

Essex Base Ball Organization

By Alexandra Pecci | Photos by Trev Stair and Matthew Muise



I glimpse them first through a row of ancient maples as they play their game in the sunny, open field. These baseball players might be ghosts, merely apparitions in the Indian summer morning, were it not for the physical evidence of dust clouds kicked up by the bounce of a well-hit ball or the running of feet across the worn-flat grass.

“That’s trouble, that’s trouble,” one of the infielders calls, as a ball cracks off the hitter’s bat. The second baseman lets the ball bounce once on the grass before making a barehanded catch for the out. “Nice hustle! Nice job! Atta boy!” the guys shout to each other, and the game carries on. Here, at the edge of a field in Newbury, Massachusetts, my husband and I are watching a different kind of baseball game than we’re used to. This is vintage baseball (or base ball, in 1860s vernacular) as played by the Essex Base Ball Organization, and the year—at least in our imaginations—is 1864.

Gloves, helmets, painted baselines, and a manicured diamond are absent. The teams play on a simple grass field, and players wear loose uniforms with shirts that are either laced down the front or covered by a large bib adorned with the first letter of their team name. Striped socks are pulled up high underneath baggy knickerbockers, and short-brimmed caps sit floppily on the players’ heads. What players call a “lemon-peel” baseball is made of one piece of leather with an “X” stitched down the middle.

“I love history. I love being able to see how the game changed,” organization president Brian Sheehy tells me later. “You can see the evolution of the game by playing vintage base ball.” Hundreds of teams are scattered across the country, but according to Sheehy, the Essex Base Ball Organization is one of only a few full leagues that play at a dedicated home field. Games occur most weekends from late May to mid-October at the 17th-century Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, a historic home and property that’s managed by the preservation organization Historic New England. The league has four core teams, plus two travel teams that play across New England and New York. Historical authenticity is part of the experience. The Essex Base Ball Organization’s teams are named for actual 19th-century Massachusetts and New Hampshire clubs. Uniform designs also are based on local history. On the team benches, technology is tucked away and players drink from glass bottles or metal cups.

“We’ve tried to make it look as authentic as we can,” says Sheehy, who’s also a high school history teacher.

That authenticity extends beyond aesthetics. The teams use 1864 rules, so there are no baseball gloves, which weren’t introduced until the 1870s. The “bound” rule allows players to catch the ball on a single bounce for an out. Pitchers throw underhand from 45 feet away, and runners can be tagged out if they overrun first base.

I’m jarred at first, but after a couple of innings, I catch on to the 1864 rules and follow the game easily from my lawn chair, sipping a beer from the Ipswich Ale Brewery truck that’s parked nearby. Soon, the game is over, with the Newburyport Clamdiggers besting the Lynn Live Oaks. The teams stand in two rows facing each other as they raise their caps over their heads and shout, “Hip, hip, huzzah!” three times into the air, flourishing their caps with each gentlemanly cheer.

The players exit the field and return to the 21st century, retrieving Gatorade bottles from bags and hugging their kids. No, they’re not ghosts. But maybe they are—for a few hours a week, anyhow—time travelers.