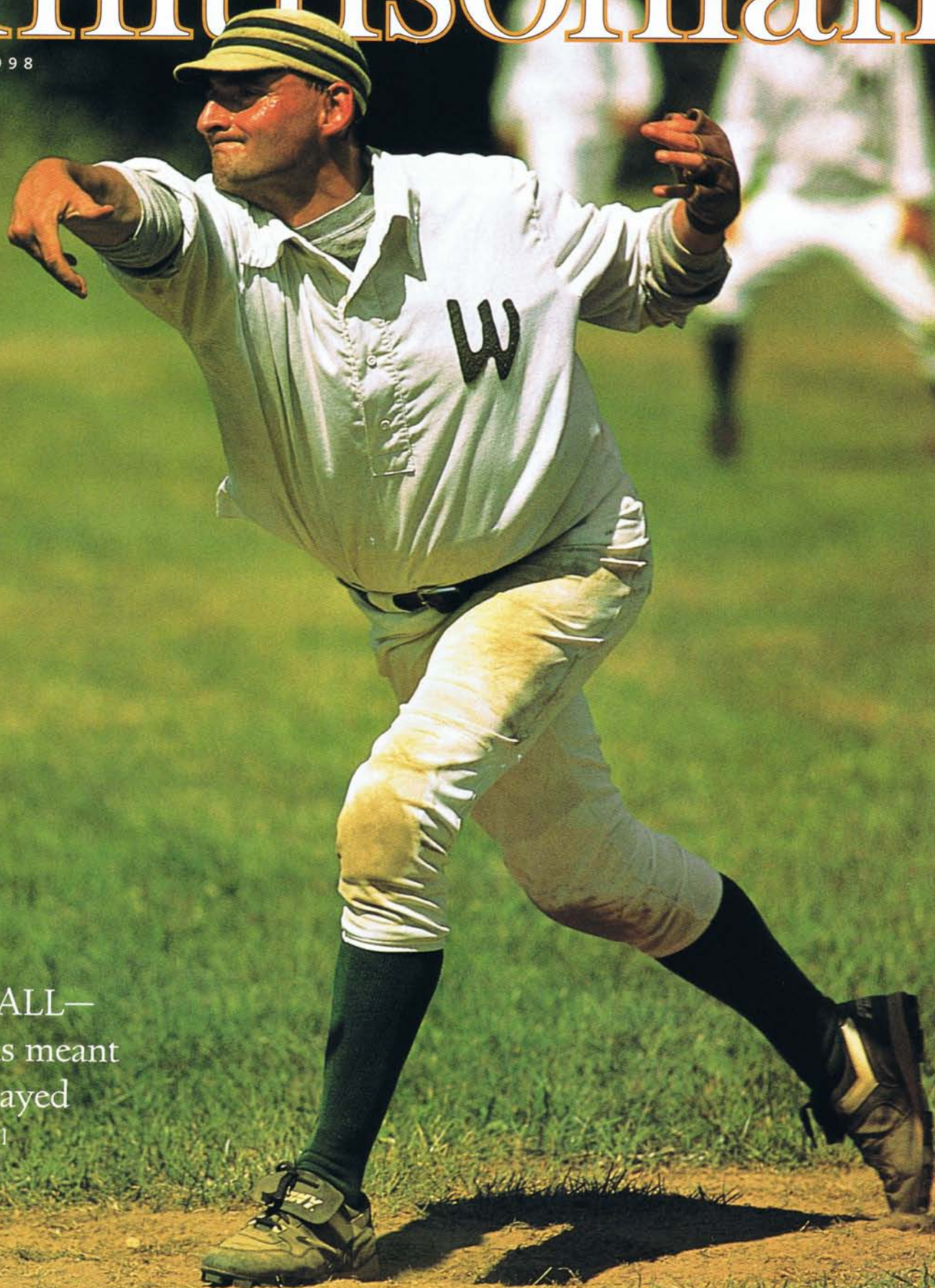


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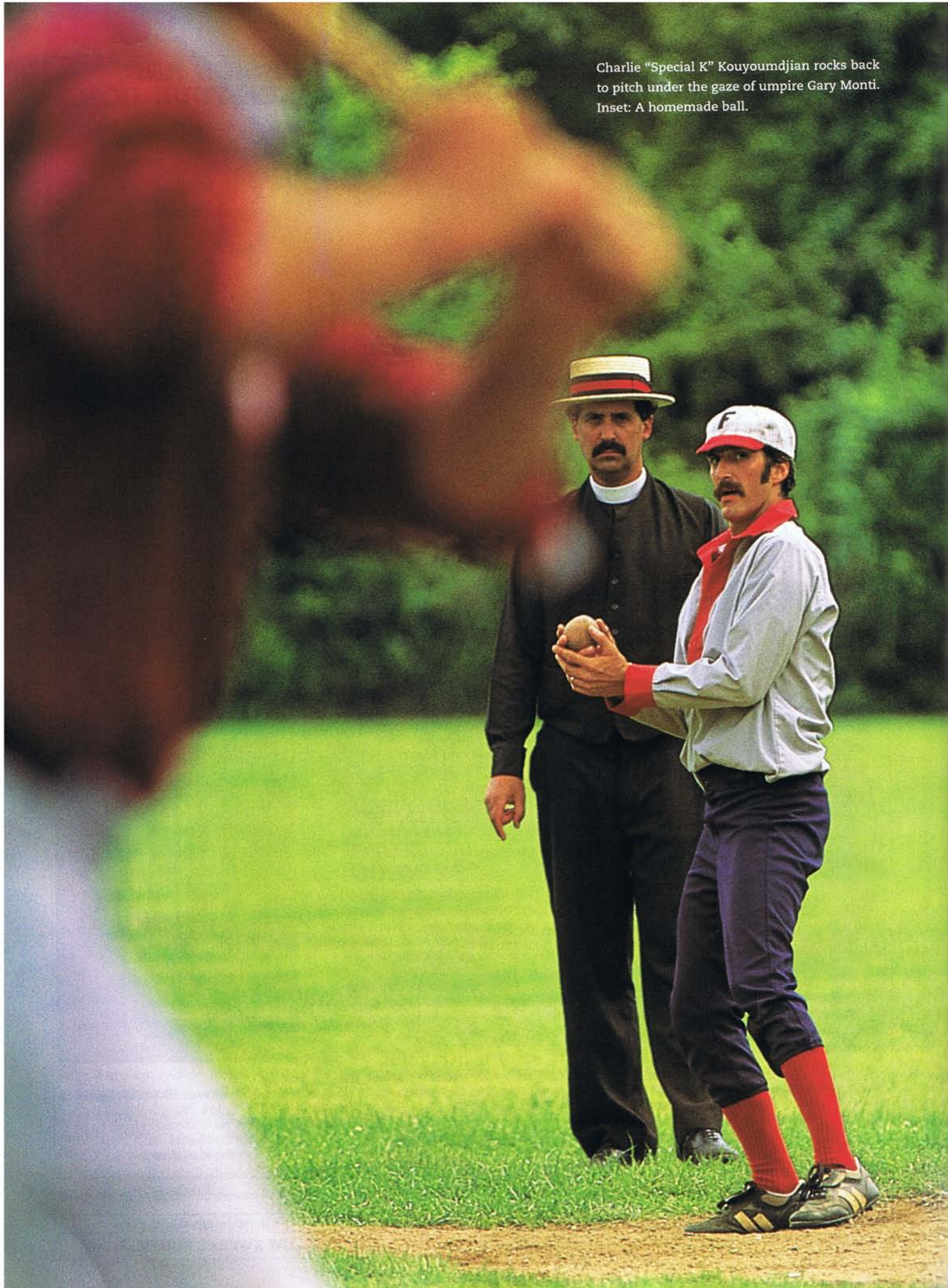
OCTOBER 1998



BASEBALL—
as it was meant
to be played

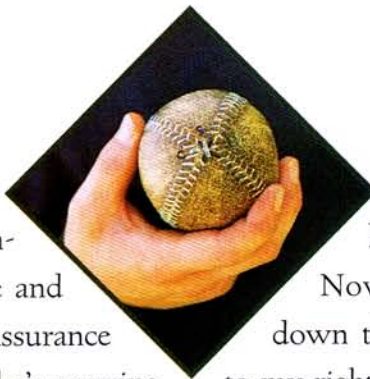
[PAGE 98]

Charlie "Special K" Kouyoumdjian rocks back to pitch under the gaze of umpire Gary Monti.
Inset: A homemade ball.



