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Diamond Mine

Derby Gisclair is a Font of Big Easy Baseball Lore

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If you like great old baseball stories, a couple of hours with Derby Gisclair is like finding the mother lode in a gold mine.

The gregarious 51-year-old Orleanian is an incorrigible baseball junkie, an all-star yarn spinner and a font of diamond trivia. But he's also an indefatigable historian who is a member of the Society of American Baseball Research and its oral history committee.

"Putsy Caballero was the youngest third baseman to ever play in the big leagues. He was 16 when the Philadelphia Phillies signed him while he was at Jesuit," Gisclair said. "But in 1944, the year he went to the Phillies, that one year they were called the Blue Jays, the Philadelphia Blue Jays. Hap Glaudi wrote a story that said Caballero's still a Blue Jay."

Caballero was a part of the Phillies' 1950 "Whiz Kids," the youngest major league baseball team ever fielded. "Great nicknames on that team -- 'Putsy,' 'Puddinhead' Jones, 'Granny' Hamner," Gisclair said. The Phils beat the Brooklyn Dodgers on the last day of the season to win the National League Pennant and played the Yankees in the World Series.

Gisclair, the chief operating officer for Equitas Capital Advisors, has written "Baseball in New Orleans" (Arcadia Publishing), a nostalgic look not only at this city's diamond heroes, but also the stories and legends associated with baseball in the Crescent City -- including spring training held here by Major League teams and college players.

It's chock full of wonderful old photographs, including one from 1954 of the so-called Clubhouse Crooners -- Pelicans trainer Angelo "Tiny" Tunis on the accordion, outfielder Erv "Four Sack" Dusak and Pels broadcaster Ted Andrews on vocals, and pitcher Elroy Face on guitar.

You can also find the Yochim brothers, Lenny and Ray, Gene Freese, Zeke Bonura, "Oyster" Joe Martina, Mel Ott, Al Flair, Mel Parnell, Bobby Brown, Rags Scheuermann and . . . Lou Gehrig? Correct. The Yankees held their spring training here from 1922 to 24 and stayed at the Hotel Grunwald, later the Roosevelt and now the Fairmont.

"When you tell people 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson played here, they're astounded," said Gisclair. Jackson, one of the game's most colorful and legendary outfielders, played for the 1910 edition of the New Orleans Pelicans. He batted .354 that year as the Pels won their second Southern Association Pennant.

But Jackson became infamous as a member of the 1919 Chicago Black Sox, accused along with several teammates of intentionally losing the World Series to Cincinnati in a game-fixing scandal. He and seven other Sox were banned from baseball for life as a result.

Baseball has always produced the best stories in all of sport because, said Gisclair, "It's the most colorful and romantic sport. It's a thinking man's game." And loaded with characters. "Take Casey Stengel," he said. "What player today would capture a sparrow and put it under his cap -- so when he got a hit and got on base, he could tip his hat to the crowd and a bird would come out of it?"

One of Gisclair's favorites was Abner Powell. In his book, he calls him "one of the most overlooked players in baseball history." He was a printer's devil (apprentice) with the Shenandoah

(Pa.) News playing semi-pro ball. An outfielder and pitcher, he would go on to play two Major League seasons, with the Washington Nationals in 1884 and the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1886.

But in 1887, he came to New Orleans to play for the inaugural New Orleans Pelicans team. He was also the manager and would go on to be the owner, along with partner Isidore Newman, founder of Newman School. An innovator, Powell is credited with coming up with the idea of using a canvas tarpaulin to cover the field when it rained -- an idea he got from watching New Orleans longshoremens cover bales of cotton with tarps. He also established Ladies' Day at the ballpark, and when there was simply too much rain, he invented a ticket with a detachable stub he called a "rain check."

A Loyola University graduate, Gisclair was immediately smitten by baseball when his dad took him to a Cubs game in 1960, at a moment frozen in time.

"You walked in under this old grandstand and then you saw blue skies and the greenest grass in this grand old ball yard," he said. "I caught a ball. I got Ernie Banks to sign it. It was sensory overload for a kid."

They also went north to see the then-Milwaukee Braves play the Giants, which included the likes of Willie Mays, Juan Marichal and Gaylord Perry, who pitched that day.

A voracious collector of baseball cards, he watched "Dizzy" Dean and "Pee Wee" Reese telecast Major League games. He still collects today, has a large photo and memorabilia collection and owns game balls autographed by every pitcher who ever threw a perfect game, with the exception of Cy Young and three others.

He still goes to the batting cage, puts on his batting gloves and takes his cuts. He played at Ecole Classique for Butler Powell and Ferd Corona but when he transferred to De La Salle High School, he was told he couldn't play baseball because he wore glasses. "I was crushed," he said.

So he played tennis and football, where he didn't need his glasses. "(In football) you just run into or away from the guy wearing the other color. Pretty basic," he said.

Gisclair tracked down Hall of Fame pitcher Gaylord Perry at a convention a few years ago. Others were asking Perry to sign baseballs and baseball cards, but Gisclair asked him to sign a jar of Vaseline. Perry was known for doctoring baseballs.

"I never used any foreign substances," said Perry

"I have a feeling they were domestic substances," said Gisclair. Perry signed the jar.

One story leads to another story and then another. "You follow the threads," said Gisclair. "There are just tons and tons of old stories. It's wonderful to get these guys to share their memories on tape."

Gisclair started his intensive research after a heart attack in 1999. "I wasn't going to watch daytime TV," he said. He is working on a book on the history of the Pelicans and is involved with two Web sites: www.neworleansbaseball.com and www.sabrneworleans.com.

"The (Society of American Baseball Research) guys have helped me tremendously," he said.

And the support of his wife Claire has been exceptional, he said.

"We spent my wife's 50th birthday at Yankee Stadium," he said. "Don't ask me how I did that. She's just a good sport and loves baseball, too."