

RICKWOOD TALES

Rickwood Calendar
12/22/23 to 3/22/24

- No Events are presently on the calendar as MLB's construction has begun at the ballpark. However, our museum/gift shop remains open during regular business hours Monday through Friday.

Please like our Facebook Page for updates about events at the park: www.facebook.com/friendsofrickwood.com

Get Your Rickwood Gear!

Caps, t-shirts, jackets, posters, books, coffee mugs, and other Rickwood merchandise are available for purchase at <https://rickwood.com/shop/>

We now have MLB-Rickwood Field merchandise!



IAN HANCOCK REPEATS AS HOME RUN DERBY CHAMP

On Sunday, October 15, 2023, Rickwood Field hosted its second annual Home Run Derby. The derby was the last time fans could see the ballpark in its pre-construction configuration before the renovations for the MLB game next summer.

Participants included: defending champion **Ian Hancock**, who batted .305 for Birmingham-Southern's 2023 Southern Athletic Association championship team, and led the Panthers with 15 homers and 68 RBIs while posting a .951 OPS; **Ryan Klesko**, who hit 278 home runs over 16 seasons in the big leagues with the Braves, Padres, and Giants, and led the Braves to a world championship in 1995 posting a 158 OPS+, which was the highest on the club by nearly 40 points; **Mike Cameron**, who played in the inaugural Rickwood Classic as a Baron in 1996, and went on to play 17 seasons in the majors for the

White Sox, Mariners, Reds, Mets, Padres, Brewers, Red Sox, and Marlins, hitting 278 home runs and stealing 297 bases; **Chris Carter**, who played 8 years in the big leagues for the A's, Astros, Brewers, and Yankees, and leading the National League in homers in 2016 with 41; **Trey Rutledge** who hit 7 homers for Miles College in 2023 with a team-leading 1.073 OPS and 20 steals; and **Dan Oberst** who has starred for the Savannah Bananas during the last three summers.

After an autograph session, the players briefly took batting practice. Former Alabama star and New York Yankee **Andy Phillips** was on hand with **Ron "Papa Jack" Jackson**, **Charlie Moore**, **Chris Hammond**, and **Pat Keedy** to offer advice to the hitters and meet with the fans. Jackson's nephew, CBS-42's Sports Anchor **Dee Jackson** provided

color commentary and interviewed players throughout the Derby. **Curt Bloom**, the Barons radio announcer, handled the play-by-play. Miles College Baseball players and local kids helped out by shagging flies.

The contest closely mimicked MLB's annual event. Each player was given three minutes to hit in the first round with the top four advancing to the semi-finals. Hancock, a left-hander matched his output in the first round of the 2022 Derby by drilling 11 homers to lead all sluggers. Cameron did not record a homer but balls were scalding off his bat leaving dents in Rickwood's fences during his at-bat. Carter, who won MVP honors weeks earlier in the championship game of the Mexican League for Pericos de Puebla, then crushed 7 homers.

- Continued on page 2

BIRMINGHAM IS A BASEBALL TOWN

Major League Baseball is coming to Birmingham and venerable Rickwood Field in June next year. The San Francisco Giants and St. Louis Cardinals will play a regular season game before a hard sell-out crowd of 10,000 and a global TV and streaming audience, as MLB pays tribute to the Negro Leagues and especially Birmingham's Willie Mays. The game and the attendant 'improvements' to Rickwood have dominated the news cycle and sparked a great deal of excitement and anticipation. But some seem surprised. They shouldn't be.

Birmingham has always been a baseball town.

Confederate soldiers returning after the war brought back the game of baseball they had learned from Union prisoners of war, and by the time Birmingham was founded in 1871, baseball had already taken root. Leisurely pick-up games after picnics eventually inevitably evolved into more strident competition, as teams from neighboring towns like Piedmont, Anniston, and Attala came to town to play Birming-

ham teams. Touring baseball clubs from the North, even female clubs, issued challenges to the pride of Birmingham's local nines. Before the momentum of so-called industrial leagues and organized company league baseball, the waiters from the new hotels sought to establish supremacy on the baseball diamond. The war had ended, but of course, racial prejudice had not. Foreshadowing the rise of the organized Negro Leagues, baseball teams were segregated. But they all needed a place to play the new

- Continued on page 4

HOME RUN DERBY

- Continued from page 1
Rutledge, who will be a redshirt sophomore next year at Miles, hit 2 homers with several other balls narrowly missing the distance. Klesko took a few swings to find his groove but finished with 4 as the lefty found Rickwood's right field fence to his liking. Finally, Oberst banged 6 homers over the fence.