It's two, three, **four** *The* **strikes** you're out at
Old
Ball Game

ED "PIGTAIL" ELMORE, A BALLIST FOR Brooklyn's Picked Nine, strides manfully to the plate. At six foot three and 200 pounds, he exhibits the cocky assurance of an accomplished athlete, even if he's carrying 40 more pounds into middle age than he had back in high school. Brooklyn's adversary in the match is the Long Island Picked Nine, in whose number, for the day, I count myself. On the field, I've been hiding in plain sight, defending third base without a glove. Our baseball contest is being waged by 1866 rules, with bare hands and a single hard, hand-sewn ball. For three innings,



to my relief, the Brooklyn strikers have yet to test my fielding mettle. Now Pigtail smites a mighty wallop down the third-base line. Stepping smartly to my right, I reach down to grasp the hurtling ball. My autonomic nervous system, however, won't let me straighten my elbow sufficiently to make this possible. That's my writing hand—I need those fingers! The ball bounds into left field, and Brooklyn begins a five-run rally.

To most people, the idea of playing baseball without a glove probably sounds like canoeing without a paddle. At the Old Bethpage Village

BY DOUG STEWART

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM

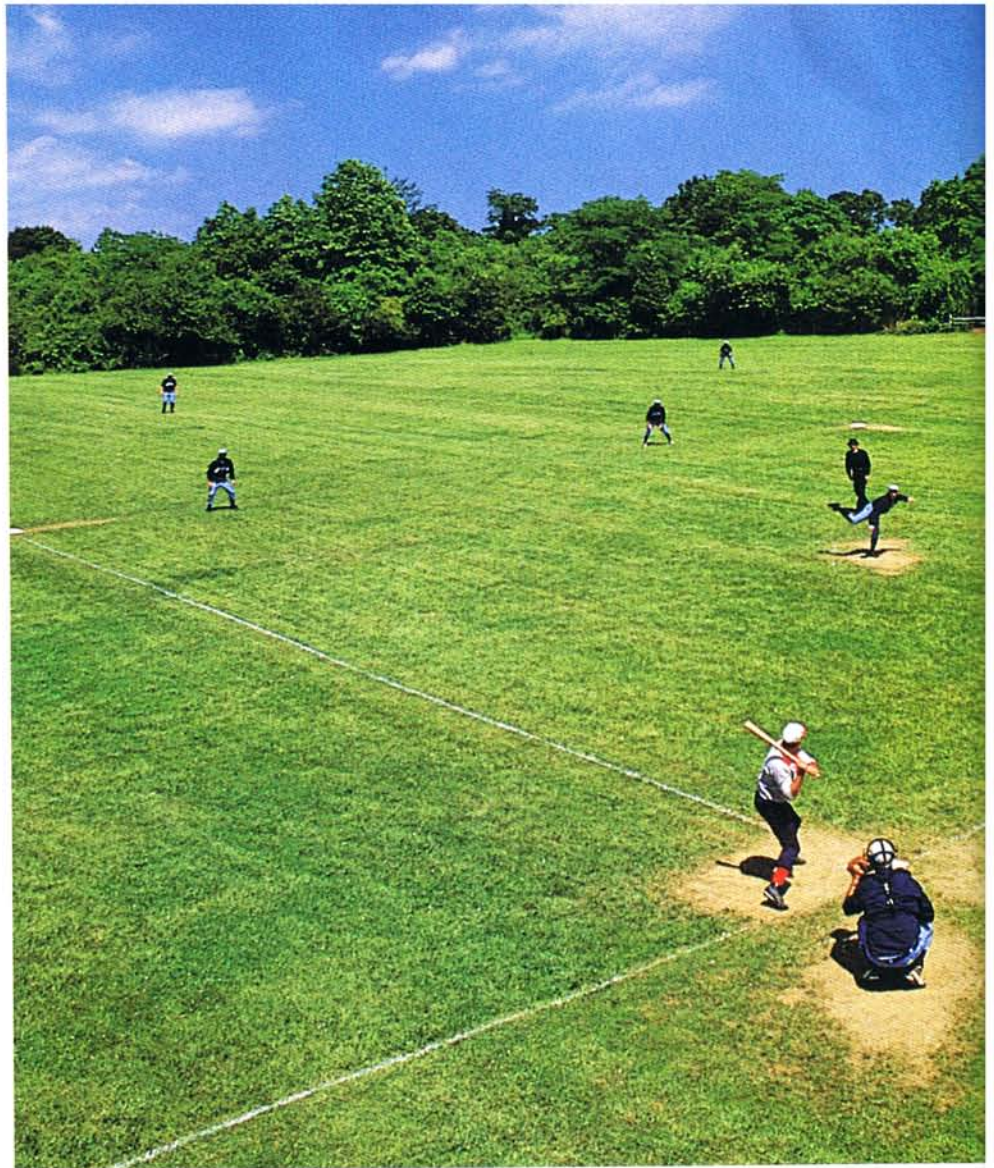
Restoration in Old Bethpage, New York, however, it's the only sporting way to play. Vintage baseball is booming around the United States. At least 70 programs are fielding teams that play by rules of past eras, which range from 1845 to 1924; many such clubs have appeared just in the past five years. Biggest and most competitive of all is the Old Time Base Ball Program at Old Bethpage.

