

RICKWOOD TALES

Rickwood Calendar 4/6/26 to 7/6/26

- **April 18, 9 AM-4 PM:** Baseball Card Show
- **April 18-19:** Spartan Baseball Tournament
- **April 26:** Birmingham Firefighters v. Birmingham Police Department
- **May 11:** Mobile Area High School All Star Game (DH)
- **May 12-13:** Mayor's Youth Baseball
- **May 15:** SmartPlay Celebrity Softball Game
- **May 20-24:** SWAC Baseball Tournament
- **May 27, 12:30 PM:** Pensacola Seagulls v. Birmingham Black Barons (Tribute to the Negro Leagues)
- **June 19, 12:00 PM:** MLB East-West All Star Tribute Game

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

Get Your Rickwood Gear!

We have plenty of copies of the new book celebrating the life of Willie Mays. Caps, t-shirts, jackets, posters, books, coffee mugs, and other Rickwood merchandise are available for purchase at <https://rickwood.com/shop/>



THE BARONS' RETURN AND MLB'S EAST-WEST ALL STAR TRIBUTE TAKE CENTER STAGE

Rickwood will host two major baseball events in 2026, with the Birmingham Barons returning in late May followed by Major League Baseball's East-West Classic: A Tribute to the Negro Leagues All-Star Game.

On **Wednesday, May 27 at 12:30 PM**, the Birmingham Barons will make their 26th return to the ballpark since 1996, facing the Pensacola Blue Wahoos. The Barons will honor the Birmingham Black Barons with throwback uniforms. Pensacola will also remember its own Negro League history as the Pensacola Seagulls.

Former Major League pitcher Denny McLain, who won 31 games for the Detroit Tigers in 1968, will be the featured guest. McLain will throw out the cere-

monial first pitch and will then sign autographs for fans for free.

Last year's return to Rickwood featured a tightly played game, as the Barons—wearing Black Barons uniforms—fell 1-0 to the Rocket City Trash Pandas, who honored the Huntsville Stars. As always, the setting provided a direct link to the game's earlier eras.

That connection continues on **Juneteenth**, when Major League Baseball returns to Rickwood for the East-West Classic, a five-inning exhibition honoring the Negro Leagues' All-Star Game. The game will be nationally televised on MLB Network, with additional details, including participating players, to be announced.

In 2025, the West combined for a shutout, with CC Sabathia opening with a perfect first inning before turning things over to Jose Contreras, Scott Kazmir, and Dellin Betances. The East was highlighted by Edwin Jackson, but the West won 3-0 behind B. J. Upton.

Tickets for both events will be handled directly by the Birmingham Barons and Major League Baseball. Fans should follow the Barons and MLB for ticketing information and updates.

Hosting events like these supports ongoing investment in the ballpark, helping ensure Rickwood Field is maintained, improved, and continues to host meaningful baseball.

THE SWAC TOURNAMENT RETURNS TO RICKWOOD

Rickwood Field will once again host the Southwestern Athletic Conference Baseball Tournament from **May 20-24**, bringing one of college baseball's premier events among Historically Black Colleges and Universities back to Birmingham.

The tournament features the top eight teams from the conference's 12 programs in a two-bracket, double-elimination format. With a history dating back to 1920, the SWAC remains a leading conference among Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and its postseason tournament continues to produce high-level competition each spring. Last year's championship game provided a clear example.

Bethune-Cookman and Florida A&M entered the final in a back-and-forth contest that carried into the ninth inning. Florida A&M led 9-6 before Bethune-Cookman responded with two runs in the eighth to cut the deficit to one.

In the bottom of the ninth, Bethune-Cookman put two runners on base with two outs, setting the stage for Andrey Martinez. On a 2-2 pitch, Martinez drove a three-run home run to center field, securing an 11-9 victory and the program's first SWAC championship since joining the conference. The win also earned the Wildcats an automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament.

Over the course of the tournament, teams played fourteen games across four days, with strong attendance throughout the week. Programs such as Southern University and Jackson State continue to add to their histories, while newer members like Bethune-Cookman have quickly established themselves as contenders.

The SWAC Tournament's return to Rickwood reflects both the quality of the event and Birmingham's role as a host city. The SWAC Tournament is scheduled to remain at Rickwood through at least 2029, providing a classic postseason home for the conference.