Oberst then matched up with Carter in the first semi-final matchup narrowly winning a 5-4 duel to advance to the championship round. The second semi-final was a battle of left-handed hitters. Klesko took the early edge by pounding 7 homers.

However, Hancock was undaunted and his eighth homer sailed high over the fence with 23 seconds left in the round to complete the championship slate.

In the championship round, Oberst shook off any weariness by matching his first-round performance with 6 home runs. As a player with the Bananas, he is used to performing in a non-stop comedy act for fans. At the Derby, he took on a more serious tone, and added, "Y'all brought me here to hit homers!" Once again, Hancock answered the bell and man-

aged to hit 7 homers in just 2 minutes and 29 seconds to win Rickwood's second annual Home Run Derby. It was déjà vu from 2022 as Rickwood's Executive Director Gerald Watkins presented Hancock with a championship plaque for the second straight year.

After the Derby, fans streamed onto Rickwood's field to run the bases or experience the simple joy of having a toss just as they have at so many Rickwood Classics in the past. We expect that tradition to continue, but this was the last time in the park's current configuration, so it was extra special.

"Once again, Hancock answered the bell and managed to hit 7 homers in just 2 minutes and 29 seconds to win Rickwood's second annual Home Run Derby."





BASEBALL TOWN

- Continued from page 1
game that had become the national pastime.

By the turn of the century, Birmingham maps show two parks labeled "Baseball Park." Lakeview Baseball Park was at the intersection of Clairmont and Highland Avenue (where former Compass Bank's Admin HQ, now PNC Bank, is located), a natural extension of the Lakeview resort. West End Park was squeezed into the western end of the railroad reservation on 1st Avenue North next to the massive Alice Furnaces, informally called "the Slag Pile" because fans watched the game for free perched on the enormous pile of slag just beyond the outfield. A closer look also shows Behrens' Park on the southside, where its baseball pedigree is on display today as UAB's Jerry Young Field.

But when future Hall of Famer Charles Comiskey brought his touring "Chicagos" to battle the "Clevelands" in exhibition games of the short-lived "Players' League" in 1890, the games were played at Ware's Grove Baseball Park. Huh? Where? James M. Ware owned a great deal of undeveloped property in the northwest corner of the city, eventually selling large parcels for the creation of Oak Hill Cem-

etery, and another for Smith's Park, a horse track on the edge of what became Smithfield. Mostly lost in history is the rugged baseball field that was carved out of the area which is now covered by Malfunction Junction. Ware's Grove not only hosted baseball between 'picked nines' from around Alabama, it was also host to political rallies and more novel entertainment such as bear vs. dog wrestling matches and the circus.

Despite the area's rough reputation, the professional game at Ware's Grove Park drew almost 1,000 spectators, a sizable crowd for the day. Col. F. G. Sheppard of the Birmingham Baseball Association had leased the old park and promoted the game heavily in an effort to drum up interest in baseball, and in turn, in his professional team, the Coal Barons. Robert Jemison, the president of Birmingham Railway, saw the potential impact of popular entertainment for the growing city and made sure there were extra dummy line train cars to carry the crowds, while the newspapers trumpeted Comiskey as a must-see baseball savant. The Birmingham Coal Barons were a season-to-season question mark financially, as the constantly evolving Southern

League tried to establish a sustainable business model for professional baseball. Sheppard needed baseball to work. The rest, as they say, is history.

The Barons toiled at the Slag Pile, with its rickety 600-seat grandstand until 1910, when A. H. "Rick" Woodward imagined the concrete-and-steel Rickwood Field into existence and forever changed Birmingham fans' expectations for watching a baseball game. Seventy-seven years later, after Rickwood had fallen into disrepair, the Barons moved to a new stadium in Hoover. In 2013, the Logan family brought the Barons back to fan-friendly, comfortable Regions Field in the city. Of course, almost every year, the Barons return full circle to Rickwood for the Rickwood Classic. Today, Birmingham is surely the only city in America with three significant baseball parks, all still fully enjoyed by the community.

