blue Jays to become their new Single A club.

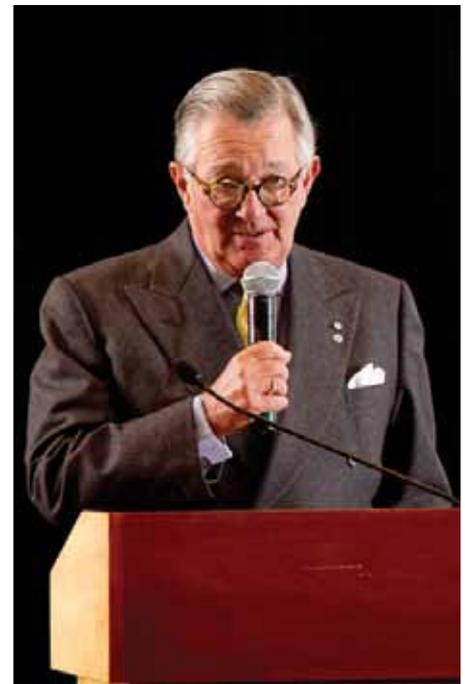
Dunn says, "It makes great sense for the only major league team in

to a 'perfect timing' scenario. They were available. We were available."

One of the things that excites Dunn the most about the change is that "the Blue Jays have the whole country behind them." And in spite of Vancouver's proximity to Seattle, he believes "there are more Blue Jays fans here than there are Mariners fans."

That might be debatable, but

▼ PHOTO: THE CANADIANS AT NAT BAILEY STADIUM WERE BOUGHT BY LOCALS JAKE KERR (BELOW) AND JEFF MOONEY IN 2007.



many local baseball fans do support both teams—the Mariners as their local squad and the Jays out of patriotism. Each season when Toronto visits Seattle, hordes of BC residents travel down to see the games. The sea of Blue Jays hats and shirts at Safeco Field is reminiscent of what you see at a Canucks game when the Maple Leafs or Habs are in town. And the switch to the Blue Jays organization will help build an even bigger fan base here, which is surely one of the things that attracted Toronto to the deal.

As Single A ball is the lowest rung on the minor league ladder, the make-up of the Vancouver Canadians' 2011 squad will primarily be decided at the MLB entry draft in early June.

According to Dunn, "One of the big things that the Blue Jays were excited about is that they wanted the first entry point for a lot of the kids to be Canada, so they could start understanding right away what it's like to be outside the US or the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. They'll start here, understand the cultural roots of Canada, get their feet

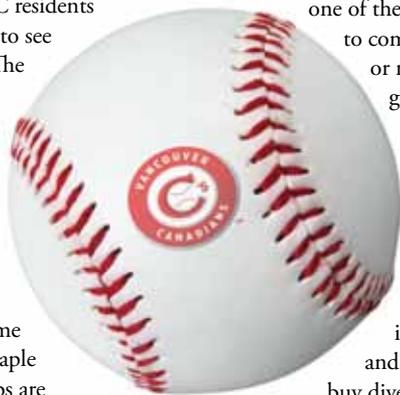
wet and start climbing the ladder, hopefully ending up in Toronto."

Watching these young players, many just 18 or 19 years old, play in such a wonderful setting is one of the great attractions to coming out to one or more of the 38 games that will be played at the Nat this summer. Yes, it helps that the stadium had new lighting and a big video screen installed last year, and that you can buy diverse food items

such as sushi and noodles along with the requisite hot dogs and peanuts. But when you get right down to it, it's about the whole experience: standing to sing "Oh Canada," and then "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh-inning stretch. Cheering a home run or a great play. Booming the ump when he calls a strike for a pitch that was a foot off the plate.

Nat Bailey Stadium is a special place. "It's really an electric ballpark," Dunn agrees. "The fans come out and they turn it on every night. It's a fun night for both the players on the field and the people in the stands."

*Joe Wiebe writes about books, beer, sports and culture. Read more at [www.joewiebe.com](http://www.joewiebe.com).*



## TICKETS & SCHEDULE

### OPENING GAME:

Friday, June 17 7:05 PM

Nine weekday nooners: 1:05 PM start times. June 17 and 30; July 15, 20 and 26; August 5, 17, 19 and 26

Eight fireworks nights: 7:05 PM start times. June 17 and 18; July 1, 16 and 25; August 6, 20 and 27

Final home game: Sunday, August 28 1:05 PM

### SINGLE TICKET PRICES:

\$12.50 reserved grandstand

(\$10 for 55+ seniors)

\$16 field-level box seats

\$22 Smart Diamond club

### NATPACKS:

10 tickets for \$125

15 tickets for \$187.50

### SEASON TICKET PRICES:

\$360 - \$550

### SUITES (which include food and drink)

Granville Island Brewing Executive

Dugout Suite: \$1500 to \$2650 (30 seats)

Whistler Brewing Third Base Suite:

\$1000 (25 seats)

BBQ Picnic in the Park: \$37 per

person for groups of 30 to 375

### STADIUM CAPACITY: 5132

ADDRESS: 4601 Ontario Street at 30th Avenue

(604) 872-5232

[www.canadiansbaseball.com](http://www.canadiansbaseball.com)

## BABE RUTH'S VANCOUVER CONNECTION

I had the pleasure of interviewing local baseball historian Bud Kerr a few years before his death in 2009, and he told me a great story about Babe Ruth's connection to Nat Bailey Stadium.

"I always call that 'holy grass,'" Kerr told me. "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."

More than 3000 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."

Years later, when Capilano Stadium was built, the infield grass was brought over from Athletic Park. As Kerr put it, "Somewhere in that turf is their chewing tobacco and their spit."

Bud Kerr was a stalwart fan of local baseball who rarely missed a game at the Nat. He started the Friends of Nat Bailey organization, which helped save the stadium from demolition several years ago. On July 9, 2007, his 72nd birthday, the Vancouver Canadians set up a permanent historical exhibit at the Nat called the Bud Kerr Baseball Museum, which includes much of Kerr's own memorabilia. Check it out the next time you go to a game...