THE NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME HONORS BILL CHAPMAN'S BASEBALL PHOTOGRAPHY

Our good friend Bill Chapman has been coming to Rickwood Field to photograph the faces and stories that shaped the game since 2003.

Bill's journey into professional photography began in a modest and deeply personal way. Growing up, he was surrounded by the quiet influence of his father, a photography hobbyist who maintained a darkroom at home. Although his father no longer actively used it, the presence of that space sparked his curiosity. By high school, he had taken a serious interest in photography, experimenting with his father's equipment and developing the skills that would later define Bill's career.

While Bill is best known for his striking baseball photography, his early work extended into the music world. Beginning in 1969, he photographed legendary acts such as Simon and Garfunkel and The Who, capturing the energy of live performances. Despite this early diversity, baseball ultimately became his singular focus, blending his artistic vision with a deep appreciation for the sport's cultural

history. A pivotal influence on Bill's work was his growing awareness of baseball's racial history.

As a young boy, he understood the significance of the Boston Red Sox being the last Major League team to integrate. A moment at Fenway Park, where he saw Pumpsie Green and Minnie Minoso together, left a lasting impression. Years later, an exhibition of Ernest Withers' photographs of Negro League players reignited this interest and inspired him to explore the subject further. This curiosity eventually led him to Rickwood, the oldest professional ballpark in the United States, and to meaningful collaborations with its community.

Bill's acclaimed project, *The Color of Baseball*, emerged from these experiences. After years of photographing Major League parks and working with teams like the Pawtucket Red Sox, a chance meeting with Ernest Withers in Memphis proved transformative. Withers introduced him to Rickwood

and shared stories of its rich past, prompting Bill to document the legacy of Negro League players through his lens.

For Bill, photographing former Negro League players was a deeply human experience. Rather than taking candid shots, he built genuine rapport with his subjects, capturing their warmth and dignity through genuine interaction. Rickwood itself became a central figure in his work—not as a nostalgic relic, but as a living, evolving symbol of baseball's enduring spirit and legacy.

Having his work included in the permanent collection of the National Baseball Hall of Fame was a profoundly meaningful achievement. It represented not only personal success but also a contribution to preserving an essential chapter of baseball history.

Through his photography, Bill has ensured that the stories, faces, and legacy of Negro League players continue to resonate for generations to come.

"For Bill, photographing former Negro League players was a deeply human experience, capturing their warmth and dignity through genuine interaction."



Darryl Strawberry and former players at the 2015 Rickwood Classic. Photo by Bill Chapman

“DUSTING ‘EM OFF”: FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The weather has turned, and Rickwood Field is again alive with baseball. Miles College, area high schools, and teams from across the region have already taken the field at America's Oldest Ballpark. As I write, schools from Florence, Muscle Shoals, and Fayette County are enjoying their time on the same diamond that has hosted generations of players and unforgettable moments.

That momentum continues into the spring. The **Birmingham Barons return to Rickwood** for a regular-season Southern League game against the Pensacola Blue Wahoos on **Wednesday, May 27, at 12:30 p.m.** Former Detroit Tigers and Birmingham A's great **Denny McLain** is scheduled as the autograph guest—the last major league pitcher to win 30 games in a season, a mark that still stands.

It is also official that **MLB's East-West Classic**, featuring recently retired major leaguers, will return to Rickwood on **Friday, June 19**. The event has quickly become a fan favorite, blending high-level talent with a tribute to the history of the Negro Leagues. Tickets for both

games will be reasonably priced and handled by the Barons and Major League Baseball.

The **Southwestern Athletic Conference Baseball Tournament returns to Rickwood** from **May 20–24**, bringing one of the premier HBCU events back to Birmingham. Last year's tournament delivered dramatic finishes, and expectations are high for another strong showing. The energy and tradition surrounding the SWAC Tournament continue to make it a highlight of the calendar.

Two newer additions are especially meaningful. On **Sunday, April 26**, Rickwood will host its first **Birmingham Fire Department vs. Birmingham Police Department** game, honoring those who serve our community each and every day. Then, on **Monday, May 11**, **top high school players from Mobile** will compete in an **all-star showcase** reminiscent of the East-West High School All-Star Games that were a Rickwood staple beginning in the 1940s.