So yes, MLB is coming to town and Birmingham's baseball history will be re-told. I am glad, but not surprised, because *Birmingham has always been a baseball town.*

- Coke Matthews

"... MLB is coming to town and Birmingham's baseball history will be re-told. I am glad, but not surprised, because Birmingham has always been a baseball town."

THE 1912 ATTENDANCE TROPHY RETURNS HOME: A BOOST FOR THE RICKWOOD DUGOUT MUSEUM

The early days of baseball were marked by strident extensions of civic pride, as cities and towns competed with each other on the diamond, especially in the South. A city's pedigree could be burnished by a winning baseball club, and by definition, by the size of its local attendance. Hoping to seize upon this civic enthusiasm, newly elected Southern Association President Judge William Kavanaugh devised a competition between the Association's city clubs. The

grand opening of Rickwood Field in 1910, with its staggering crowd of 12,000, surely caught his attention. Kavanaugh offered a trophy for the largest opening day attendance, beginning in 1912. He was onto something.

Birmingham's city leaders were not about to lose that trophy to the likes of Memphis or Little Rock, and surely not to Atlanta. April 11, 1912, was

declared Chamber of Commerce Day at Rickwood. The Chamber took on this novel means of civic boosterism with a passion, imploring businesses to close early, arranging extra railway cars to the park, and using megaphones throughout to encourage fans to win the trophy for Birmingham. Chamber members' wives and the Women's Auxiliary were invited to sit in a special section of the grandstand. And win they did. Rick-

ATTENDANCE TROPHY RETURNS

wood's opening day attendance of 7,556 far eclipsed second-place Atlanta, and later that season Judge Kavanaugh presented the trophy after the top of the 7th inning, then a novel break of the game. The inscription read:

*Presented to
Birmingham Baseball Association
Largest Attendance
Opening Day, Season 1912
Southern Association of Baseball
Clubs*

Some sixty-six years later, Lucy Acree was looking for a bargain at a flea market sale in Spoon Handle, Alabama. When she came across a box full of miscellaneous items, she purchased the whole lot for five dollars. One of the grab box items was an old, tarnished trophy, a 'loving cup' with a barely legible inscription. Though she was not necessarily a big baseball fan, she was intrigued enough to take the cup to the Antique Roadshow for an expert appraisal ... only to learn that the trophy's inscription rendered it 'too local' to have much value.

A decade or so later, newspapers across the state proclaimed that ancient Rickwood Field had just become the oldest baseball park in the land due to the demolition of Chicago's Comiskey Park and that a local group of volunteers had been formed to save Rickwood from a similar fate. Upon seeing the story, Mrs. Acree contacted the Friends of Rickwood and loaned the trophy to the grateful group who carried the cup from meeting to meeting as a visual history prop to showcase just how important baseball was in the early days of our city, and the central role that Rickwood Field had played in the city's development. It was also featured to implore others to search their attics for forgotten memorabilia for the anticipated museum at Rickwood. Below are

FOR members posing with the trophy 1992.



But when Rickwood's first Executive Director Chris Fullerton tragically died in a car accident, Mrs. Acree became concerned as to what might become of the cup and retrieved it, and unfortunately, the Friends lost touch with her.

Over the years, FOR leaders wondered aloud about the now famous cup, relying on the new-fangled internet to narrow down the search for Mrs. Acree, leaving messages on landlines and sending notes to old addresses, to no avail. It was assumed that the trophy was lost forever. Over the next two decades, the story of the 1912 trophy took on a life of its own. Fans imagined that Mrs. Acree's father had been a great ballplayer; and that the cup was a vital heirloom that the family was not likely to part with. Or maybe someone had convinced them that the cup was extraordinarily valuable and that they were going to sell it someday to someone else! (Indeed, a decade earlier, the 1915 Attendance Day trophy had been secured at a remote auction, simply whetting the appetite for the earlier trophy).

Amusingly, the only part of that folklore that was true is that

the trophy had returned home and was still in the family, now with Mrs. Acree's daughter Kathryn Bingham. However, it was not hidden away in a safe. For the last two decades, the trophy had served as a useful doorstop.

In the summer of 2023, Mrs. Bingham reached out and generously offered to donate the 1912 cup to the Friends of Rickwood. Veterans of the nonprofit excitedly exchanged emails and texts that the cup had been located and was finally coming back to Rickwood.