"Ours is the only program with full-blown leagues," says Ken Balcom, the museum village's assistant site director. Old-time baseball games have been played here since 1980 as one of the village's living-history demonstrations, like quilt-making and blacksmithing. The program got a boost four years ago when hundreds of baseball-hungry Long Islanders, disgusted that the major leagues' millionaires were out on strike, converged on Old Bethpage to watch or to play an older, purer game. Today the program involves 130 players, all

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Handmade balls are
too precious to waste.*

volunteers, on ten teams in two leagues, over a 60-game season.

The 1866 league, with underhand pitching, is open to anyone with basic ability. Its 1887 counterpart is a faster, more hard-nosed game with overhand pitching and fixed rosters. Participants in both include a handful of



The Hicksville Ozones take on the Freeport Athletics in a game played by the rules of 1887. The pitcher is only 55 feet from home plate, instead of today's 60 feet, 6 inches.

women (dressed like the men) and range in age from 17 to 67. As it did in these parts a century ago, the baseball season climaxes this month at Old Bethpage's revived Long Island Fair. Amid band concerts and cornhusking bouts, the play-off games take place during the first two weekends, followed by the league championships on October 18.

"Sometimes during the fair when a ball game starts, everybody leaves," says Judy Campbell, an interpreter in 19th-century costume who works out of a tiny fisherman's cottage down a dirt road from the baseball diamond. "My mother and father will come from Hicksville to see me, but when the ball game's on, they say, 'We have

to go now.' It's one of the biggest attractions in the village."

On a recent Saturday, I watch the first match of an 1880s doubleheader, the Westburys against the Glen Head Zig Zags. Dan "the Man" Moskowitz, 47, is the Zig Zags' bald, goateed, and very muscular cocaptain and pitcher. "My team is pretty much local guys, from the Glen Head area," Moskowitz tells me as his players shag flies before the game. The teams' names, like their uniforms and many of the players' nicknames, are copied from their 19th-century predecessors. Moskowitz himself dug up 1880s game accounts of the Zig Zags in the local newspaper archives. "They were known as a plucky bunch of ball-



players, very plucky," he says, "the equal of any nine in the area."

The ballpark at Old Bethpage (above) is nostalgia incarnate: a grass field, a wooden backstop, a vine-covered split-rail fence at the edge of the outfield, a red barn and gambrel-roofed house of 1840 vintage just beyond. Spectators begin gathering on rough wooden benches in the shade of an oak grove. "This is baseball in its purest form," Moskowitz tells me, waxing philosophical as baseball-history buffs do. "It's a window back into our youth, but also into America's past. It's a real counterpoint to the commercialism of modern-day baseball, where the focus is on marketing and skybox seats."

