

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

He Didn't Forget the Ladies

He invented "Ladies' Day", and for this and numerous other innovations Abner Powell is fondly remembered. An article in *Sports Illustrated* Magazine summed it up:

"If there were real justice in such matters, Charles Abner Powell would be in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Not for his feats on the playing field, although they were considerable, but for his immeasurable contribution to the game of baseball as an American institution."

The 1973 article went on to state what his "oversized" plaque might read once he was granted a spot in Cooperstown with the other great Baseball Hall of Famers:

"Charles Abner (Ab) Powell, player, manager and club owner, developer of baseball's first rain check, Ladies' Day, the Knothole Gang, the field tarpaulin, free soda pop, band music and one of minor league baseball's superteams." And his ideas took hold throughout baseball.

The *Sports Illustrated* piece also suggested they might "toss in the fact that he was the only manager ever to fire his entire squad at once."

That team was the Pelicans, and Abner Powell was its manager. He was born December 15, 1860, in the coal hills of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. To avoid the life of a coalminer like his father (and every other young man in his community), baseball offered young Powell a ticket out. His mother, however, laid down the law and forbade him to play baseball. She didn't believe the career to be "respectable", even though she smoked a pipe and operated a tavern. He didn't heed her admonishment.

This aspiring pitcher played only two years of professional baseball, debuting with the Washington Nationals in 1884 and finishing with the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1886. He played with the Baltimore Orioles in between. But with only two years in the majors, Powell

made as many significant contributions to the national pastime as any other person in the history of the sport.

Powell arrived in the Crescent City in 1887, taking a job with the New Orleans Pelicans for \$175 a month. He would manage the team for sixteen years. The Pels won the Southern Association pennant that year, with Powell (as Captain) playing in 98 games, alternating as pitcher and outfielder. He batted .354 and stole 89 bases. He also dreamed up some revolutionary ideas for baseball that very first season.

He realized that baseball had always ignored the ladies, most clubs believing women to be simply uninterested in athletics. It was not a sport open to the ladies because, in truth, the men were not acting like gentlemen. There was always a great deal of profanity, and brawling was commonplace. Sometimes fights erupted between entire teams, and the spectators razed and mobbed umpires for unpopular decisions. But Powell saw an opportunity and an untapped reservoir of fans among the city's women, and he decided to capture that market.

He ran ads in the *Times-Picayune*, setting aside one day each week for the ladies. The first day of "Ladies' Day", April 29, 1887, attracted only nine of the fairer sex. But, guess what. There was a substantial increase in male attendance that day. More ladies showed up the second week and many more the following week. Soon hundreds of women were watching the Pelicans, and a certain increased number of men were watching the ladies. Attendance continued to climb, often hitting 5,000 on weekdays and 10,000 on weekends, enviable totals for many minor league clubs even today. The *Picayune* reported that the damsels "came in carriages, in buggies, in street cars, and on trains, charming in their spring attire, and made the cozy bandstand a bower of beauty."

His other big ideas were conceived in the rain. New Orleans, he learned, was one of the rainiest cities in the nation, averaging more than 50 inches a year. After each rainfall, the infield at Sportsman's Park (located near what is now City Park Avenue and the Pontchartrain Expressway across from Greenwood Cemetery) would become a quagmire for days at a time. Powell started to work on a plan (a domed roof over the park was not practical back then). The answer came to him when he saw stevedores on the riverfront throwing waterproof tarpaulins over bales of cotton. Within days, Powell began covering the infield between games. Now games could commence shortly after rainstorms. The Cincinnati Reds played an exhibition in New Orleans and took the idea north with them.

The rain check was perhaps Powell's most brilliant money-saving idea. Games were oftentimes washed out in early innings, or even before they ever got started. Standard practice on rainouts then was to give

new tickets to the fans as they left the park. But the club was losing money big time because many fans had sneaked into the game — by slipping past security or climbing fences, or by knowing somebody at the gate. More tickets were given out to those leaving than were sold in the first place, “a whale of a lot more tickets,” said Powell. He pondered the problem for a full year until inspiration struck him. He came up with a design for a new kind of admission ticket. Instead of taking the entire ticket at the gate, attendants would now take only half, leaving the spectator with a dated detachable stub good in the event of game postponed for rain. Unfortunately for Powell, he did not patent his idea for perforated tickets, and other clubs soon began adopting the rain check for themselves.

Another great accomplishment of Powell's was to enable kids without the money for a ticket to see a baseball game. Powell had come from a poor family, and it made him sad to see dozens of young kids hanging around outside the ballpark, trying to freeload, unable to afford admission. Realizing, too, that baseball's future resided in these future success stories, Powell decided to give them a better glimpse of the game than they could obtain by peeking through a knothole in the fence. He sold the Pelican club owner his idea: letting the kids come in free one day a week. That taste of baseball would certainly insure their loyalty as fans in later years. He dubbed these pint-sized aficionados the Knothole Gang. Branch Rickey, another baseball genius, borrowed Powell's brainstorm. Like the rain check, the Knothole Gang became a baseball tradition.

Another remarkable thing Powell did was to make his team too successful. By building one of the superteams of minor league history, he put himself and a hundred other players out of work. The Pelicans started off the 1889 season by winning 12 straight games, losing one, then winning 11 more. At first the team's success drew large crowds, but as the wins became commonplace, bored fans started staying home. After several weeks of this, the seven other teams decided to disband and the league called it quits. By 1892 the Southern Association recovered from the setback of Pelican success and reorganized. But Powell was not able to come anywhere near his club's 1889 performance except in the second half of the 1901 season. In July of that year the Pelicans were dead last. Powell was angry and decided to do something about his “lazy” team. “I went to North Carolina,” he related, “and bought myself 12 players for \$1,200. They were the key men up there, and after they left, the North Carolina league collapsed. When I got back to New Orleans the old team said to me, ‘What are you going to do with us?’ I said to ‘em, ‘You're all fired. Go on up in the stands and watch a real team.’ Well, they howled and hooted and hissed and booed, but my new team couldn't be stopped.” He was right. His totally new squad went on to win 80% of their remaining games, elevating the team to second place, only one game short of a pennant win.

Sportsman's Park witnessed many more of Powell's marketing gimmicks, such as free cold drinks, orchestras, gate prizes, fireworks displays, pitching contests and fielding competitions. He also became part owner and, later, sole proprietor of the club. Powell had to advance money sometimes to ailing franchises just to keep the league going. Once he found himself owner or part owner of clubs throughout the South.

Powell left the game in 1904 and tried various business ventures, but his heart was still with baseball. And he remained in great physical condition after his retirement. When he was almost 70 he was turned down for a job as an umpire, being told, "At your age they'd kill you out there." Seems they didn't really know the man. 15 years later Powell completed a base-running exhibition in only 22 seconds, timed by stopwatch. At 90 he was still driving, and at 91 he painted his house after climbing a 38-foot ladder. But in the summer of 1953, after chopping down and cutting up a chinaberry tree in his New Orleans backyard, Powell collapsed with a heart attack and died (aged 92). He's interred in Hope Mausoleum, New Orleans.

Since 1859, when amateur baseball leagues played their games on the grounds of the Delachaise Estate near present day Louisiana Avenue, baseball has had a long and interesting history in the Crescent City. Abner Powell made the game more accessible to kids and ladies, while keeping the playing field dry and the customers satisfied. His legacy is vast, for his concepts were always major league.

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