

RICKWOOD TALES

Rickwood Calendar: 6/4/21 to 9/4/21:

- **June:** Dedication of the Women's Suffrage marker. See our [website](#) or [Facebook page](#) for the date
- **June 4:** Miles College tryouts
- **June 5-6:** Bash baseball event
- **June 8:** [Central Alabama Baseball Academy](#) v. Utah team
- **June 12:** Jennifer Weaver Vestavia Baseball Family Outing
- **June or July:** [Tennessee Association of Vintage Base Ball](#) makeup game. See our [website](#) or [Facebook page](#) for the date
- **July 12-17:** [Piper Davis Baseball 6th Annual National Tournament](#)
- **August 18:** Rickwood turns 111!
- **September:** No events are currently scheduled. See our [website](#) for updates

Get Your Rickwood Gear!

- Caps, t-shirts, posters, books, and other Rickwood merchandise are available for purchase on our web-



<https://rickwood.com/shop/>



JERRY MALLOY CONFERENCE MOVED TO JUNE 2-4, 2022

The prestigious Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference has again been rescheduled. The Conference will now take place **June 2-4 2022** at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Birmingham. The event was originally scheduled for 2020 to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Negro National and Negro Southern Leagues. COVID-19 then postponed the conference several times. The

Friends of Rickwood are excited to welcome researchers and authors from across the country, who will be visiting the Magic City for the event.

According to SABR, "Since 1998, the Jerry Malloy Conference has been the only symposium dedicated exclusively to the examination and promotion of Black baseball history. The conference, which is

open to baseball and history fans of all ages, promotes activities to enhance scholarly, educational, and literary objectives." For more information, please visit:

<https://sabr.org/malloy>.



WHO ARE THE FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD? PART 4: THE RICKWOOD CLASSIC BECOMES BIRMINGHAM'S FAVORITE GAME

In our last installment, we discussed how two movies filmed at Rickwood, *Cobb* and *Soul of the Game*, brought much-needed financial assistance and attention to the ballpark at a time when it was desperately needed. These films truly helped keep the wrecking ball at bay. However, the most critical date in the Friends of Rickwood's efforts to preserve the ballpark happened on June 12, 1996, when the Birmingham Barons returned for the first time since 1987 to play the Memphis Chicks in the Rickwood Classic.

For this dream to become a reality, it took a great deal of hard work behind the scenes. Coke Matthews remembered getting the Barons to agree to the game was not easy. He recalled, "[I] would give [Bill] Hardekopf (the Barons GM) the credit for finally agreeing to meet with the yahoos from Rickwood. After several years of saying how important day games were to his players (true), and how much money he made (not much), we got him to

the table with a compelling offer: Tell us how much money the Barons made on day games in 1995, on average, and if the Barons would return for one glorious 'turn back the clock' game, we would guarantee them at least that much off the top, and then split the rest. The funny thing was, we still owed Vulcan Painters \$100,000 for the paint job, and had other creditors clamoring, so our 'guarantee' was vapor. The good news was that the First Classic was a sellout [and] grossed probably \$75,000. It was easy to convince Bill to make it an annual event."

The day of the first Rickwood Classic was not like anything ever experienced by fans going to a minor league baseball game in Birmingham. Sure, there were huge crowds of Michael Jordan at the Hoover Met in 1994. But the Classic was different, and the feeling was electric. Two hours before the game, traffic was at a

standstill over a mile away. It was incredible, and reminiscent of the long line of cars at the end of *Field of Dreams*, only it was real.

People who had not been to Rickwood in years came home wearing nostalgic smiles and sharing memories. Fans who attended games as children now led their elderly parents by the hand making sure they got a hot dog, a cold drink, and a place to sit. Many grandchildren were also in tow as the experience of going to the ballpark was handed down to a new generation.

There were two special honorees for the game. Walt Dropo traveled from Boston and looked as if he might play an inning or two. At 78-years old, Piper Davis was slowed by time but was proud to join Dropo on the field. Both Davis and Dropo had played key roles for two different hometown teams, which shared the ballpark

[Continued on page 2]

THE CLASSIC BECOMES RICKWOOD'S SIGNATURE EVENT

[Continued from page 1]

in the chase for championships in 1948. The two of them, and Rick Woodward III, grandson of the park's namesake, threw out ceremonial first pitches.