Unfortunately, Rickwood sustained some recent storm damage from high winds. An outfield billboard was partially knocked down, and the scoreboard suffered minor damage. However, repairs are already being planned to ensure the ballpark remains ready for the full slate of events.

Finally, as always, I want to thank our partners and friends with the City of Birmingham. Their continued support, dedication, and willingness to help in so many ways make it possible to preserve and maintain this historic ballpark. Quite simply, without their partnership, keeping Rickwood in the condition it deserves would be far more difficult.

With so much activity already underway and even more on the horizon, it is shaping up to be another truly memorable season at Rickwood Field. We look forward to seeing you at the ballpark this year. Come take in a game or join us for a tour!

- Gerald Watkins

“Finally, as always, I want to thank our partners and friends with the City of Birmingham. Their continued support, dedication, and willingness to help in so many ways make it possible to preserve and maintain this historic ballpark.”



Rickwood Field in 2003. Photo by Bill Chapman

TWO NEW RICKWOOD BOOKS ARE COMING!

Two new books will shine fresh light on Rickwood Field and Birmingham's rich baseball history.

Baseball fan, historian, and author **Tim Whitt** previously wrote *Bases Loaded with History: The Story of Rickwood Field, America's Oldest Baseball Park*, one of the earliest books devoted to Birmingham's diamond on the west side of town. Written in the mid-1990s, the book has been out of print for some time, with copies commanding high prices in used bookstores and online—if you can find one.



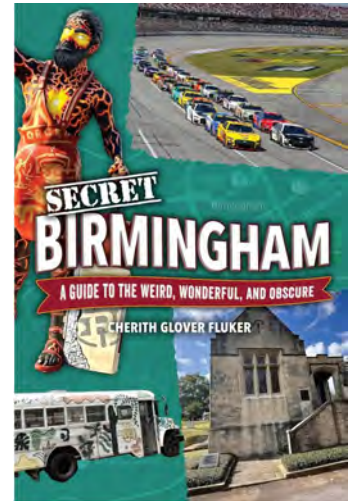
Fear not. Whitt and colleague Joe Mock have updated and expanded the original work, giving it a new title: ***Rickwood: How America's Oldest Ballpark Forged Baseball's Legends***, now available in bookstores and libraries. Accord-

ing to Whitt, "about 75% of this new book is the 'old' book," with the remainder incorporating updated research, expanded statistics, and material that was not available when the original was published in 1995. The result is both a refreshed history and a deeper look at the players, teams, and events that shaped Rickwood over time.

You can meet Tim Whitt and purchase a copy of the book at the Sports Card and Memorabilia show at Rickwood on Saturday, April 18. Whitt is scheduled to attend, meet fans, and sign copies of the new book.

Local author **Cherith Fluker** has recently written a new book, ***Secret Birmingham: A Guide to the Weird, Wonderful, and Obscure***. The book includes sections on Rickwood Field and the Negro Southern League Museum.

The book also highlights lesser-known stories and locations throughout the city, offering readers a broader appreciation of Birmingham's history and character. It serves as both an introduction for newcomers and a fresh perspective for longtime residents and visitors exploring the area for the first time, encouraging deeper exploration into Birmingham's



neighborhoods and landmarks. Fluker is also tentatively scheduled to appear at the Rickwood Sports Card and Memorabilia Show on Saturday, August 18, where copies of her book will be available for purchase and signing. She is expected to meet with attendees, discuss her work, and share insights into the stories featured in her book.

The Friends of Rickwood are excited to see the Rickwood Library continue to grow, adding new resources that help preserve and share the ballpark's history for future generations. These books also expand access for researchers, fans, and visitors interested in Birmingham's heritage and its enduring place baseball history.

- Joe DeLeonard

"Two new books will shine fresh light on Rickwood Field and Birmingham's rich baseball history."



RICKWOOD AND BIRMINGHAM FEATURED IN USA TODAY SPORTS WEEKLY

Birmingham was recently selected as one of the best minor league baseball towns in the country by USA Today Sports Weekly. Writers Rick Suter, James Kramer, and Dan Spears highlighted Birmingham in the March 11-17 edition of the weekly sports journal.

In the story, it was noted, "Rickwood Field is the oldest existing pro baseball stadium in the country and is definitely worth a visit by tourists." This marks the second time in recent years that Birmingham and Rickwood have received accolades from the publication.

