



They're Rolling The Dice; APBA Retains A Faithful Following, As This Weekend's Convention Is Showing.



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The 1930 Philadelphia A's went 102-52, and beat the St. Louis Cardinals in six games in the World Series.

The A's featured Hall of Famers Lefty Grove, Jimmie Foxx, Mickey Cochrane and Al Simmons.

Really good team. Perhaps not historically great, but really, really good.

More importantly, the '30 A's are living on as the runaway favorite of this year's APBA Convention.

The convention, which concludes today at the Heritage Hotel centers around a championship tournament in the dice baseball game beloved by baseball fans/math geeks.

APBA originated in Lancaster, in 1951. The company is still headquartered here.

The convention has been held annually since 2002 in either Lancaster or Las Vegas.

This year there are 93 attendees, a record 86 of whom played in the tournament.

They come from as far away as California and Canada. Some of them have come every year.

"The game is great," said Mike Davidson of Citrus Hills, Calif. "The people who play the game are better."

For the uninitiated: Every team in major league history has a set of APBA cards for its roster, with rating/numbers based on how each player performed in the season in question.

The numbers on the cards correspond to dice-rolls, and those numbers match up with a situation booklet that determines outcomes.

APBA players manage their teams, deciding to play small ball or slug away, pinch-hit, steal, bunt, make pitching changes.

But the biggest and most interesting decision APBA managers make is which team to use.

Past tournament champions aren't eligible. That pushes legendary teams like the 1927 Yankees and '75 Reds (and the '77 Phillies) off the table.

The strike years of 1981 and '94 are also out, as are certain turn-of-the-century-era teams because of errors in the cards.

Which brings us back to the 1930 A's. There were 15 divisions in the "regular-season" portion of this year's tournament. Every division had at least one entrant playing as the '30 A's.

The 1929 and '31 A's won more games. The '30 club had gaudy offensive numbers - Simmons had a monster year, hitting .381 with a .708 slugging percentage, and the team had five .300 hitters plus one .299 - but everybody hit for average then.

"They had sluggers, but they had some pitching," Davidson said.

Some? Grove went 28-5 with a 2.52 ERA.

Davidson himself played this year as the 1962 Mets, famously among the worst teams in major league history.

"Why not the '62 Mets?" he asked. "It's a chance to embarrass some people."

He'd embarrassed only one to that point. He was 1-4 halfway through the early rounds.

"Pretty much like the '62 Mets," he said.

Davidson is a college math professor, which, along with his maleness, makes him stereotypical of this group.

"Numbers - that's what we live for," he said.

They are not lacking for eccentricity. One guy had a Homer Simpson puppet roll the dice for him. Last year a young entrant had action figures for every regular on his Baltimore Orioles team.

There were T-shirts bearing the wearer's own, fictional APBA card, and an assortment of off-the-path baseball jerseys and hats, like those of the Harrisburg Giants of the Negro Leagues, and the early, minor-league version of the Toronto Blue Jays.

The top guns in this year's field were Brian Wells, 17, of Wyomissing and John Duke of Knoxville, Tenn.

Wells won it all in 2002 (at age 9!) as the 2002 Arizona Diamondbacks, and in '08 as the 2001 Seattle Mariners.

Duke, an avuncular, white-bearded guy who stands 6-7, won in 2007 as the 1927 Yankees, and in 2009 as the 1909 Pirates.

In his title runs Duke had just two single-game losses, both to Wells. But Duke also eliminated Wells both years.

Duke's run for a third title seemed in trouble late Saturday morning, though. He had already been beaten twice, and a guy in a Yankees jersey was bragging (politely) about having just stolen home on him.

The playoffs began Saturday afternoon, with the semifinals scheduled for 9 a.m. today and the final at 10 a.m.

Wells, who will play football for Wyomissing High in the fall and run track in the spring, started playing APBA at age 7.

When he won the convention title two years later, "That was my peak of playing," he said. "When I play now, it's pretty much only in July."

That includes a 12-team tournament Wells played by himself to determine which team he'd use this weekend. The winner, for the second straight year, was the 2004 St. Louis Cardinals.

Wells didn't sound like a cutthroat competitor.

"You don't want to look this up on Wikipedia and see the same couple guys winning every year," he said.

"All these guys are cool, and really funny. It'd be fun to see one of them win it, because some of them really want it."

Wells is already looking ahead to the convention in 2014, when he turns 21.

"I'm hoping they have that one in Vegas," he said.

Mike Gross

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