Many others who played a part in Rickwood's history were there too. Norm Zauchin came to the game shortly after having major surgery weeks before. Former player Fred Hatfield and his wife came from Florida and Willard Nixon traveled from Georgia. Bill Greason came from a few miles away to meet old friends and gladly sign autographs.

Art Clarkson, the former owner of the Barons was there, as well as advertising executive John Forney, better known as the radio voice of Alabama football from the 1960s through the early 1980s. Also on hand was former Southern League President Jimmy Bragan. Clarkson, Forney, and Bragan were the key people who brought baseball back to Birmingham in 1981. Team owner Dave Elmore even flew in from the west coast but had trouble finding the park. There were no smartphones for directions.

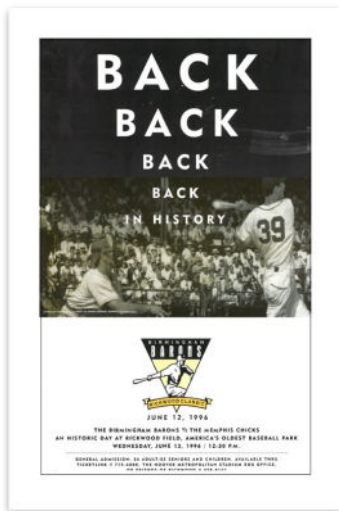
10,334 fans jammed into the park to relive their memories and to make new ones. Through six innings, the Barons built a 3-0 lead. Mike Heathcott, Birmingham's starting pitcher was brilliant, pitching into the eighth. The Chicks rallied with a run in the eighth and another in the ninth to build the drama before former Auburn standout and Barons reliever Stacy Jones closed the door for a 3-2 Barons victory.

Afterward, everyone was thrilled by how popular the event was with the fans. Walt Dropo summed up everyone's feelings to Wayne Martin of the *Birmingham News*, saying "I look out at this park and it looks just the same to me. It seems like just yesterday... I hope they do it every year." Baron GM Bill Hardekopf was cautious in his comments. He asked attendees to provide feedback and added, "our fans will play a big part in any decision about games here at Rickwood in the future." The fans' overwhelming response was undeniably positive.

It is hard to believe that only four years after a group of friends got together with the improbable idea of saving an old ballpark that the stars aligned, and the Barons came home. Since the Classic began in 1996, the Barons have returned to Rickwood Field 23 times with just a few interruptions. There was no game in 2017 due to repairs to the park. COVID-19 then stopped the game in 2020 and 2021. Having the Classic at Rickwood is a privilege and is due to the diligent efforts of the Logan family, Barons' GM Jonathan Nelson, the Chicago White Sox, and the Friends of Rickwood. We look forward to the Classic returning in 2022.

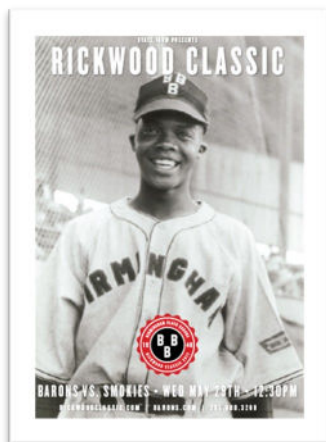
As we said in our first article in this series, saving the ballpark is a never-ending process. In our final installment, we conclude by discussing some of the challenges facing Rickwood now and in the future and what we can do to preserve her for the next generation.

- Joe DeLeonard & Jeb Stewart
[This story will conclude in our next issue]



*"I look out at this park
and it looks just the
same to me. It seems like
just yesterday... I hope
they do it every year."*

-Walt Dropo



MAJOR LEAGUE STATUS FOR RICKWOOD?

On December 16, 2020, Major League Baseball announced that seven professional Negro Leagues, which operated from 1920-48, have finally been designated as having "[Major League status](#)". Nearly 3,500 players who played in the Negro Leagues during these years are now considered Major League players. In addition, the statistics and records for the players and clubs will be included in [Major League Baseball's records](#).

Included were several leagues that the Birmingham Black Barons competed in during their glorious history, including the first Negro National League, the

Negro Southern League, and the Negro American League. 17 different Black Barons seasons are now recognized as being Major League years (1924-25, 1927-30, 1932, 1937, 1940-48). This means that Black Barons' greats such as Sam Bankhead, Mule Suttles, Piper Davis, Artie Wilson, Lyman Bostock, Sr., Bill Powell, and so many others, are now being honored as former Major League players.

