

# BASE PATHS

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## Baseball's First World Champions: The Providence Grays

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Few baseball fans know that Providence once had a major league baseball team and fewer still know anything about this team. However, one of the most interesting chapters in the history of baseball was written by the Providence Grays who were part of the National League from 1878 until 1885. In eight years the Grays fielded two pennant winning teams. Five members of baseball's Hall of Fame played for the Grays, two of whom managed the team. In 1884 the Grays won the National League pennant and went on to win the first interleague, post-season playoff (the first equivalent of the World Series) sweeping all three games from the New York Metropolitans of the American Association (then a major league). That year the Grays were led by pitcher Charles (Hoss) Radbourn who posted what is probably the greatest single season record in the history of baseball – 60 victories.

### 1878: The First Season

The Grays joined the National League in the third year of its existence, 1878. The team finished in third place with a record of 33 wins and 27 losses. Centerfielder Paul Hines was the batting star of the team. He led the National League in batting average (.358), runs batted in (50), and home runs (4). Hines was the first "triple-crown" winner in major league history. That year he also gained the distinction of being the first major league player to make an unassisted triple-play. Hines is the only player who was a member of the Grays during all eight years of the team's existence. The pitching star of the team was Hall of Famer John Montgomery Ward who posted a record of 22 wins and 13 losses and led the league with an earned run average of 1.58. The eighteen year old Ward set a record that he shares with several other pitchers by pitching shutouts in his first two major league starts with the Grays in 1878. Ward's lifetime earned run average of 2.10 is the fourth lowest for all major league pitchers. Ward pitched for the Grays in the early part of his career; he later played for many years as a shortstop and outfielder for the New York Giants. He earned a law degree in the off-season and organized the Players' Brotherhood, the first professional baseball players union. Ward was the main leader of the short-lived Players' League, organized by the Player's Brotherhood in 1890. Although the Players' League collapsed after only one season (due to poor financial backing), the league succeeded in signing most of the top players of the

day and enjoyed better attendance than the National League during the 1890 season.

### **1879: The First Pennant**

The Grays added two members to its roster in 1879: rightfielder "Orator Jim" O'Rourke and shortstop George Wright, who replaced George Ware as manager of the team. (O'Rourke left the Boston team in a huff over a financial dispute with owner Arthur Soden, a notorious skinflint who demanded that O'Rourke pay \$20 for his baseball uniform.) O'Rourke added offensive punch to the Grays and hit a splendid .348. In addition the Grays acquired star firstbaseman "Old Reliable" Joe Start from Chicago. The 37-year-old Start hit .319 for the Grays in 1879 and stayed with them for the rest of their history. Start ended his career with a lifetime batting average of .301. Hines hit .357 and Ward posted the best record of any pitcher in the league: 47 wins and 19 losses. Manager Wright led the team to its first pennant. The Grays finished with a record of 59 wins and 25 losses, 5 games ahead of the Boston Red Caps managed by George Wright's brother, Harry. The excitement of the close pennant race was enhanced by the fierce sibling rivalry. The Grays clinched the pennant in the last week of the season by winning a game against Boston, with George Wright scoring the winning run. The Providence fans erupted in what was described as the biggest demonstration "since Lee's surrender." In spite of an outpouring of interest and enthusiasm for the games with Boston and Chicago, the Grays drew poorly in this and other years. Total attendance for 1879 was only 43,000; total receipts were about \$12,000 – considerably short of the team's expenses.

The Wrights were among the most important figures in early professional baseball both as players and managers. Harry Wright was the owner and founder of the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the first professional baseball team. He introduced "knickers" or the "knickerbocker" style of uniform still used in baseball to this day. Brother George was the team's star player. In 1869 the Red Stockings toured the country playing local teams and taking on all comers; they won 68 of the 69 games in which they played, the other game ending in a tie. George Wright is generally considered to be one of the greatest players in early professional baseball. In 1937 he became one of the first 11 men elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Brother Harry was elected in 1953. After the 1879 season, George Wright entered into a partnership to found the Wright-Ditson Sporting Emporium on Dorrance Street in Providence; Wright-Ditson later became an important manufacturer of sporting goods.

