

STRANGER THAN ...

Morgan Field has had a long and storied life. The oldest stadium in the majors, it is targeted every year by those baseball neophytes who care more about the financial end of matters than they do about the spiritual side of the game. I say spiritual because Morgan Field has taken on the aura of hallowed ground. Every year it puts up a valiant resistance to modernization.

As an example of the shortsightedness of these money gurus, let me cite attendance records. Since the last nail was set, this historic stadium has been sold out for every game ever played there. When asked to name any modern stadium to match that record, they offer lame excuses that are best left to the boardroom. Just because it only has a capacity of 10,000 fans, they feel like that's some kind of relevant argument.

Baseball history books are filled with stories about Morgan Field. Many of them are strange. There is perhaps none stranger than the one we are going to visit today.

The Crows and the Blues often met with fireworks. Both teams obliterated their opponents with powerhouse hitting. The league lead in homers, runs, extra base hits, and team batting average vacillated back and forth between those two rivals. Fans frequently enjoyed games that totaled thirty runs or more when the two teams played each other.

The weather for the game we posthumously, so to speak, attended was hot and steamy. While the umpires suffered in that kind of temperature with their traditional all-black attire, the vendors in the stands easily dwarfed other stadiums' sales volume of hot dogs and ice-cold beer for a single game.

It is with complete astonishment that we re-tell the account of this game. Our tale begins in the tenth inning. After nine innings of regulation play, the score between the two titans stood at 0 to 0. Even more unbelievable remained the fact that neither team had garnished a single hit through those first nine innings. Yes, it is true. Both starting pitchers went the full nine innings throwing no-hitters against the two top hitting teams in the league.

Leading off the tenth for the Blues was their big gun, Ingmar Johansenn. The Crows chose to let their starter, Jack Crawford, pitch another inning. As is often the case with power hitters such as Johansenn, they were free swingers and tended to strike out a lot. Crawford's combination of a blistering fastball, a deceptive changeup, and a wicked curve made Johansenn's walk back to the dugout a quick one.

Next up was Jake Shuster, no less a free swinger than Johansenn. Unfortunately for the Blues, Shuster's fate followed that of his predecessor in the lineup. I gotta tell you, Crawford still looked very strong out there. The next hitter tried something totally foreign to the slugging legacy of the Blues – a bunt. It may have been a case of sign stealing, we can't say for sure, but the Crows' third baseman, Eddie McCumber, was standing ten feet in on the grass. He threw out the attempted bunter easily.

The Crows then had a chance to end the affair with their big bats in the bottom of the tenth. The Blues also decided to let their starting pitcher, Max Smith, go another inning. The first Blues batter,

Greg Accord, stretched the count to three balls and two strikes. Smith was determined not to let Accord get on base with a walk so he fired a heater that looked to be right over the heart of the plate. But the umpire called it a ball. As could be expected, the Blues manager and half the dugout engaged in a dramatic argument with the umpire that lasted for over ten minutes. The end result of the fiasco landed Accord on first base with a walk and the manager and half the dugout in the locker room.

The next batter for the Crows drilled a sharp grounder to the shortstop. A tailor-made double play opportunity went through the shortstop's legs into center field for an error and the runners advanced to second and third. The pitching coach for the Blues called the bullpen and slowly walked out to the mound. The conference on the hill lasted for as long as the home plate umpire would allow it. The coach then walked slowly back to the dugout. They made the decision to intentionally walk the next slugger to set up a force play at home if necessary. Of course, the pitcher took as much time as possible between the four pitches needed to walk the batter.

With the base loaded, the pitching coach came back out to the mound and signaled for his ace reliever to take over.

John Bannister had the highest strikeout ratio per nine innings the league had ever known. He did not disappoint, for the first two batters he faced fell victim to that strikeout ratio.

The Crows manager then came out to speak to the home plate umpire. It was announced that Billy Hathaway would be a pinch hitter. Normally, it was not usually done in that manner, but it was later determined to be a psychological maneuver. Billy Hathaway had the lowest batting average of any player in the league, including pitchers. Why would the Crows manager decide to make such a move?

While Billy Hathaway occupied the bottom of the list in hits, he did lead the league in getting hit by pitches. He had more broken bones than all other teams combined.

Before Billy could step into the batter's box the umpire motioned for the field crew to come over. He instructed them to dress up the lines of the

batter's box that Billy would be using. He wasn't going to give Billy an inch.

Billy stepped into the batter's box and nudged the new line that marked how close he could stand to the plate. He had the incredible ability to lean way over the plate without losing his balance and falling down. Bannister wound up and threw a blazing fastball right at Billy's head. Well, not even Billy was so stupid as to let himself get hit in the head by one of Bannister's fastballs. Billy bailed out and went into all kinds of theatrics. The umpire finally told him to just get back into the batter's box.

Before Billy stepped back in, he knelt down and began to pray. The umpire wasn't quite sure what to do. He knew Billy's reputation, but it just seemed disrespectful to interrupt a man while he was praying. Finally, Billy got back into the box, but he still leaned over as far as he could.

Bannister looked in to get the sign, but he kept shaking it off. The catcher called time and went out to the mound. Bannister felt he had another pitch to waste so he wanted to throw it at Billy's head again even though it would clearly be

a ball. Billy leaned over so far that his head was in the opposite batter's box. The catcher just wanted him to throw a strike. They worked it out and the catcher headed back, but when he got back to his position Billy had moved to the other side to bat left-handed. The catcher went back out to the mound. After a lengthy discussion, the catcher headed back to home plate, but Billy had moved back to hit right-handed.

By this time Bannister was getting mad, so the catcher let him have his way. The pitcher wound up and fired a fastball right towards Billy's head again. But he made a slight miscalculation in his target. This time the ball was so far outside that the catcher couldn't get to it. The runner on third dashed home and the game ended.

The Crows won the game 1 to 0 and nobody got a hit. Strange ... indeed.

Just another cog in the odd and storied history of Morgan Field. The sports editor of the local newspaper interviewed a lifetime season ticket holder coming out of the stadium and the fan said, "Modernization ... umph ... And lose all this?"