And while the credit undoubtedly belongs to those players and teams who earned their Major League stripes on the field, there was at least one unintended consequence with

the announcement, which impacts our favorite ballpark. Rickwood Field was not just the home of the Birmingham Barons but was also the Black Barons' park. Rickwood hosted Negro League all-star games, playoff games, and the Negro League World Series in 1943, 1944, and 1948. The story of the Black Barons at Rickwood was told by Chris Fullerton in his book [Every Other Sunday](#).

Based on MLB's decision, Rickwood Field is rightfully considered a Major League park for all of the seasons when the Black Barons were a Major League team.

DUSTING 'EM OFF": FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

On Saturday, March 6, 2021, the ballpark hosted the Rickwood Field SABR Chapter's annual meeting, which was well attended. Attendees were treated to grilled Bratwursts and Italian Sausages and watched a slide show of about 350 photographs from the Friends of Rickwood's collection of 2,000 photographs, which the organization obtained from the *Birmingham News* from 1931-1987. It was nice to spend an afternoon talking baseball. The event raised \$236 in donations for the Friends of Rickwood in the organization's efforts to restore Rickwood Field, America's Oldest Ballpark.

As a bonus, Miles College played Stillman College in a double-header that afternoon. The Golden Bears swept both games from the Stillman Tigers, 11-10 and 16-2. For most of us, it was the first live baseball game we had attended in well over a year.

On April 10, we had a great day of baseball at the ballpark. Fullondale High School's baseball team took part in a triple-header; and the Friends hosted a baseball/sports and memorabilia

show, which made nearly \$800. There is baseball nearly every weekend at Rickwood. On May 8, Rickwood hosted Vestavia Youth Baseball games at the park. Everyone had a great time.

On May 28, Rickwood was set to host games between teams in the Tennessee Association of Vintage Base Ball. The league follows 1864 rules and teams use equipment and uniforms from that era. Unfortunately, the games were rained out. We are working to reschedule the event and will announce it on our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) soon.

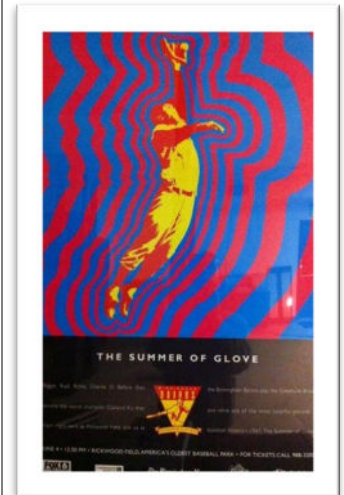
If you've ever walked past the first base side of the ballpark on 12th Street West, you may have noticed extensive water damage on the wood on the exterior of the former Dugout Restaurant. The Friends of Rickwood have begun to replace the siding. Our [Facebook page](#) features a photo of the ongoing project. With a 110-year old ballpark, maintenance and restoration efforts never end. [Only In Your State](#) recently published a nice article on the ballpark and the Friends' efforts to restore it.

Sometime in June, Rickwood will be getting a new [historical marker](#). On August 18, 1915, the Alabama Equal Suffrage Association and the Birmingham Barons hosted a game supporting the right for women to vote, which the marker commemorates. The marker is part of the National Votes for Women Trail. Once we know the dedication date, we will announce it on our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

We close with some sad news. On April 5, longtime Alabama sportswriter and editor [Bill Lumpkin](#) died at 92. There will be a service for him this Saturday at 11:30 AM at Elmwood Cemetery.

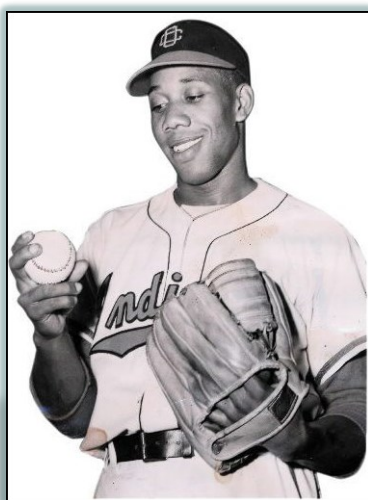
On May 10, [Jake Sanders](#) died at 86. He played in the Negro Leagues with the Kansas City Monarchs, Detroit Stars, and New Orleans Bears in the 1950s. WBHM featured Sanders in a [story](#) in 2018.