Gerald Watkins and I met Mrs. Bingham at the Cracker Barrel in Trussville for the exchange. She was very pleased to give the cup to a group that is genuinely excited to give it a permanent home. We promised to exhibit the trophy in a special display in the Rickwood Museum.

- Coke Matthews



Kathryn Bingham and Watkins

*"In the summer of 2023,
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“DUSTING ’EM OFF”: FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

On a drizzly, dreary day in October, Rickwood Field was filled with the sounds of baseball; wooden bats hitting baseballs, fans cheering, and lots of good-natured ribbing by the major league alums who came to our Home Run Derby. About a dozen former big leaguers came to participate or cheer on the participants in what has become an annual fall tradition at America's Oldest Baseball Park. Only a couple of days later, the sounds of baseball were replaced by the unfamiliar sounds of earth-moving equipment, dump trucks, jackhammers and who knows what else!

On October 25, 2023, construction began in earnest to prepare Rickwood Field for its biggest event since August 18, 1910. Our quaint old ballpark is being prepared for an invasion next June. Major League Baseball is coming to Rickwood Field! To prepare the park for the Giants and Cardinals game, the following changes will be made:

(1) The construction crews have removed two feet of sod and baseball dirt; (2) A new drainage system will be installed. This system is Major League quality. The drainage system will ensure that the field is playable less than 30 minutes after a significant rain; (3) A new irrigation system will be installed to keep the grass green and the baseball surface in tip-top shape. In March and April, the

new baseball surface and sod will be installed. Rickwood's playing surface will be second to none!; (4) New extended netting will be installed down each foul line for fan safety; (5) New dugouts are being constructed. The new dugouts are necessary to accommodate the larger number of players, coaches, and support staff that make up the game day needs of a big league team; (6) The bullpens are being relocated to 2 spots beyond the outfield fence; (7) The wooden outfield fence is being removed and replaced with a chain link fence with padding to protect the players. The familiar fence with colorful signs will be put back in place after MLB leaves. The upper-level fence signs will remain in place, but the signs will be covered for the MLB game; and (8) Temporary lights will be brought in for the game, along with a huge, temporary batter's eye, and a jumbotron scoreboard.

All of the work described above is being done or supervised by the same company that built the Field of Dreams field in Iowa, the baseball fields in London, and the site of the MLB Little League Classic in Williamsport Pa. Trust me! We are in good hands.

Improvements are being made to other areas of the Park, but

those are too many to mention. There will be no change to the front of the Park. There will be some adjustments to the seating areas to provide more accessibility for handicapped fans. The large grass lot across from the Park will be converted into a "Fan Plaza" for the game. This plaza will provide food and beverage sales, interactive games for fans, merchandise sales, a jumbotron scoreboard, and a stage for live entertainment.

A fence will also be installed around the entire Rickwood property. 12th Street will be closed for game day and other traffic controls will be put in place. Only ticketed individuals will be allowed inside the property.

The Friends of Rickwood have made every effort to work with MLB to prepare for what we believe will be a record-breaking off-site MLB event. We can't wait for June 20, 2024, but there will be other announcements as we get closer to game time. Lastly, the Friends do not have tickets to the game. Please look early and often at the MLB, Giants, and Cardinals websites. Thank you to all who have supported Rickwood over the years. This is truly a dream come true!

- Gerald Watkins

*"Our quaint old
ballpark is being
prepared for an invasion
next June. Major
League Baseball is
coming to Rickwood
Field!"*



Construction has begun at Rickwood Field. For more construction photos, see pages 10-11.

DID YOU KNOW?



In 1885, the Birmingham Barons played games at the Fairgrounds and Lakeview Park before finally taking up residence at West End Park from the late 1880s until Rickwood opened on August 10, 1918. West End Park featured a wooden grandstand and was nicknamed "The Slag Pile" because of the enormous mountain of slag stretching along the exterior of the outfield fence. Slag was a byproduct of Birmingham's burgeoning iron industry, and the mountaintop was poised neatly above the field. Budget-minded fans would climb to the top to watch games for free.