Madison and Montgomery, Alabama, were also picked by the trio as among the best minor league baseball towns. Other Southern League cities to make the list include Pensacola, Florida, Biloxi, Mississippi, and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

FROM THE ROOFTOP

Spring has sprung! It seems like almost every weekend is filled with baseball at Rickwood Field, and the energy around the ballpark is unmistakable as players and fans alike return to enjoy America's Oldest Ballpark.

We are still looking for your old photos and memorabilia of baseball games and other events at Rickwood Field. Please search those old boxes and containers in your attic or basement, where you might have stored and perhaps forgotten some hidden treasures. As I have stated before, we are hoping to find photos that will help fill in pieces of the puzzle of Rickwood's rich and storied past. Contact me at jddballpark@gmail.com.

In either late spring or early summer, there will be a new "Quick

Rickwood Field Facts" sheet produced. It will be free to all visitors at the park and will provide a helpful snapshot of the park's remarkable history.

Please make plans to attend the Rickwood Card and Memorabilia Show on **Saturday, April 18**. The show is from **9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.** Find your perfect card or piece of memorabilia for your collection, or simply come out and enjoy a great day at the ballpark.

Two authors will be there with their new books available for purchase and autograph. Cherith Fluker's new book was released last year, *Secret Birmingham: A Guide to the Weird, Wonderful, and Obscure*. Tim Whitt will be on hand with his

new book, *Rickwood: How America's Oldest Ballpark Forged Baseball's Legends*. Both writers are tentatively scheduled to be at Rickwood during the morning hours of the card show.

Don't forget the two recently booked events at Rickwood. The **Birmingham Fire vs. Birmingham Police game** is scheduled for **Sunday, April 26**, and the best players from Mobile, Alabama high schools will play a game, or perhaps a doubleheader, on Monday, May 11. It would be nice to have a strong turnout for both of these events and show our continued support for the ballpark.

- Joe DeLeonard

"As I have stated before, we are hoping to find photos that will help fill in pieces of the puzzle of Rickwood's rich and storied past."

2026 OFFICIAL RICKWOOD POCKET SCHEDULES ARE NOW AVAILABLE

The official 2026 Rickwood Field pocket schedule is out and free to everyone. The schedule lists all college and professional baseball games played at America's Oldest Baseball Park.

There are several ways to obtain one. Schedules can be picked up at the ballpark, Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, or by

writing to the Friends of Rickwood at 1137 2nd. Avenue West, Birmingham, AL 35204. Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

You can also send a message to jddballpark@gmail.com and request some schedules. Stay in the know. Get your official Rickwood schedule now!



RICKWOOD FIELD: A PLACE WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE

I grew up in a small town—Corning, New York—about 200 miles from “The Big Apple” and 100 miles west of Cooperstown. The holiday movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* paints a pretty good picture of what it was like living there. We had a thriving market street with specialty shops, bars, and restaurants that made for a close-knit community, surrounded by the Finger Lakes, cornfields, and dairy farms.

For my young, baseball-obsessed self, the best part of Corning was the game. From collecting baseball cards to playing Little League, my passion for America’s pastime started early, and like so many kids, I dreamed of making it to the big leagues. I grew up during the Mantle/Maris home run era, and my allegiance to the New York Yankees has remained strong ever since.

Another movie that captures my childhood is *The Sandlot*. My buddies and I would sacrifice almost anything to play one more game—ignoring schoolwork, weather, or anything else in our way. If we didn’t have enough players, we improvised. If bats broke, we nailed them back together. If we ran out of baseballs, we hunted for lost ones or made do with whatever we had. When no one else was around, I’d throw a tennis ball against the front steps or a basement wall to sharpen my fielding skills.

Baseball was the talk of the town most of the year. The local newspaper published Little League standings and highlights alongside coverage of the Yankees. If you had a big game, your name might appear in the paper—right next to the Yankees recap. That kind of recognition only fueled the belief that the big leagues were just around the corner.

My best friend on the north side of town once hit three grand slams in a single game. He was mercifully pulled before his fourth at-bat—with the bases loaded again. We were convinced Mickey Mantle needed to start planning his retirement because Chris was on his way.