Until next time, we hope to see you at the ballpark.



*"Sometime in June,
Rickwood will be getting
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marker."*

BECOME A FRIEND OF RICKWOOD



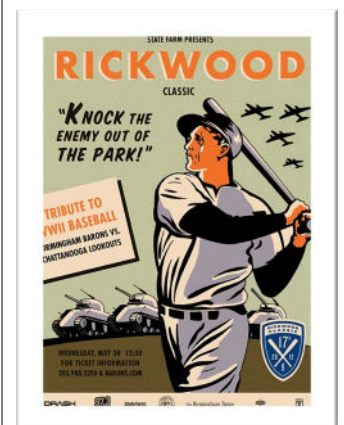
The Friends of Rickwood is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which was formed in 1992, and is dedicated to preserving America's Oldest Ballpark. Anyone can become a Friend of Rickwood by donating to the Friends.

We have four levels of membership for individuals and each level will receive a certificate, a window sticker, and 10% off Rickwood merchandise: (1) Level 1 is a "Little Leaguer" for a \$10 donation; (2) Level 2 is a "Rookie" for a

\$25 donation; (3) Level 3 is a "Veteran" for a \$50 donation (and also gets a patch); and (4) Level 4 is a "Gold Glover" for a \$100 donation (and also gets a Rickwood shirt). To donate, please visit <https://rickwood.com/donate-to-rickwood-field/> or write us at:

**The Friends of Rickwood
Rickwood Field
1137 2nd Ave West
Birmingham, AL 35204**

**We need your help more than
ever this year. Thanks!**



THE RICKWOOD HALL OF FAME PROJECT

The 13th annual Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference was held in Birmingham in 2010. The conference program reported that “A record 107 Cooperstown Hall of Famers stepped onto Rick Woodward’s Rickwood Field.” That number has been considered final for a decade.

However, new sources have revealed additional Hall of Famer members who appeared in games at Rickwood. The Friends of Rickwood soon realized that 107 was merely the floor, not the ceiling, and additional research was needed.

This year members of the Friends of Rickwood and SABR, Joe DeLeonard, Ben Powell, Lamar Smith, and Jeb

Stewart formed the Rickwood Hall of Fame Project committee. The goal of the project is to confirm every member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame who appeared in a game at Rickwood Field as a player, manager, coach, or umpire.

So far, the committee has identified an additional 30 Hall of Famers, who appeared in games at Rickwood, which brings the total to 137 with more to come. Some of the recently identified Hall of Famers include Bob Gibson, Joe Torre, Eddie Murray, Larry Walker, Edgar Martinez, Randy Johnson, Phil Niekro, and Carl Yastrzemski.

The most Hall of Famers to appear in a single game at

Rickwood almost certainly happened on April 4, 1927, when 13 future Hall of Famers took the field. The Washington Senators, managed by Stanley “Bucky” Harris, were led by Sam Rice, Tris Speaker, Goose Goslin, and Stan Coveleskie. The Senators were overmatched losing 10-3 to the New York Giants, who were managed by John McGraw. The Giants’ roster featured Mel Ott, Fred Lindstrom, Edd Roush, Rogers Hornsby, Bill Terry, and Burleigh Grimes. In addition, future Hall of Famer, Bill Klem, umpired the game.

We will report our findings in a future edition of our newsletter and will provide a complete list of the Hall of Famers who have appeared in games at America’s Oldest Ballpark.

“So far, the committee has identified an additional 30 Hall of Famers, who appeared in games at Rickwood, which brings the grand total to 137 with more to come.”

DID YOU KNOW?



Photo Credit: The Birmingham News, 1982.

On July 22, 1982, the Atlanta Braves, who were in the heat of a pennant race, visited Rickwood Field to play an exhibition against the Southern League All-Stars. [After a heavy rainstorm nearly canceled the game](#), an overflow crowd of 11,111 saw the All-Stars defeat the Braves, 7-4. Jeff Reynolds of the Knoxville Blue Jays won MVP honors after going 2-for-4 and smashing a 2-run homer. Despite the loss, the Braves went on to win the National League West by 1 game over the Los Angeles Dodgers, as Atlanta finished with a record of 89-73. Unfortunately, the Braves’ Cinderella season came to an end in the NL Championship Series, as they lost to the St. Louis Cardinals in three games.

