



PHOTO: COURTESY ROSSLAND HISTORICAL MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

Rossland's baseball grounds at Black Bear pond, showing the Black Bear working of the Le Roi mine, compressor and ore bins. Today this is the site of the museum and Highway 3B.

THE KOOTENAY WASHINGTON LEAGUE

The story of our brief flirtation with pro baseball

In 1897, Rossland and Kaslo residents could do something no one else in West Kootenay has been able to before or since: root for their own professional baseball teams.

Those places, along with Spokane, made up the short-lived Kootenay-Washington association — also known as the North-western International league, Spokane and Kootenay league, and British Columbia-Washington league.

Founded that April in Kaslo, the league was originally expected to include a team from Nelson, but the club folded without playing a single game for lack of a suitable field. Trail and Sandon were suggested as possible replacements, but it didn't happen.

Two members of the league executive are well-remembered today but not for their association with baseball: Rossland's founder, Ross Thompson, was president and Nelson's first mayor, John Houston, was vice-president.

The schedule called for each club to play 44 games between May 24 and September 15. Players were recruited locally and from out of town, but it's unclear if they negotiated individual contracts.

Many held other jobs, including the league's most noteworthy player, Kaslo pitcher-manager George (Chief) Borchers, described by Spokane baseball historian Jim Price as a "hard-drinking, hell-raising young right-hander." He played 14 games in the majors with Chicago and Louisville between 1888 and 1895 and had been arrested several times for being drunk and disorderly. When he wasn't running Kaslo's

team, he had a newsstand and tobacco shop.

Other notables included Kaslo pitcher Howard Nash and third baseman Ed (Trilby) Rankin, both formerly of the Portland Monograms; shortstop Owney Patton, who had a long minor league career all over the US; and Spokane first baseman Leslie Belt, son of the city's mayor.

Kaslo's home field was on a hill overlooking the town, which had previously been a "wilderness of stumps." (It's roughly where the high school field is today.) Citizens raised \$2,400 to support the club before it incorporated and issued \$10,000 in stock. The team's uniforms were white with blue trim.

Rossland, meanwhile, played on the Black Bear sporting grounds, approximately where the museum parking lot and Highway 3B are now. The grandstand accommodated 700 with bleacher seating for another 200. The team's uniforms were gray with emerald green caps, stockings, and belts "in deference to the wishes of the players. They are all Irishmen."

Spokane played at Twickenham Park, later renamed Natatorium Park, which closed in 1968. Its uniforms were Yale gray with maroon trim and "Spokane" in large letters across the breast.

The teams didn't have official nicknames, although Rossland was sometimes informally called the Miners.

Kaslo's newspaper, *The Kootenaian*, put up a "handsome silver cup, standing 22 inches high" for the league championship, with an eagle and beaver engraved on it to symbolize the US and Canada.

Opening day saw Spokane beat host Kaslo 17-15 in a match played ➤



CREG NESTEROFF COLLECTION

This photo of an unidentified early Rossland ball player was probably taken a few years after the Kootenay Washington league folded.

before 1,000 to 1,800 people, depending on the estimate — virtually the city's entire population. According to the *Rossland Miner*, "The grandstand was crowded, a very large proportion of the occupants being ladies, whose bright frocks and beaming countenances were decidedly effective."

Gate receipts came to over \$800 — well in excess of \$20,000 in today's currency. Visiting clubs were guaranteed \$50 per game or 50 per cent of the take. Ticket prices varied: Spokane charged 25 cents with ladies admitted free to the grandstand, while Kaslo charged 50 cents for bleacher seats and \$1 for the grandstand, and Rossland 25 and 50 cents respectively.

Spokane won its first seven games, while Kaslo and Rossland went winless. Then two Spokane players, Eddie Marshall and Al Arneson, de-

fectured to Rossland. Spokane and Kaslo both protested, but the matter was resolved when Spokane's manager agreed the two could stay, provided Arneson paid an old debt.

It didn't help: by mid-July, Kaslo and Spokane were neck-in-neck in the standings, with win-loss records of 12-8 and 11-7 respectively, while Rossland lagged far behind at 5-13.

At that point, two Rossland players — pitcher George Baker and third baseman Marshall — allegedly threw a game against Spokane, although their motive wasn't clear. In the eighth inning, Spokane scored six runs, en route to a 13-9 win.

"It was the most disgusting exhibition ever seen on a ball field," *The Kootenaian* fumed. "The spectators hissed and cried shame, but the crooked players continued indifferent, even when those present left their seats and the grounds and went home."

The *Rossland Miner* was more forgiving. It published a letter from a third player denying any involvement in the scheme and added the team's finances had always been poor, with Ross Thompson personally out of pocket \$1,600.

After that, Rossland folded, and with more than half the schedule remaining, the league followed suit.

Although Kaslo had a slightly better winning percentage, Spokane claimed it deserved the Kootenaian Cup based on a forfeit against Rossland. *Kootenaian* editor and trophy trustee David W. King disagreed. Talk of a Spokane-Kaslo championship series came to naught.

What happened to the cup — then on display in Spokane — is unknown. It may yet turn up, a reminder of West Kootenay's brief flirtation with pro ball. 🍪

— With thanks to Jim Price and Peter A. Watson