

Diamond Memories: The Roots of Arlington Little League

BY TOM HAWKINS AND CHARLES S. CLARK

In March of 1951, Tom Hawkins, age 9, arrived at Peyton Randolph Elementary School on South Quincy Street with his baseball glove hanging from bicycle handlebars. “It was an Election Day in Arlington, and one of the men staffing the voting site asked whether I like to play baseball,” Hawkins recalled 66 years later.

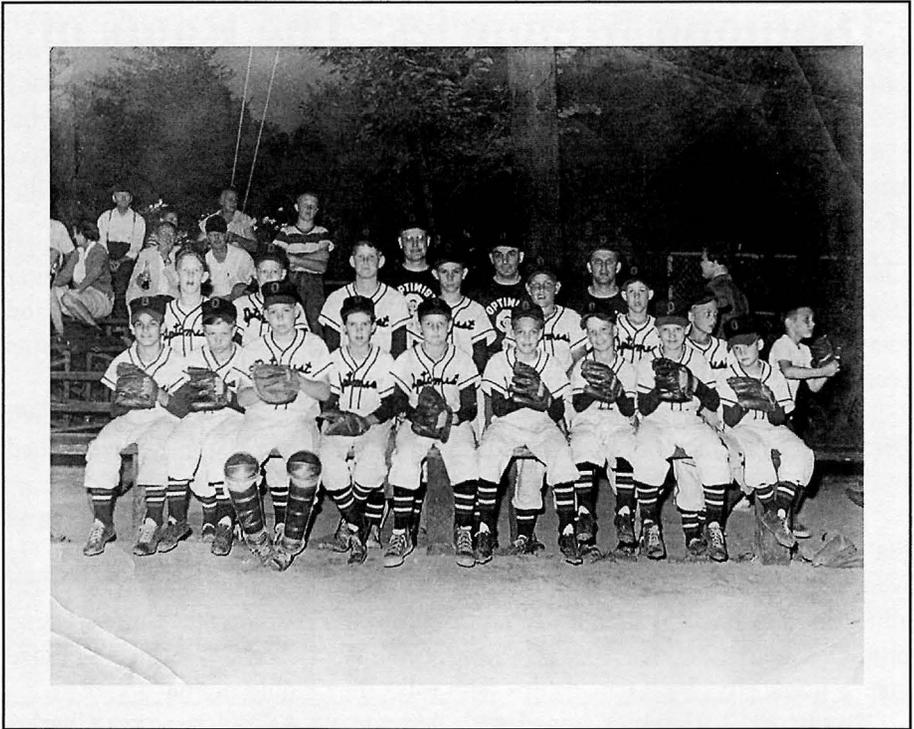
“I said yes, and he told me about tryouts being held at Four Mile Run field that Sunday. So I tried out for the Optimist Club Little League team coached by Jim Bowman. I made it.”

Like thousands of boys (and later girls) after him, Hawkins found that youth baseball on the public fields of Arlington changed his life. He went on to set a league record, became an Arlington Public Schools physical education teacher and then a fire chief before his retirement. “Little League brought together players from all over the county,” he says. “Because of those connections, guys built friendships with folks they would not have known.”

In 2017, Hawkins joined with 64-year-old Arlington writer Charles Clark—his former P.E. student at Williamsburg Jr. High—to piece together the history of that influential Arlington Little League. They traced it from its origins in the post-World War II suburban prosperity, through the pivotal ‘60s, to the multi-age—and co-ed—countywide character-building institution it remains today.

The league’s first stirrings in early 1951 were captured in a series of articles by reporter Frank Appel in the *Northern Virginia Sun*. Arlington already had a history of competitive men’s baseball, what with Washington-Lee High School, the Old Dominion semi-pro league and American Legion summer ball sending several to the Major Leagues (George McQuinn and Garland “Bill” Dailey), Hawkins notes. The old ballfield—at Ballston Stadium near Randolph St. where the Washington Redskins used to practice—was torn down just as Little League was getting started to make way a shopping center.

As the *Sun* reported, Arlington Parks and Recreation Department official Buck Richardson—inspired by the formation of the national Little League organization in Williamsport, Pa.--invited interested parties to a meeting to explore forming a baseball league for boys under age 12. Carl Stotz of the national organization came down speak to officials, coaches and parents.



Courtesy of the Hawkins Family
Optimist Club 1953, Tom Hawkins is in middle of second row. Photo taken at Four-Mile Run Park.

The visitor explained that national baseball rules would apply except: the playing field would be a miniature baseball diamond; the bases would be 60 feet apart; the pitcher's mound would be 45 feet from home plate; a pitcher could pitch only nine innings a week; and games would be six innings.