In keeping with the village's focus on living history, umpire Gary Monti, a professional historian, hands out typed lists of suggested period banter—"red hot" for a hard-hit ball, "what the blazes!" for "what the hell!"—which draw laughs from the rookies. "And no high fives," Monti warns. "Handshakes, that's it." A few of the players wear leather gardening gloves with the fingers cut off. Only the catchers wear baseball gloves, a concession to safety in the 1887 league. The players use modern-day wooden bats reshaped with slimmed-down barrels and flattened heads to resemble models from the 1800s.

As play gets under way, I recognize what I'm watching as baseball, but it

has its oddities. Foul balls don't count as strikes, yet a foul tip to the catcher is an out, or a "hand down," even on the first pitch (a rule that inspires language from the batsmen that's not on the vocabulary list). A player is entitled to four strikes and five balls. Each time Monti intones "Strike four!" there are murmurs and laughter from spectators as they repeat the phrase.

The Westburys' fearsome pitcher, George "Wild Horse" Ferchland, 37, steps to the plate. The game is young, but Wild Horse already has dirt and grass stains on his broad chest, and the seam under one thick arm is ripped. Now he launches the ball on one bounce over the fence in center field and into a thicket. He pulls up at second as a pair of Zig Zags leap into the shrubbery to retrieve the ball. The play is dead. By 1866 rules, the ball would have remained in play, the runner circling the bases to "cross an ace" as the fielders bushwhacked. No matter what rules are being followed, the game doesn't continue till the ball is found. In Old Bethpage, it's one game, one ball: the handmade balls are too precious to waste.

Ferchland makes the balls himself, spending close to four hours wrapping yarn and stitching cowhide. On the bench later, he hands me a Wild Horse original. "I made my own pattern from an old ball I took apart," he says. The finished product is hard and round, though not quite as hard or round as a regulation baseball, and it's slightly larger.

The fans, sitting on the grass or on benches on the sidelines, are enjoying the show. "This is the game the way it should be played," says a man in a Yankees cap who's sworn off Yankee Stadium for good—"too expensive." An elderly Mets fan from Brooklyn comments after a successful pickoff play at first base: "They must have sore hands out there."

The game is no staged reenactment.

It's a gritty, full-speed-ahead athletic contest with fastballs, curves, hard slides and diving catches. One of the hardest-playing competitors is Cliff "Buck" Archer, 42, the Westburys' Brooklyn-born catcher and sometime pitcher. Before the games Archer told me, "There's no way to describe how much I love baseball. I will play baseball until I drop dead on the field." Tall, gangly and dignified, with a large hawk-like nose that's not quite straight, Archer looks the part of a 19th-century ballplayer. Like many of the other players here, he regularly plays hardball in an adult league. He met his wife, Joanne, on the subway when she tried to read the sports pages over his shoulder; on their second date, he took her to Shea Stadium. "Our first date," she tells me, "we went to a bar and talked baseball."

Archer first visited Old Bethpage as a tourist in the late 1980s. On a trip in 1990, he says, "my friends were going, 'Come on, let's go see the cows.' I said, 'Hey, wait a minute, I'm watching this game here!' I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was like watching history—the uniforms, the style of play." One of the captains said they were short a few players and wondered if any of the spectators wanted to play. "I must have looked like a 4-year-old in a toy store: 'Me! Me! Me!' They dressed me up, and I was hooked." Most of the players here, he says, were recruited the same way. "They come to watch a game, they start asking questions, and we sign them up."

Now, at the top of the ninth, Archer slams his jaw on the ground diving for a low foul to the left of the plate. Climbing to his feet, he spits a gold crown into his hand and walks it out to umpire Gary Monti behind the pitcher's box for safekeeping. The Westburys hold on to win, 14 to 10.