The location of the ballpark remains somewhat of a mystery, however. According to Bham Wiki, the Slag Pile was "located on land west of Alice Furnace and north of the Railroad Reservation on the western edge of Birmingham's original city limit, adjoining Smithfield. The park abutted 7th Street North at 1st Avenue North, south of the Car Line Railroad and north of the Alabama Great Southern Railroad tracks." Over the years, several of the roads in this area have been reconfigured and/or renamed, which has left the exact location of the Slag Pile difficult to identify. Several SABR members who are on our board are trying to determine where the Slag Pile's grandstand once stood, as well as information regarding the orientation of the playing surface so that a historical marker can be placed at the site. **If you have any information about the Slag Pile, including historical maps, photographs, diary entries, or other writings about the ballpark, please reach out to us on social media.** Thank you.

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BECOME A FRIEND OF RICKWOOD

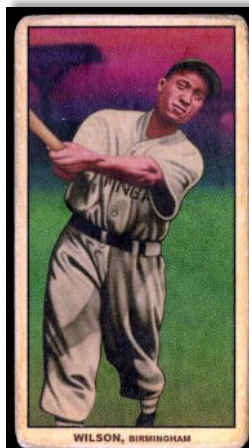
The Friends of Rickwood is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which was formed in 1992, and is dedicated to preserving America's Oldest Ballpark. Anyone can become a Friend of Rickwood by donating to the Friends.

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. Thanks!



**Artie Wilson T-206 Card
by Helmar Brewing**

FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD 2023 FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Rickwood Field depends on the generosity of our community every year to keep the park alive. We have had another strong year of park operations, with record park rental fees, memberships, and gift shop donations, and our board and friends continue to devote countless volunteer hours and

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\$1,000 & above

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Mark Walker
Katherine Whitfield

"We have had another strong year of park operations, with record park rental fees, memberships, and gift shop donations, and our board and friends continue to devote countless volunteer hours and critical in-kind services as we get ready for the world in 2024."

This listing does not include support such as the countless hours of help by our legion of volunteers, the support from the City of Birmingham, the critical in-kind donations we count on, annual Board dues, or merchandise sales. Our Members are listed on the following page. When considered as a whole, community support for Rickwood Field is at an all-time high. We cannot thank everyone enough for their generous support.

Please let us know if we missed your donation so we can correct our listing.

FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD 2023 MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM CONTRIBUTORS

MEMBER LIST 2022-23

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* Renewal Members

- Continued on next page

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**HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM
THE FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD!**

FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD MEMBER LIST 2022-23 CONTINUED

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Timothy Parks
Jay Reeves
Marc Rice
Culley Scarborough
Zach Searcy
John Sturges
David Tew
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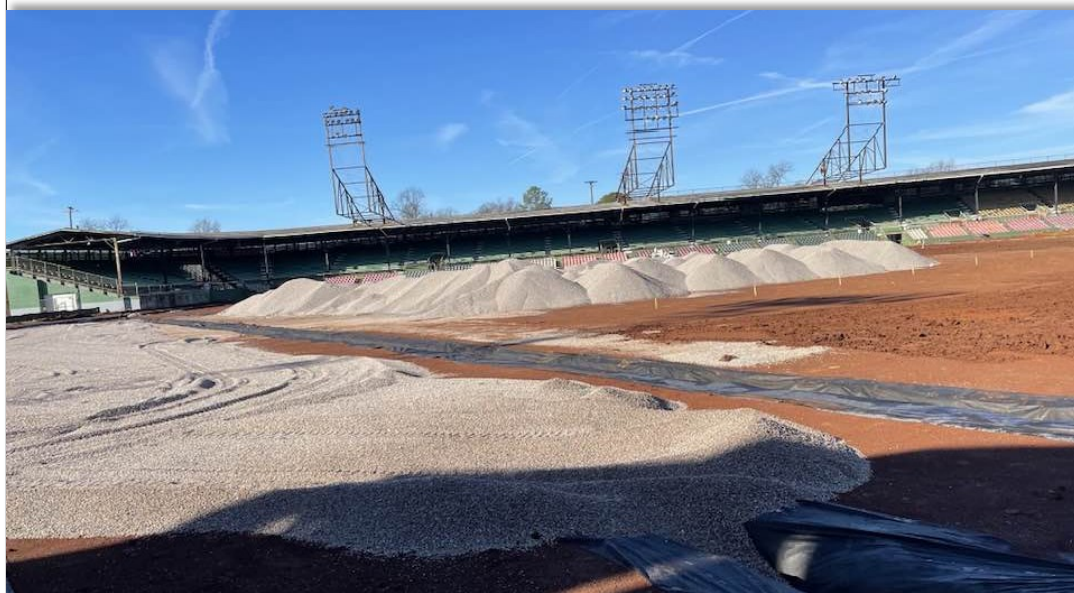
*Renewal Members

Tax-deductible donations help the Friends of Rickwood maintain and restore America's Oldest Ballpark, which includes funding the ongoing renovations at the ballpark for the 2024 Rickwood Classic, the MLB game, as well as preserving the ballpark for future generations.