RICKWOOD'S CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE 1912 BIRMINGHAM BARONS

If you happen to wander over by the third-base side of the grandstand, you will notice that the Friends of Rickwood have commemorated the championship clubs that have called America's Oldest Ballpark home from 1910-1987. This series remembers each of those seasons.

In 1912, [the Birmingham Barons](#) won the Southern Association (A) pennant as they finished 85-51 (.625) with a 6.5 game lead over the second-place Mobile Sea Gulls. Legendary Manager [Carlton Molesworth](#) skippered the team to the first championship ever won at Rickwood Field. Molesworth managed the Barons from 1908 to 1922.

The *Montgomery Times* called the club "The Bold Bad Barons", as Molesworth's men used daring and dash to race to the pennant.

The Barons batted .253 collectively with Bill McGilvray (.314), Mike Almeida (.301), Jimmy Johnston (.296), and Bobby Messenger (.259) leading the way as the Barons scored 560 runs. Molesworth's club ran wild on the basepaths as the Barons stole an incredible 259 bases paced by Johnston's league-leading 81. His total still stands as the franchise record today.

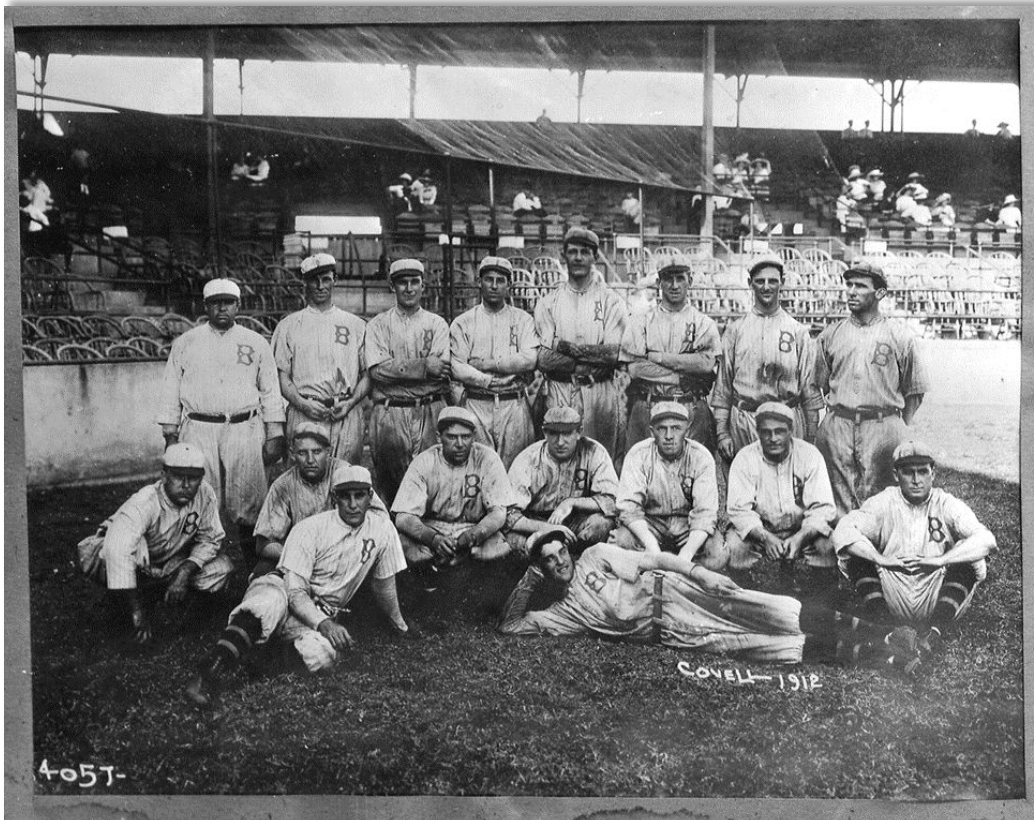
The pitching staff was ably led by Ray Boyd (23-11), Bill Foxen (19-9), Omer Hardgrove (14-10), and Pop-boy Smith (15-8). Pop-boy would later achieve fame in Art Black's [Showdown at Rickwood: Ray Caldwell, Dizzy Dean, and the Early Years of America's Oldest Ball Park](#) (Birmingham, AL: Blue Rooster Press, 2017).