"All in all, it sounds like a wonderful idea for the kids," attendees said, according to the *Sun*. Arlington Little League would begin with teams playing "twice a week on a common field furnished by the Recreation Department." That meant finding "competent managers" on a budget of \$800.

Then under construction was a field at Four Mile Run (later called Barcroft Park), to be shared with an unlimited-age softball league. That park, it was determined at a March 28, 1951, meeting, would have lights, storage rooms, toilets, water fountains, a playroom and an open shelter. (Also being readied was the county's field at Greenbrier Park, now alongside Yorktown High School.)

First, "the Pee Wee" training league for the youngest boys would begin on June 6 under the lights at Four Mile Run. It was followed by the

older league for boys who had not turned 13 before Sept. 15, 1951. Each team roster would consist of 15 boys: five 12-year-olds, five 11-year-olds and five 10-year-olds and under. The ball to be used was the official Little League model. Teams had to be properly equipped: catcher's protective equipment and uniforms conforming in color and style as required by the Recreation Department (players without the uniform would not play). Games would be five innings.

Unlike in the rules for teens or adults, the pitching rubber would be 50 feet from home plate - the Arlington founders believed the extra five feet created a safer distance for the pitcher to be from the batter. Runners could not leave a base until the ball crossed over home plate.

Unlike in the rules for teens or adults, the pitching rubber would be 50 feet from home plate--the Arlington founders believed the extra five feet created a safer distance for the pitcher to be from the batter. The bat could not be longer than 33 inches. Runners could not leave a base until the ball crossed over home plate. Finally, as the *Sun* reported, "the umpires were instructed not to allow anyone who was not in uniform to sit on the bench of a team-- the league officials wanted the spectators to sit in the stands where they belonged."

The original sponsors for the Pee Wee teams were Falls Church Canteen, coached by Chuck Walker and wearing the color royal blue; Optimist Club (Hawkins' team) coached by Jim Bowman and wearing black; St. Mary's Episcopal Church's team managed by E.M. Norton wearing maroon; Fairlington Kiwanis managed by Phil Dobyns and wearing dark blue; Brumbach Plumbing managed by Dallas Pearson and wearing scarlet; and Barnes and Kimel managed by Donald Creamer and sporting purple.

The Pee Wee League was "packing them in," wrote Parks and Recreation Director Frank Alston in an essay in the *Sun*. "At least 400 people attended the triple-header on Wednesday night at Four Mile Run Park." There was an official scorer for each game, he reported, and the department had funding from Pepsi Cola to build a scoreboard for the kid-sized diamond.

The first results from those inaugural 1951 opening games: Falls Church Canteen beat Barnes and Kimel 6 to 0 as Doug Walker pitched a one-hitter; the Optimist Club beat Fairlington Kiwanis 6 to 0 with pitcher Dennis Hill allowing only two hits; and Brumbach's Plumbing beat St. Mary's 10 to 3 behind the pitching of Steve Ryan.



Courtesy of the Clark Family

Optimist Club 1962. No. 12 is Charles Clark's brother Tom. Photo taken at Bluemont Park.

The league was up and running. Hawkins and fellow future Arlington gym teacher Tim Hill would lead the league in hitting as recorded on the mimeographed statistics sheets compiled by the Recreation Department—aided by parents such as Mrs. DeNelson Ward. The stats included the “batting order” of top-hitting league players followed by each team’s lineup. The sheets provided each player’s at-bats, runs, hits, doubles, triples, homers, walks, strikeouts and batting averages. A history section memorialized batting and home run leaders back to 1954. Hawkins set the all-time hitting record that year, averaging .618.

In 1954 the Optimist Club team won the Arlington Little League championship (thus launching a dynasty that lasted into the 1960s). In those days, the champs did not compete to go to the Little League World Series—because of rules differences. Celebrated Major Leaguer George McQuinn, an Arlington native and namesake of McQuinn’s Sporting Goods, in the mid-‘50s showed up at Four Mile Run Park to give pointers on playing first base, according to Little League alumnus and Arlington attorney Bill Dolan.

“I played with or against some very good ball players,” Hawkins recalls, reeling off a string of names he has never forgotten. One slugger named Jimmy Baer, (he led the league with 8 home runs in 1954) was so large as a 12-year-old

that Optimist Coach Bowman once asked the opposing team to sideline him out of fairness.

Hawkins has never forgotten the travel tournament series played in Roanoke, Va. “We stayed with the Roanoke players and vice versa when they came to Arlington—it was the first time I’d been that far from Arlington,” he says. “The host families organized team events.”