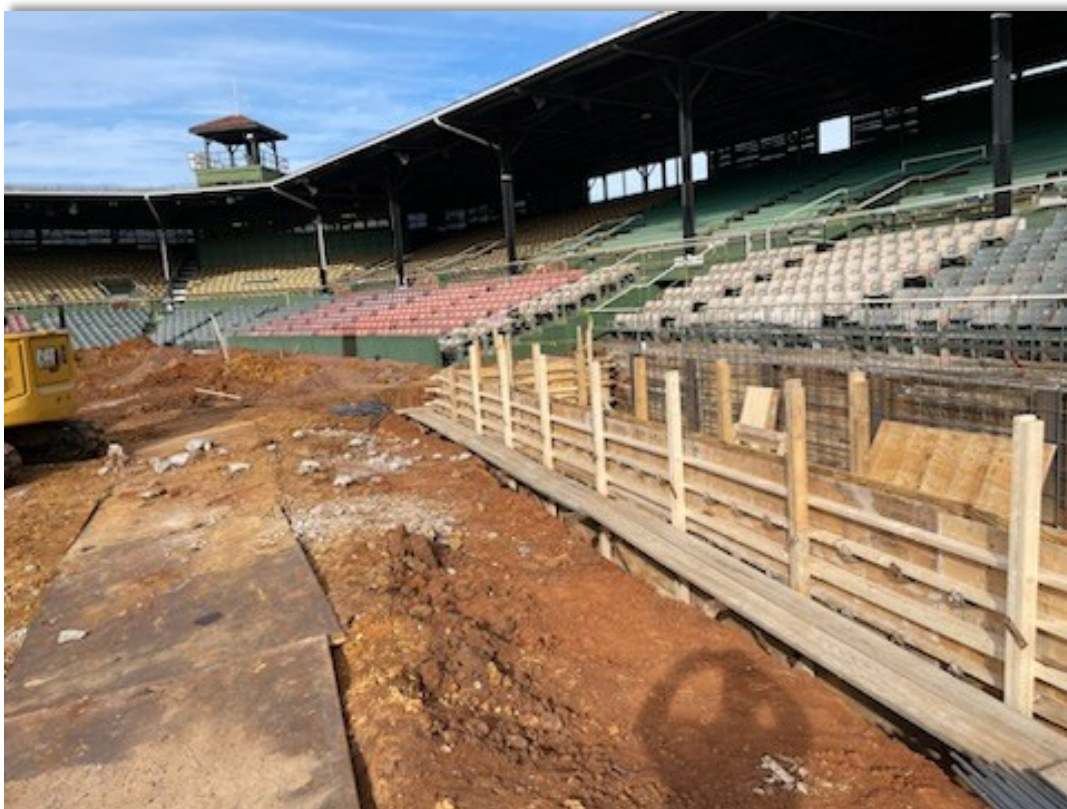
THANK YOU to all our Sponsors, Granters, Donors, and Members! You are truly FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD!

*"THANK YOU to all our
Sponsors, Granters, Donors,
and Members! You are truly*

*FRIENDS OF
RICKWOOD!"*



PHOTOS OF THE ONGOING RENOVATIONS



It's sometimes hard for the Friends of Rickwood to watch our favorite ballpark being torn up while undergoing renovations. The changes that are happening now will keep Rickwood around for another century, which is a wonderful thing for all of us, including future generations of baseball fans.



"The changes that are happening now will keep Rickwood around for another century, which is a wonderful thing for all of us, including future generations of baseball fans."