Halfway through my 11-year-old Little League season, big news hit our household: my dad announced we were moving to Birmingham, Alabama. I was having a great season, but I had to leave early to prepare for the move. Part of me worried that my dream of becoming a baseball player had taken a hit—I had heard football was king in the South.

Leaving my friends was tough, but I held onto the idea that I might see some of them in the big leagues one day. What I didn’t know at the time was that God had a different kind of “major league” plan for me.

I began playing in the Dixie Youth League for the Center Point Yankees. Ironically, it took moving south for me to wear my first “Yankee” uniform. It turned out to be a good transition. I made new friends who loved baseball just as much as I did.

Then, in the spring of 1971, I heard something that felt almost too good to be true—the New York Yankees were coming to Rickwood Field to play the Red Sox in an exhibition game. I didn’t even know where Rickwood was, and I wasn’t sure my dad could afford tickets. But a couple of days before the game, he told me he had gotten them.

Although many of the Yankees legends had retired, I knew some of the newer names like rookie Thurman Munson, Bobby

Murcer, and ace Mel Stottlemyre. I was also familiar with Carl Yastrzemski, the 1967 Triple Crown and MVP winner—I had just read his autobiography in sixth grade—so my excitement was off the charts.

On April 4, 1971, I made my first trip to Rickwood Field, clutching an unsigned baseball and hoping for autographs from my beloved Yankees. The moment I walked into the stadium, I was in awe. I had been to a few minor league games in small parks up north, but Rickwood felt different. It felt special.

The Washington Senators had played the Atlanta Braves there the night before, making it a full weekend of baseball in Birmingham. We found our box seats down the third-base line—seats I could still point out today—and I immediately spotted a long line forming for Yastrzemski’s autograph. I jumped in, but the line was moving slowly, and it looked like I might not make it.

Then something incredible happened. A photographer from the Birmingham Post-Herald grabbed my arm and pulled me to the front of the line—apparently because I was wearing a bright red T-shirt that made for a good photo. Yaz took my ball, signed it on the sweet spot, and posed with me. I was ecstatic.

With game time approaching, I rushed over to the Yankees’ dugout. The players were already inside, so I politely called out. One of them motioned for me to toss my ball down, and it came back with a few more autographs.

The Yankees lost the game 5–1, with Sonny Siebert pitching a complete game for the Red

“Then, in the spring of 1971, I heard something that felt almost too good to be true—the New York Yankees were coming to Rickwood Field to play the Red Sox in an exhibition game.”

DREAMS COME TRUE AT AMERICA'S OLDEST BALLPARK

Sox—just two days before Opening Day. But the score didn't matter. It was one of the greatest days of my life. As it turned out, none of my childhood friends made it to the major leagues—and neither did I. Childhood dreams are pure and powerful, but only a small percentage come true in the way we imagine.

But in 2020, I was elected to serve on the board of the Friends of Rickwood. A couple of years later, my best friend Gerald Watkins called to tell me that Major League Baseball wanted to meet with us. Not long after that, I found myself serving on the or-

ganizing committee to bring a Major League Baseball game to Rickwood Field in June 2024.

This wasn't an exhibition—it was a regular season game, nationally televised. For two years, we worked to make it happen. That event placed me right in the middle of a major league experience in a way I never could have imagined as a kid.

Maybe my dream of making it to the big leagues came true after all—just not in the way I expected. As a board member, I'm often asked why I serve. The best answer I can give comes

from a line spoken by James Earl Jones in *Field of Dreams*:

“America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past. It reminds us of all that once was good, and what could be again.”

I can personally testify that Rickwood Field is a place where dreams do come true.

- Mike Newton



Yankee Bobby Murcer at Rickwood for the 1971 exhibition game against the Red Sox.

Photo courtesy of our good friend Art Black, who was also in attendance that day.

“Childhood dreams are pure and powerful, but only a small percentage come true in the way we imagine.”

PLAYING AN EXTRA IN *COBB* AT RICKWOOD WAS A GREAT THRILL

One Sunday morning in January 1994, I did as I always had. I went to a newspaper rack, as people did in those days, inserted eight quarters, and bought the Sunday edition of *The Birmingham News*. I bought a Sunday paper even though I didn't read anything but sports.

