

Blackburn College's Pug Bennett Was Pro Baseball Character, Blamed 1910 Batting Slump on Color of Umpires Uniforms

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CALLINVILLE - Perhaps someone said he was pugnacious. Or pug-nosed. Or looked like a member of the dog breed.

Exactly how Justin Titus “Pug” Bennett acquired his nickname is unclear. But Bennett left an indelible mark on early pro baseball in several regions of the country.

“You don’t hear nicknames like that anymore,” said Pacific Northwest sports historian Dave Eskenazi of Seattle, who writes the column “Wayback Machine” with Steve Rudman at sportspressnw.com. “It just sounds like hard-nosed, old-time baseball. A guy by the name of Pug, that sounds like a ballplayer.”

Bennett seemed to leave a piece of his legend everywhere. Born Feb. 20, 1874 in Ponca, Neb., he surfaced in 1896 at Blackburn College in Carlinville, which had an enrollment of only a few dozen.

That year, Bennett anchored the infield of a Blackburn baseball team that feared no one. In those days before NCAA division, Blackburn rolled to a remarkable 22-4 record against a schedule including the likes of Missouri, Purdue, and Wisconsin.

Bennett then spent seven seasons in the minors, including part of the 1905 campaign in the Pacific Coast League in Seattle, before breaking in as a 32-year-old rookie with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1906. He started 153 games at second, leading the National League with 595 at-bats while hitting .262 with 34 RBI and 20 steals for the seventh-place Cardinals, who finished a whopping 63 games behind the pennant-winning Cubs and their legendary infield of “Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance.”

But Pug tailed off in 1907, starting 86 games and hitting .222 as St. Louis dropped 101 games and finished last, 55.5 games behind the first-place Cubs.

It was the last call for Pug in the majors. In 1908, he was back in Seattle, now a member of the Class B Northwestern League. Bennett hit .305 with 38 extra-base hits for the last-place Siwashes, whose fortunes were about to change.

In 1909, Seattle, now called the Turks, rolled to the league title at 109-58, paced by Bennett, who led the circuit with a .314 average, 201 hits, and 111 runs while playing all 167 games. Perhaps he was motivated by a remark in the Spokane Spokesman-Review, which called him the “gray old slugger.”

The 1909 squad remains a cherished part of Seattle sports history. “That was the first time a pro team from Seattle won a championship,” remarked Eskenazi. “They had such

a good record, and so many stars. That team really carved its place in legend in this area.”

On June 29, 2013, the Seattle Mariners celebrated “Throwback Day” by wearing replica uniforms of the 1909 Turks.

But Pug was hard-pressed for success in 1910. He struggled to a .239 mark, but had a one-of-a-kind explanation. That season, the Spokesman-Review reported that league umpires had switched to white uniforms, which Bennett called “a stumbling block in the way of batting averages...the light suits shade the white ball and make any pitcher with a crossfire or a sharp break much more effective.”

It was not as crazy as it sounds. No full-time Northwestern League player hit .300 that season. In 1911, ten players reached .300, including Bennett himself. “He may have been on to something,” laughed Eskenazi. “I’d give him the benefit of the doubt.” By then, Bennett was playing in Vancouver, and showing no signs of slowing down. He batted .285 in 168 games in 1912 and rapped 32 extra-base hits in 1914 at age 40.

That April, Bennett was on a train from Seattle to Tacoma when two young men attempted a robbery. Pug and another man subdued one perpetrator, holding him in place and beating him over the head with his own pistol so badly that the New York Times reported “he is likely to die.”

The pistol-whipping Pug helped Vancouver capture three Northwestern League titles in four years. He played in Aberdeen in 1915 and Great Falls the next season, batting .296. In 1917, he was back in Vancouver, seeing his season end early when the league folded on July 17.

The 1917 season was Bennett’s last in pro ball. He remained in the Northwest and died in Kirkland, Wash. on Sept. 12, 1935.

“One reason that Pug was so popular was because he was so good,” said Eskenazi. “Anytime someone hits .300 with 30 or 40 extra-base hits, he’s going to be popular with fans. I think the nickname helped, and all of the stories that surround him. He was a gamer and stayed around for a long time, and that became part of the legend.”

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