But Hawkins reserves the most gratitude for the coaches. He recalls Mac Herndon (a coach in Arlington for 40 years), Bowman, George “Lefty” Freisem, Chuck Walker and Mort Irwin. “They were dedicated and understood baseball,” he says. Bowman in particular “taught kids how to play the game right: you hustled, you played smart baseball and above all, you exhibited sportsmanship.”

Expansion in the 60’s

The coaches were also influential for Charles Clark, who played from 1962-67 in what by then had expanded to three age groups: Arlington Little Major (ages 9-12), Junior Major (ages 13-14) and Senior Major (ages 15-16).

His teams were Optimist Club, Mario’s Pizza, Evening Optimist and Knights of Columbus. (Unlike Hawkins, he set no records, but he learned enough to return to the fields while a high school student to umpire.) The coaches he remembers from around the league include Maynard Waterfield, Burt Wittington, Howard Millner (who hit lofty fungo flyballs), Ralph Whikehart, Dana Pond, George Stevens, Sparky Bouchard and Don Lichty.

The best ones emphasized fundamentals, Clark recalled—such as fielding a grounder by starting with your glove on the ground and raising it as needed, and using both hands to catch a fly or pop-up (unlike today’s pro’s). Clark recalls being chewed out by a coach for showing up to practice on a chilly spring day without a jacket.

By the early ‘60s, Arlington youth baseball had expanded to include no-cut teams for younger kids (they had T-shirts rather than uniforms), and Barcroft Park had a diamond for girls softball as well. Fields the boys frequented included Bluemont, Jamestown, Nottingham and Tuckahoe elementary schools, Madison Manor, Westover field and the Marshall Annex. Barcroft Park’s old green wooden fences, dugouts and press box were rebuilt as red brick and chain-link.

The roster of team sponsors had grown to include businesses and nonprofits long vanished: Vet Vans, Martz Insurance, Newlons Transfer, Tops Drive-Inn, Old Dominion Bank, Arlington Trust, M.T. Broyhill homebuilders, Stewart Buick, Barcroft Cleaners, Cherner Ford, McQuinn’s Sporting Goods, the Red Shield Club (a Salvation Army offshoot), Kenyon-Peck Chevrolet, Barr Realty, State Loan, Clarendon Trust and First & Citizens Bank.

Some organizations that still exist but sponsor less frequently included the YMCA and since-relocated Arlington Motors, St. Thomas Moore Cathedral and Wayne Construction. The men's lodges that put their names on the kids' shirts included Host Lions, Civitan, Jaycees and Moose Lodge.

Clark never forgot the thrill of having a team photo reprinted in the *Northern Virginia Sun* (with names often misspelled). There was also the ritual of being taken by one's parents to Sampson's, McQuinn's or Sports Fair stores to buy cleats, gloves and the now-unfashionable white "sanitary socks" needed for uniform pants that stopped at the knee. The teams supplied balls, bats and plastic wrap-around batting helmets.

There was competition to qualify for teams (and some back room trading by coaches). If a player was going to be cut or transferred, the classier coaches would tell him in private; others simply singled the kid out in front of the whole squad.

The teams were not very integrated, and Clark recalls some teams forfeiting games once it was exposed that a player was too old. Participating in a countywide team allowed "you to meet kids from other schools, which meant you had already had played with some by the time you met again in high school," he observes.

Among the highlights of that era: in the early 60s, one of the better pitchers was Clay Kirby, who in 1960 batted .313 for Stewart Buick. He went on to star on the mound for Washington-Lee High School and then for the St. Louis Cardinals and San Diego Padres. There is more. Kirby's boyhood next-door neighbor was John "Jay" Franklin (Clark's teammate on a 12-year-olds all-star team). In 1965, Franklin batted .444 for Arlington Kiwanis. But when construction of Interstate-66 forced Arlington homes to be torn down, his family moved out of the Yorktown High School zone to Vienna, and Franklin pitched for state champion James Madison High School. With his terrifying 95-mph fastball, he was drafted by the majors No. 2 out of high school in 1971. After a summer in the minors, Franklin went on to pitch three games for the San Diego Padres, getting "lit up" by future Hall of Famers Johnny Bench and Hank Aaron.

Travel to tournaments was a thrill for Clark's generation as well, with all-star teams venturing regularly to Colonial Heights, VA., and York, PA.

Other highlights: One year the Arlington Trust team had 11 players named Mike. Many of us recall the disturbing sight of a player for the Moose Lodge, facing ace fast-baller John Brown of First National Bank, turning to bunt. The batter took a speedball right in the belly, and the crowd moaned as he keeled over.