Of the 16 players on the roster, 9 members of the 1912 Barons would reach the big leagues. There were no SA playoffs that year, and the Dixie Series did not yet exist. So, the Barons' season ended with the rest of the SA clubs, except they were champions.



Carlton Molesworth

"Molesworth's club ran wild on the basepaths as the Barons stole an incredible 259 bases paced by Johnston's league leading 81."



The 1912 Birmingham Barons - Southern Association Champions

The Friends of
Rickwood

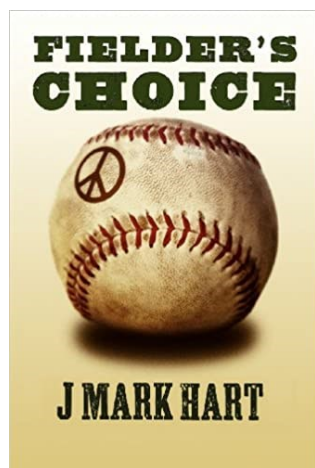
Rickwood Field
1137 2nd Ave W
Birmingham, AL 35204
205-922-3725

Email address:

friendsofrickwoodfield@gmail.com



<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood/>



THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: *Fielder's Choice*

Fielder's Choice is a novel by J. Mark Hart, which is set in the fictional community of West Lake in the City of Birmingham in 1969. The book tells the story of Brad Williams, a skinny high school senior on the West Lake High School baseball team, who is also the narrator. The book begins as Brad loses his starting shortstop position to a black player named Robbie Jones, who recently transferred into West Lake. Brad realizes Robbie has more range and deserves to start. Hoping to win a high school championship and possibly earn a baseball scholarship to college, Brad dutifully accepts his new role as the team's second basemen, and he and Robbie soon become a solid double-play combination and develop a friendship.

Throughout the book, Brad arrives at a series of crossroads. Despite his young age, he has to make the kinds of decisions usually reserved for adults. Brad is a young man who is forced to handle enormous pressures, including: his teammates' reaction to Robbie winning his job; the larger racial tensions simmering in his neighborhood; his desire to attend college to avoid the drudgery of working in a mill; concerns about his draft status, the war in Vietnam, and the peace movement; his relationship with Susie (his first serious girlfriend); and his interactions with a bully named Bubba. Hart deftly uses the backdrop of the issues colliding in Birmingham in 1969 as a parallel to the entanglements Brad faces. His choices will not only shape his future but more importantly his character.

Hart's writing breathes three dimensions into Brad. The reader is immediately drawn into this big-hearted story and soon develops a deep empathy for him. As implied by the title of the book, Hart compares the many decisions Brad has to make as being like that of an infielder deciding which base runner to throw out. He writes:

There's a thing in baseball called a "fielder's choice." The dictionary defines a fielder's choice as a play made on a ground ball in which the fielder chooses to put out an advancing base runner, allowing the batter to reach first base safely. What it really means is if you choose to get one guy, the other guy gets away. Choices are a lot like that, you know. And it might be something you really, really don't want to lose. That turned out to be true for me when I had to make some serious choices. But I didn't know any of that yet at the beginning of spring when the robins came back and dandelions sprouted in the outfield grass.

Of course, this is also a baseball novel set in Birmingham, Alabama. Walter Jones (Robbie's father) tells Brad a story about how he played for the Birmingham Black Barons in the late 1940s at Rickwood Field, and what it was like to bat against the great Satchel Paige. Brad also learns how the tentacles of segregation prevented Walter from playing organized baseball, but Walter tells him the story without bitterness. In another scene as Brad's team is riding on the bus home after a game, they "drove past Rickwood Field, where Reggie Jackson and the A's played their minor league ball on their way to the future World Series."

Even with the complex issues swirling around him, Brad is always able to find sanctuary between the lines of the baseball diamond where things always seem to make sense. By the end of the book, the reader learns whether West Lake will play for the Alabama state baseball championship, whether Brad will earn a scholarship, and whether things work out for him and Susie.

Hart is a great storyteller who writes with an easy style. Any baseball fan will enjoy this novel and *Fielder's Choice* would make a great movie. This is Hart's first book and is also the first novel reviewed in the Rickwood Library. J. Mark Hart is a Birmingham attorney who grew up watching the Birmingham A's play at Rickwood Field in the late 1960s.

- Jeb Stewart