On the way to the sports section, my eyes caught something about auditions at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. If you showed up at noon, you could get your name in the hat as an extra for a movie that was going to be shot later in the spring at Rickwood Field. The movie was about the baseball player Ty Cobb. I didn't have to be told that Rickwood Field was quite representative of what a ballpark looked like in Cobb's heyday, which explained why the crew was coming to Birmingham.

Tommy Lee Jones was set to star as the Georgia Peach, and Ron Shelton would direct the film. The article mentioned that Shelton had also directed *Bull Durham*, a big hit for Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins.

An extra in a movie—that was really about all that registered in my mind as I read the article. Since I had time to go to the northside that day, I figured, "Why not?" When I got there, I was shocked to find people lined up around the corner to get through the front doors. There must have been a couple of hundred, at least. Everyone was given a form to fill in their name, age, and telephone number. At the end of the one-page form was a question about stage talents: "List any entertainment quality you might have." Since I thought I could imitate a couple of movie stars, I wrote, "can imitate certain film stars."

I almost left before turning in the form, such was my annoyance at

having to stand in line for anything. Instead, I stood patiently for three hours just to hand that form to someone inside before returning to my Homewood apartment. I didn't give it another thought beyond that afternoon.

In mid-March, I got a telephone call from someone I didn't know. If I wanted to be an extra in *Cobb*, I needed to report to costumes at the Alabama Fairgrounds at 6:00 a.m. the following morning. I was genuinely surprised. I hadn't thought I'd be selected at all.

Was I ever glad that I took that call.

Before filming, I thought it might behoove me to bring a camera. Over the course of four days standing in the grandstand at Rickwood Field, I took 144 pictures—half color, half black and white. I even got outfitted in a rather snazzy cane-bottom hat with a three-piece brown suit. The production company also sat me down and gave me a free haircut, styled as someone might have worn it around 1912.

Filming a movie can be tedious work. There is a lot of sitting and waiting—for the director to get people in place, for lighting to be positioned, for sound technicians, extras, and actors to be ready. Believe me, when you had several hundred people to move around the stadium to create the look of an overflow crowd for a game against the New York Yankees, there was a lot of sitting and waiting.

Even with all the extras, there still weren't quite enough people to fill out the stands. Cardboard cutouts of fans dotted the ballpark to help create a big crowd. This was before the days of computer-generated imagery.

A true motley crew had descended on the old ballpark. I remember some people being impressed when Roger Clemens showed up to lend authenticity to the pitching. There is a great scene in the movie when Clemens is pitching for the Philadelphia Athletics. Cobb smashes a double off him, and steals third. Clemens' character immediately regrets not throwing at his head. Cobb then steals home and his vicious leg kick into the catcher starts a benches clearing brawl.

A few of the ballplayers were local sportscasters, Doug Bell and Matt Coulter among them, playing catch in the outfield. Ron Shelton had budgeted a few extras outfitted as policemen, owing to Cobb's volatile reputation. One of the policemen even doubled as an Elvis impersonator in his spare time.

More mock fisticuffs were staged on the afternoon of day three, and as Cobb, leaped into the crowd to beat up a rowdy heckler just as the sun was going down. The heckler? Jimmy Buffett, who later performed an impromptu concert for all those in attendance after the final day of filming.

I've not forgotten my brief time as an extra, even if I never appeared in the final cut. I even made about \$140 for four days' work. The film made a brief appearance in Birmingham, and I plunked down five or six dollars to see it. It was a forgettable film for Jones, coming on the heels of his Oscar-winning role in *The Fugitive*, when he was tracking down Harrison Ford.

For me, those four days at Rickwood Field — while standing in the grandstand, dressed for another era, and watching baseball history come to life — were completely unforgettable.

- Jason Head

"Before filming, I thought it might behoove me to bring a camera. Over the course of four days standing in the grandstand at Rickwood Field, I took 144 pictures—half color, half black and white."

JASON HEAD'S PHOTOS FROM
THE FILMING OF *COBB*



“There is a great scene in the movie when Clemens is pitching for the Philadelphia Athletics. Cobb smashes a double off him, and steals third. Clemens’ character immediately regrets not throwing at his head.”



Top: Tommy Lee Jones and Director Ron Shelton with “Babe Ruth” looming in the background. Middle-Left: Jason Head in character during filming. Middle-Right: Tommy Lee Jones about to face off with Jimmy Buffett as the heckler. Lower: One of the staged brawls.