The Friends of Rickwood

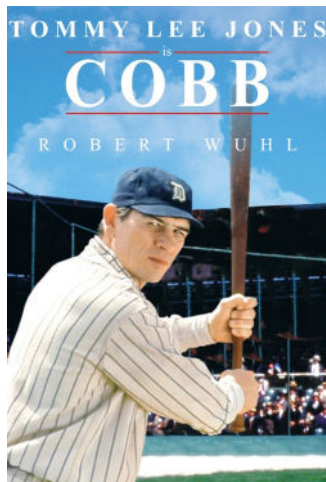
Rickwood Field
1137 2nd Ave W
Birmingham, AL 35204
205-922-3725

Email address:

friendsofrickwoodfield@gmail.com



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THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: *Cobb*

Tyrus Raymond Cobb. Ruminates on that name for a few moments. What thoughts come to mind? The Georgia Peach. Greatness, speed, intensity, obsessive competitiveness, and determination. Also, pettiness, racism, misogyny, and violence. When it comes to Ty Cobb, adjectives only raise more questions about who he really was.

Ron Shelton wrote and directed *Cobb*, which stars Tommy Lee Jones as Ty Cobb and Robert Wuhl as his biographer, Al Stump. The film is based on the book, *Ty Cobb: A Biography* by Stump, and asserts that it is "based on a true story," as so many biopics do. In this case, it would have probably been more appropriate to state that the movie is "based on a disputed story."

Cobb is set in 1960. Al Stump is a sportswriter who is living in Santa Barbara, California. He has just gotten several national articles published and his star is rising. The movie opens in a bar with reporters arguing about the greatest boxers, singers, and kings. Stump receives a phone call informing him that Ty Cobb wants him to write the story of his life. Unlike their other debates, all but one of the sportswriters agree that Cobb was the greatest baseball player of all time. Stump then drives to Cobb's hunting lodge near Lake Tahoe, Utah where he meets the legendary player. Despite Cobb's aberrant behavior, which includes randomly firing a pistol in his home, serial alcohol abuse, a harrowing ride down an ice-covered mountain road, and revealing his violent nature at a hotel in Reno, Stump signs on as his biographer. Cobb then persuades him to drive cross country with him to Cooperstown for a ceremony at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and later to Royston, Georgia.

Throughout the film Stump and Cobb debate about whether the book will be about the life of Cobb or the game and Cobb declares, "Cobb is baseball!" Cobb's demons make him the antagonist of his own biography while Stump becomes the protagonist, at least until Cobb's troubled character briefly rubs off on him. *Cobb* is a struggle for the truth. Stump begs Cobb to open up about his life beyond his baseball exploits and opinions about the game to reveal who Stump believes Cobb actually was. Meanwhile, Cobb is frustrated by Stump because Cobb has his memories about his life in baseball. He wants generations of fans to remember him as a hero. Stump finally decides to write two books—one modeled after Cobb's dictates and the second based on his view of Cobb's dark nature. Shelton decided that Stump's sinister version of Cobb was the story worth retelling in the film. However, just as Cobb and Stump fought over which story accurately depicted Cobb's life, baseball fans are presented with the same task. Stump's narrative of Cobb has been hotly contested.

In "The Georgia Peach: Stumped by the Storyteller," which was published in *The National Pastime: Baseball in the Peach State*, baseball historian and SABR member William R. Cobb (no relation to Ty) raises serious questions about Stump's motives and the accuracy of his book as retold in the movie. Anyone watching *Cobb* should do so with a proverbial grain of salt, or perhaps watch the movie for the nearly 8 sparse minutes of screen time afforded to the excellent baseball scenes shot at Rickwood Field.

As we noted in our *Who Are The Friends of Rickwood* series in 2021, "Shelton's vision for the ballpark created the right feel for the baseball scenes. The existing signs in the outfield were replaced with period signs including Ajax Tires, The American Boy Magazine, and Burma-Shave. The signs were designed by Ted Haigh, who also created signs for 'A League of Their Own' and 'The Natural.'" The baseball scenes include an appearance by Roger Clemens pitching for the Philadelphia Athletics, and Jimmy Buffett as a fan whom Cobb brutally attacks in the stands.

Cobb was filmed when the Friends of Rickwood was a fledgling organization and the ballpark was in serious disrepair. Whatever its merits as a film, the movie was critical to saving Rickwood Field not only because of the repairs the park received at the time, which allowed filming to go forward but also because of the local and national exposure the park received. While *Cobb* may have made only \$1 million at the box office, the film has an enduring value for the preservation of Rickwood Field, whether viewed as non-fiction, fiction, or a mixture of both.

- Jeb Stewart