### **1880: Second Place**

In 1880 the Grays lost both right fielder O'Rourke and manager shortstop George Wright to Harry Wright's Boston team. Jim Bullock (who was replaced later in the season by Bob Morrow) became the team's manager. In spite of these losses, the Grays posted a record of 52 wins and 32 losses – a won-lost

percentage of .619 – good enough for first place in most years. But 1880 was the year that Cap Anson built his Chicago White Stockings (later to become known as the Cubs) into the dominant team of their era and the Grays finished in second place 15 games behind Chicago who won with 67 wins and 17 losses. The highlight of the season was Ward's perfect game (the second in major league history) on June 17 against Buffalo.

#### **1881: Radbourn Arrives**

In 1881 the Grays finished second to Anson's White Stockings for the second consecutive season. The most important development of the year was the arrival of pitcher Charles Radbourn. Radbourn quickly supplanted Ward as the team's best pitcher. He posted a record of 25 and 13 and also played 38 games as an outfielder and shortstop when not pitching.

#### **1882: The Wright Brothers Make a Run For It**

In 1882 the Wright brothers joined the Grays; Harry as manager and George at shortstop where he hit a very disappointing .162 in what was to be his last season as a player. The Grays finished second to Chicago for the third season in a row; but they came close to taking it all, finishing only three games behind Anson's team in a very exciting and bitterly fought pennant race. Radbourn was quickly emerging as the top pitcher in the game and posted 33 wins and 19 losses. Ward had 19 wins and 12 losses in his last season with the Grays. On August 17 he threw the longest shutout ever pitched by one pitcher (18 innings). Radbourn, who played the game in the outfield, hit a home run to win the game 1-0. At the end of the season the financially troubled Buffalo team received permission to play its last three home games against Chicago in Chicago in the hope of making more money. This gave Chicago a home field advantage and Anson's team swept all three games – the margin of difference in the pennant race. The Wrights protested bitterly and league officials scheduled a post-season play-off between Chicago and Providence. Chicago swept the series.

#### **1883: A Fall to Third Place**

The Grays slipped to third place but still finished only 5 games behind first place Boston and 1 game behind second place Chicago. In 1883 George Wright retired and Ward was sold to the New York Giants where he ended his career as a pitcher and began a long and illustrious career as a shortstop and outfielder. Charlie Sweeney, a very talented and hot-tempered pitcher, joined the team to replace Ward. Radbourn established himself as the best pitcher in baseball with a record of 49 wins and 25 losses. Radbourn threw the only no-hitter of his career against Cleveland on July 25. The Grays won the most lopsided shutout in baseball history on August 21 beating the Philadelphia Phillies 28-0. Another noteworthy event of 1883 was the invention of the baseball glove by the Grays' shortstop Arthur Irwin who broke two fingers in his left hand and had a buckskin driving glove modified to protect his hand. When the expected jeers

of the fans failed to materialize, other players quickly acquired their own gloves. The attitude of early professional ballplayers towards baseball gloves is called to mind in the poem about the Cincinnati Red Stockings by George Ellard:

We used no mattress on our hands,  
 No cage upon our face,  
 We stood right up and caught the ball,  
 With courage and with grace.

Irwin is also credited by some baseball historians with the invention of the hit-and-run play.