All photos are reprinted with permission and courtesy of Jason Head.

RICKWOOD'S CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE 1959 BIRMINGHAM BARONS

If you wander over by the third-base side of the exterior grandstand, you'll see that the Friends of Rickwood have commemorated the championship clubs that have called America's Oldest Ballpark home from 1910–1987. This series remembers those teams.

In 1959, the Birmingham Barons returned to Rickwood Field riding the momentum of their remarkable 1958 campaign, when they captured the Southern Association pennant, swept the playoffs, and claimed the Dixie Series. That success elevated manager Cal Ermer to Minor League Manager of the Year honors by *The Sporting News*, and led to his departure to a Triple-A post. Into the dugout stepped first-year manager Lamar "Skeeter" Newsome, who proved more than equal to the task in a challenging transition year.

Under Newsome's steady guidance, the Barons improved to 92–61 (.601), finishing with the best overall record in the Southern Association, one game better than the championship club of 1958. Birmingham captured the first-half title to secure a playoff berth and,

despite slipping to second in the second half, demonstrated consistency and resilience across the full season. In a league defined by the split-season format, the Barons stood out as its most complete and balanced club.

Offensively, Birmingham batted .271 with 108 home runs and 61 stolen bases, combining timely hitting with surprising speed. George Alusik led the lineup with a .309 average, while Steve Boros added a .305 mark and 16 homers. Gail Henley supplied power with 20 home runs, and Jay Cooke (.290, 15 homers) and Bob Johnson (.297) provided steady production throughout a deep and reliable order.

The pitching staff was equally strong, posting a 3.45 ERA and relying on a durable and effective rotation. Gordon Seyfried (14–7, 3.26 ERA, 235 innings), Wyman Carey (14–11), and Bob Miller (14–9) anchored the staff, while Phil Regan (2.94 ERA) and Ron Mrozinski (12–8, 1.86 ERA) delivered

standout performances. Seventeen members of the club would go on to play in the major leagues, underscoring the talent assembled at Rickwood.

Despite their regular-season dominance, the postseason proved unforgiving. Birmingham opened with a victory at Rickwood Field, but Mobile captured the next four games to win the series. With the Dixie Series discontinued after 1958, the Bears' triumph marked the end of the Southern Association season and denied Mobile another postseason opportunity.

Although they fell short in the playoffs, the 1959 Barons earned their place on Rickwood's championship wall through sustained excellence over the six month campaign. A first-half title and the SA's best overall record secure their legacy as one of the finest teams ever to take the field at America's Oldest Ballpark.

[NOTE: All player statistics and team records were taken from Baseball-Reference.com]

"Under Newsome's steady guidance, the Barons improved to 92–61 (.601), finishing with the best overall record in the Southern Association, one game better than the championship club of 1958."



Three left-handed pitchers pose at Rickwood Field, part of a Barons' staff that produced the Southern Association's best overall record, a first-half pennant, and a place on Rickwood's championship wall. Photo: *The Birmingham News*, Alabama Media Group/AL.com.

DID YOU KNOW?



“Mike Mills, formerly of R.E.M., especially enjoyed the visit, taking the mound and firing a few throws, clearly relishing the experience, as captured in this photo.”

On page 9 of this issue, there is a photograph of Jimmy Buffett that was taken at Rickwood during filming of the *Cobb* movie. He is not the only musician to visit the park. On July 10, 2014, The Baseball Project – featuring Steve Wynn, Scott McCaughey, Mike Mills, and Linda Pitmon – played a memorable concert at UAB’s Alys Stephens Center. Several Friends of Rickwood board members who were in attendance invited the band to tour historic Rickwood Field the following day, where they quickly fell in love with America’s Oldest Ballpark and its rich history. Known for baseball-themed songs like “Ted F***ing Williams,” “Past Time,” “The Straw That Stirs The Drink,” and “Harvey Haddix,” the band appreciated the deep connection between music and the national pastime. Mike Mills, formerly of R.E.M., especially enjoyed the visit, taking the mound and firing a few throws, clearly relishing the experience, as captured in this photo.

