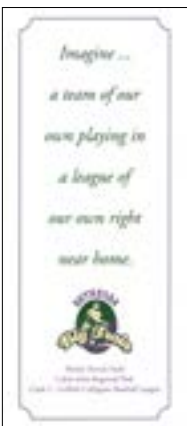




Miller & Long staff building grandstand walls in February 1999.

Plain League was launched in 1997, it had teams in Durham and Raleigh. They failed. It was the teams in the more rural parts of the Carolinas that succeeded. While there are exceptions, summer college baseball tends to thrive in places like Chatham, MA, Edenton, NC and New Market, VA.



So, as we recruited our players and constructed our ballpark, we also had money to raise and a fan base to build. In December of 1998, I sent a short four paragraph letter along with a brochure designed by the Earl Palmer Brown firm to my mailing list of political, community, and baseball friends. Our inspiration this time wasn't Paul Newman but rather John Lennon. The cover of the brochure said simply: "Imagine... a team of our own playing in a league of our own right near home." There wasn't any choice but to imagine. Virtually no one who received that brochure knew anything about summer college baseball. There were no players. There wasn't a ballpark. Inside, the brochure promised: "Join us for summer nights of family fun with baseball at its most genuine in a county fair-like setting." The request was to send \$100 to get a small plaque on one of the

606 seats at the ballpark or \$1,000 as a Diamond Club sponsor to be listed on a ballpark plaque. Astonishingly, the seats sold out and the plaque filled up in just two months.

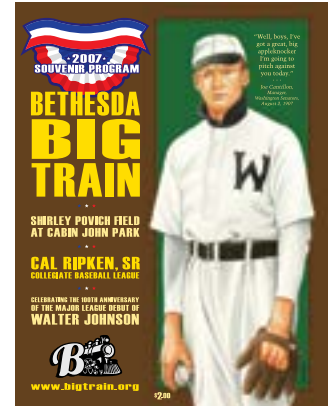
3. How did the team get the name Big Train?



For the initial meeting in my living room in 1997 to discuss the concept of a Bethesda based team in the Clark C. Griffith Collegiate Baseball League, I made a very traditional list of baseball team names for the group to consider. I remember Barons, as in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School Barons, was on my list. When someone suggested Big Train as a way of honoring Walter Johnson, I was thinking to myself "Big Train is a person's nickname, not the name of a team." Before I could make my point, another in the group said he was also thinking of Big Train for the name.

If it worked for the group, it sure worked for me. Big Train it would be. I grew up being told by my dad that Walter Johnson wasn't just the greatest pitcher in history. Everyone agreed about that. He told me Walter Johnson was one of the greatest people who ever lived. My dad grew up in Edgemoor near what is now downtown Bethesda. Just a two mile trolley ride west and north on Old Georgetown Road lived a another young baseball and basketball player named Eddie Johnson. Eddie's dad worked at Griffith Stadium in Washington, DC. He was the manager of the Washington Senators from 1929 to 1932 when the boys were between 12 and 15 years old. When the Senators played at home in the summer, Eddie went to the ballpark with his dad. Eddie need a pal to hang out with, and my dad's house was on the way. I told my kids when they were growing up that it would be like Cal Ripken picking them up and taking them to Camden Yards to hang out with Cal's kids in the dugout.

Later, as a member of the Montgomery County Council, I had the privilege of getting the Johnson house at 9100 Old Georgetown Road designated historic. Johnson bought the eight acre Alta Vista estate in 1925, possibly with his bonus money and fees for articles after the 1924 World Series championship. The 11 room, white clapboard Victorian house sat back off the road. There was a four acre fruit orchard, coops for 2,000 chickens, and, of course, a ballfield. By 1936, the Kansas born farm boy needed more space and moved from Bethesda to a farm in Germantown that is now the site of Seneca Valley High School.



Sculpture by Joseph Craig English

Walter Johnson was in the first class of players selected for induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in 1936 along with Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, Babe Ruth, and Honus Wagner. In 1999, *The Sporting News* ranked Johnson as number four on its list of baseball's 100 greatest players. Johnson compiled a record of 417 wins against 279 losses in 21 seasons with the Washington Senators. In a record that will almost certainly never be broken, he pitched 110 complete game shutouts. He struck out 3,508 batters, leading the major leagues in strikeouts twelve times. We was named American League MVP in 1913 when he won 36 games, and 1924, the year Washington won the World Series.

The right-hander threw a fearsome fastball with a sidearm motion. Ty Cobb, one of baseball's greatest hitters, described facing Walter Johnson for the first time: "On August 2, 1907, I encountered the most threatening sight I ever saw in the ball field. He was a rookie, and we licked our lips as we warmed up for the first game of a doubleheader in Washington. Evidently, manager Pongo Joe Cantillon of the Nats had picked a rube out of the cornfields

of the deepest bushes to pitch against us. He was a tall, shambling galoot of about twenty, with arms so long they hung far out of his sleeves, and with a sidearm delivery that looked unimpressive at first glance. One of the Tigers imitated a cow mooing, and we hollered at Cantillon: 'Get the pitchfork ready, Joe—your hayseed's on his way back to the barn.' The first time I faced him, I watched him take that easy windup. And then something went past me that made me flinch. The thing just hissed with danger. We couldn't touch him. ... [e]very one of us knew we'd met the most powerful arm ever turned loose in a ball park."

Hank Thomas, Walter's grandson and the author of the terrific biography *Walter Johnson: Baseball's Big Train* (1995, Phenom Press), was instrumental in launching the Bethesda Big Train and secured permission from the family to name our team after his grandfather. In the preface, Shirley Povich confirmed my dad's appraisal of Walter Johnson: "Captivated was I, not only by his unmatched pitching skills, but by the manner of the man, his modesty, humility, and humanity while surrounded by a game that in his era was the playing field of roughnecks."

After retiring from baseball to his Germantown farm, people urged Walter Johnson to become a candidate for public office. This modest man likely needed substantial coaxing to enter the political arena. In 1938, he was elected