#### 1884: The Great Year

Frank Bancroft became manager of the team as Harry Wright left to manage the Philadelphia team. Radbourn began the season with a very sore arm and the team's chances seemed to depend on fireballer Charlie Sweeney, the fastest pitcher in the game at that time. The Grays were locked in a tight pennant race with Chicago in the first part of the season. Radbourn and Sweeney were the best pitchers in baseball that year finishing with the two best earned-run averages in the league. On June 7 Sweeney struck out 19 batters in 9 innings against Boston – a feat matched only by Steve Carlton in 1969 and Tom Seaver in 1970. [Ed. Note: Written prior to 1986 when Roger Clemens struck out 20 Seattle Mariners at Fenway Park.] During a game on July 16 Radbourn became disgusted with the poor play of his fielders and with what he thought to be unfair calls by the umpire. He began lobbing the ball up to the plate without making any effort to get the batters out. He lost the game and was immediately suspended without pay by manager Bancroft. During Radbourn's suspension Sweeney got drunk and was also suspended by Bancroft. Angriily, Sweeney quit the team and signed with the St. Louis team of the short-lived Union Association thus leaving the Grays without any pitchers. (Sweeney was noted for his terrible temper and later served time in San Quentin prison after he killed a man in a brawl.) Bancroft was compelled to lift Radbourn's suspension and offer him a bonus to pitch all of the Gray's remaining games. Radbourn rejoined the team on July 23 and began what is arguably the greatest single season performance in the history of baseball. Radbourn started 37 games in a row and completed all of them, winning 32 out of the 37. During the period from August 7 until September 18 he won 26 out of 27 decisions putting together winning streaks of 18 and 8 consecutive victories. Radbourn posted a final won-lost record of 60(!) victories (an all-time major league record) and 12 losses. He completed all 73 of the games that he started (two short of the major-league record), struck out 441 batters (an all time National League record) and posted an earned run average of 1.38. "Hoss" also pitched 679 innings (1 short of the all-time major league record). Since the rules of the National League in 1884 required 6 balls for a walk and 4 strikes for a strikeout, Radbourn presumably

was required to throw considerably more pitches per inning than present day pitchers. The team finished with a record of 84 wins and 28 losses, 10 games ahead of second place Chicago. (To post a comparable winning percentage under today's longer schedule a team would have to win more than 120 games.) At the end of the season the Grays participated in the first post season championship. They played against the New York Metropolitans led by Tim Keefe, Hall of Fame pitcher. Radbourn completed his heroics by pitching and winning all three games. Each member of the Grays received a \$65 share of the gate receipts and the team was presented with a large silk pennant bearing the inscription *World Champions*. Radbourn's achievements during 1884 are even more impressive when one remembers that the Grays were a weak hitting team; Hines was the team's only real batting star and four of the other seven teams in the National League scored more runs than the Grays in 1884. Further, Radbourn began the season with a sore arm, which became worse during the season. By the end of the year his arm was so sore that he couldn't raise it to comb his hair. Radbourn threw underhanded (overhand pitching was prohibited before 1884) and took a running start (cricket style) before each pitch, which was permitted by the rules of the time. In 1883 a rule change limited pitchers to only one step before throwing the ball. Pitchers threw the ball from a rectangular 4' x 6' box, rather than a pitching rubber.

#### **1885: A Sorry End**

1885 was the last year of the Grays' existence and the team's only losing season; they finished with a record of 53-57. The Providence fans never turned out in large enough numbers to support the team adequately. The Grays had a winning record for the first half of the season. But then the team's financial problems came to a head. Owner Henry Root was compelled to suspend without pay Radbourn and some of the other star players for the rest of the season. The team played badly and at one point lost 18 games in a row. At the end of the season, Root sold the Grays to the Boston Beaneaters (formerly the Red Caps, later to be the Boston Bees, The Boston Braves, The Milwaukee Braves, and, finally, the Atlanta Braves) for \$6,000. The Beaneaters kept the Grays' battery of Radbourn and catcher Con Daily. The other players were sold to other teams. Hines, Start, secondbaseman Farrell, left fielder Carroll, catcher Gilligan, and pitcher Shaw were all sold to the Washington club of the National League, and Irwin was sold to the Phillies. Providence never fielded a major league baseball team after 1885. However, there was later a team in the International League also known as the Providence Grays; Babe Ruth played for them in 1914. The Grays' home field, Messer Street Park, has long since disappeared. The park was located in the vicinity of the present Bridgham Middle School at 1655 Westminister Street in Providence. A bronze plaque in the school cafeteria is all that remains to acknowledge the fact that a great baseball team once played there.

Charles Radbourn played with the Beaneaters for four seasons; in 1890 he pitched for the Boston team of the Players' League and in 1891 he played his final season for the Cincinnati Reds. Radbourn ended his career with a record of 308 wins and 191 losses. The final years of Radbourn's life were very unhappy. He retired from baseball to his hometown of Bloomington, Illinois where he opened a pool hall. Several years before his death he had most of his face shot off in a gun accident. He refused to be seen in public after this and spent the last years of his life hiding in the back room of his pool hall. He died of syphilis in December 1897 just a few days short of his 43rd birthday.

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