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 and a window sticker. In addition: (1) Level 2 is a “Rookie” for a \$25 donation (and gets a certificate and a sticker); (2) Level 3 is a “Veteran” for a \$50 donation (and also gets a custom patch); (3) Level 3 is a “Gold Glover”

for a \$100 donation (and also gets a Rickwood T-shirt); and (4) Level 4 is an “All-Star” for a \$500 donation (and also gets a cage jacket) To join, please visit www.rickwood.com/membership or write us at:

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

Please come out to the ballpark and take a tour. Thanks!



The Friends of Rickwood

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



THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: 42

Most moviegoers who watch *42* see the story of Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color barrier. I saw something else too: Rickwood Field, alive again, playing not just a backdrop but a character in one of baseball's most important stories. That perspective comes from having stood in the grandstand in May of 2012 while the film was being made. For a week, Rickwood felt less like a historic ballpark and more like a working time machine. Crews painted walls, built facades, rolled in period cars, and even filled the stands with an eerie inflatable crowd. Someone on the Friends of Rickwood board said it best: "The circus has come to town." They weren't wrong.

On screen, that work pays off. Rickwood appears on screen for just over ten minutes, but it plays five different roles—most notably itself, but also Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, Shibe Park in Philadelphia, and even the Polo Grounds clubhouse. Few viewers will realize it, but much of the film's visual world is anchored in Birmingham.

The movie opens where it should: at Rickwood Field, with Jackie Robinson playing for the Kansas City Monarchs in 1945 against the Birmingham Black Barons. In a sequence that captures Robinson's daring style, he steals home, an early signal of the aggression that would define his game. It's a fitting introduction, not just to Robinson, but to Rickwood's place in baseball history.

From there, the film tracks Robinson's journey from 1945 through his rookie season in 1947. Clyde Sukeforth finds Robinson on the road and delivers the message that Branch Rickey wants to meet him in Brooklyn. That meeting becomes the emotional core of the film. Rickey, played by Harrison Ford, tells Robinson that he must endure the abuse that is certain to come without fighting back. When Robinson asks if Rickey wants a man afraid to fight, Rickey delivers the film's most famous line: he needs a player "with guts enough not to fight back." It's a moment that defines both men, and the burden Robinson would carry.

The film briefly follows Robinson to Montreal, where he plays under Clay Hopper, a Southerner initially skeptical of Rickey's experiment. Over time, Hopper comes to recognize Robinson's greatness, a subtle but important arc that mirrors the broader changes happening in the game.

For Birmingham viewers, the story carries an added layer. When Robinson joined the Dodgers in 1947, three key figures connected to his experience: Bobby Bragan, Dixie Walker, and Phillies manager Ben Chapman. All three had ties to Birmingham. None initially supported integration. Bragan even asked Rickey to trade him, though he would later change his mind after witnessing Robinson's treatment. Walker never fully accepted Robinson and was traded after the season. Chapman's relentless harassment of Robinson is one of the ugliest chapters in the film, and in baseball history, and he was dismissed by the Phillies after the season, never to manage again. Those connections serve as a reminder that this story, while national in scope, was deeply rooted in places like Birmingham.

No film based on real events is without its liberties, and *42* takes a few. Pirates pitcher Fritz Ostermueller is depicted as a right-hander, though he was actually a southpaw. In the film, he beans Robinson in the temple, but in reality Ostermueller, who was known for his control, hit only one batter that season: Robinson, just not in his head. The climactic home run Robinson hits off Ostermueller is also dramatized as a pennant-clinching moment. While Robinson did homer off him, it came earlier in the game and could not have been a walk-off on the road at Forbes Field. These are small departures, but worth noting. Still, those liberties do little to diminish the film's impact. *42* succeeds where it matters most. It captures the pressure, isolation, and courage required of Robinson, and it does so in a way that resonates with modern audiences without losing its historical weight.

And for those of us who know Rickwood, there is an added appreciation. Watching Robinson round the bases, or stand in against a hostile crowd, it is impossible not to think back to those nights in 2012 with the portable lights humming, the extras frozen in place, and the sense that something meaningful was being created on that field once again. In the end, *42* is more than a baseball movie. It is a story about dignity and change.

But for a few unforgettable minutes, it is also a tribute to a ballpark in Birmingham that helped bring that story to life; and for those who were lucky enough to witness the filming, that experience lingers long after the final scene fades.

- Jeb Stewart