On the lighter side, Clark recalls a Cherner Ford Black Knights player hitting a fly ball for extra bases. As he rounded second base, his cap blew off.

So he stopped and went back to retrieve it. That made it easy for our team to throw him out at third.

One of the joys of playing on Mario's Pizza was that, despite a mediocre record, players got free pizza after games. (Fifty years after Clark's stint on that team, he visited the wife of Coach Archie Shaffer; Marguerite still had the old woolen uniforms in her attic.)

Still Going in a New World

The Little League launched in Arlington in 1951 is today larger and more popular than ever, though with permutations. Gone are most of the heart-breaking cut-throat tryouts—the slogan is “where all kids are stars,” and all players get into each game. Some obvious changes: use of metal bats, girls on boys teams, and games on Sundays.

Barcroft Park was upgraded and modernized in the 21st century, thanks to a partnership with the George Washington University baseball team.

In the mid-1980s, the parents in the Little League split into two groups, one of which formed the Arlington Babe Ruth league, which allows the season for some to extend to the fall for travel teams. Some parents felt

the county program “wasn't enough of a hands-on operation,” said Little League president and volunteer Adam Balutis in 2014, “and the old system of neighborhood-based sponsors “was too easily manipulated” to recruit elite players.

The current system with February tryouts uses a draft “to make sure each team is balanced, so each has some studs and has a chance of fielding a winning team,” he said.

Babe Ruth offers an array of levels of play, beginning with “Blastball (soft bats and balls for 4-5-year-olds) up through T Ball, Single A, Double A Tripple A, and Majors. Variations to serve different ages and abilities include coach-pitch, machine pitch and rules adjustments, such as dispensing with the catcher returning the ball to the pitcher by stationing a bucket of balls by the pitcher's mound. Organized as “minor league” versions of the Washington Nationals, the Babe Ruthers wear shirts with sponsors such as Pie-Tanza and Dick's Sporting Goods.

The current system with February tryouts uses a draft “to make sure each team is balanced, so each has some studs and has a chance of fielding a winning team.”

—Little League president and volunteer Adam Balutis



Arlington Babe Ruth League Website

Contemporary Arlington Babe Ruth League game.

While the first Arlington leagues may have involved 100-300 boys, by 2017, participants had swollen to 3,000 for both leagues. “It became so popular, we ran out of space for activities,” said John Blevins, the county’s sports and enterprise section supervisor; hence the Sunday games.

The Babe Ruth teams today bear names that mimic the Major Leaguers or deploy flavorful monikers like the Timber Rattlers and the Lugnuts. The nearly 50 commercial sponsors are as important as ever. The operation is complex enough to require a 25-member board (not all of whom are parents) to handle insurance, training for coaches, regional tournaments and the occasionally pushy mom or dad.

As it did in our era, the *Sun-Gazette* reports some game results. But the Little League website, with its nifty color photos, spares kids with low batting averages from having them posted for grandmother to see, though it does post team standings. An anonymous online “Barcroft Insider” provides coverage a little more pointed. The Website’s Hall of Fame goes back to the early 1990s. It honors not elite players but the adult volunteers.

That approach is something Clark understands. “Looking back at the ‘60s, I give a special thanks to the parents who got us up early on Saturdays and drove all over Arlington’s creation for practices, games and awards picnics,” he says.

We'll give Hawkins the last word:

“Arlington Little League was a great experience because I met players from all over the county and region--kids from Bailey’s Crossroads, Falls Church, McLean. Later, those communities formed their own leagues, and the Arlington teams were composed mostly of Arlington boys,” he says. “Today, I have renewed friendships with men I knew from the Arlington Little League. “And if I am playing softball or baseball, I remember the lessons taught by Mr. Bowman. One rule he enforced at every practice was ‘Know what you are going to do with the ball if it comes to you.’ “One could apply it to everyday life,” Hawkins says. “Think what you will do with the experiences life will throw at you, and be prepared.”

About the Author’s

Tom Hawkins grew up in South Arlington near Four Mile Run Park. He graduated from Wakefield High School in 1959 having entered Wakefield the day it opened. Later Tom was teacher and coach at Williamsburg Junior High. In the early 70’s he entered the fire service. In 1978 he was appointed Fire Chief of Arlington. In 1993 he became Fire Chief in Alexandria, retiring in 2003 after suffering a heart attack.

Charles S. Clark, a frequent contributor to the Magazine, grew up near Chain Bridge. He is a journalist who writes the “Our Man in Arlington” column for the Falls Church News-Press. His book “Hidden History of Arlington County” was published in July 2017 by The History Press.