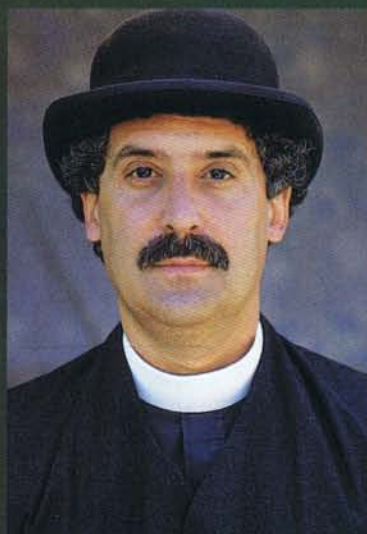
Officiating amid the hubbub, Monti is a peaceful if somber presence in a



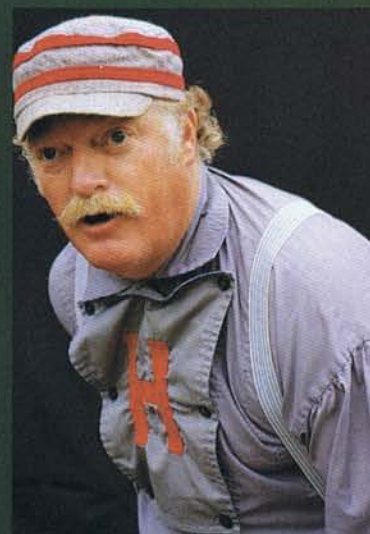
RALPH "LIVE WIRE" AMITRANO



CLIFF "BUCK" ARCHER



GARY "REV" MONTI



JOHN "BLUE STREAK" MORRISON



AL "OLD DUTCH" DIECKMANN



TOM "SQUID" JORDAN

black bowler, black vest, black pants and white minister's collar. At a cookout following the second game (the Bellmore Seminoles over the Cold Spring Harbor Spiders, 5 to 3), Monti explains his outfit. In the decades following the Civil War, most small towns had a team, and one town would challenge another. The home team furnished the umpire. "A minister, or maybe the sheriff or mayor, was supposedly the most honest person in a town." Even out of uniform, Monti is addressed as "Rev" by many of the players.

Al "Old Dutch" Dieckmann, 52, the Hicksville Ozones' intrepid captain, joins us. At Old Bethpage, he's the acknowledged sage of bygone baseball trivia. Monti recalls the first time Dieckmann visited, as a tourist four years ago. "He came up and said, 'You know you're using the wrong home plate.' He said the plate back then was round because people originally used an old tin dinner plate. I said, 'Put on a uniform.'"

"We read that some of them would slip a piece of raw meat inside to cushion the shock of the ball. That told us our pitching was all wrong."

Dieckmann, who works by day as a computer consultant, is small and gaunt. With rimless glasses, grizzled stubble on hollow cheeks, a direct, dead-serious gaze and an ever-present cigarette, Old Dutch seems to have wandered out of the smoke of a Civil War battlefield. "Visitors always ask, 'What are the rules of 19th-century



Tom Heinlein tries to slide past catcher Jason "the Spider" Pulido into home. Standing is pitcher Ken "the General" Patton, who has run in to help on the play.

baseball?' The rules changed so fast you can't generalize like that," he says. Old Bethpage's two leagues offer different glimpses of the game's evolution, and a new league planned for next year will depict the 1876 game. In that centennial year, pitchers had the luxury of a nine-ball count. Batsmen, meanwhile, were entitled to call their own pitches, high or low. "The umpire would ask, 'What's your pleasure, sir?' when you stepped into the box," says Dieckmann.

He and the other vintage ballists comb old game accounts for clues about how the game was actually played. "By the 1880s," says Monti, "catchers were wearing unpadded gloves. We read that some of them would slip a piece of raw meat inside to cushion the shock of the ball. That told us our pitching was all wrong. We shouldn't be just feeding the ball to the batters."

One of the promising rookies here is Tom "Squid" Jordan, a sure-handed 26-year-old with sideburns and curly

hair who moved to the area last fall, after the baseball season ended. In Chicago, he'd played semipro baseball as well as adult-league softball (his team was the Wicked Squids, hence his nickname). He jumped at the chance to play at Old Bethpage, joining teams in both leagues. "I didn't think there was anybody in the world as fanatic about baseball as I was—until I met these guys," Squid says, gesturing at Dutch, Pigtail, Kid Speed, Two-Bag, Mickey the Lip and the others. "You can play in leagues with more talent than this one, but they don't care as much about the game. These guys are impassioned about baseball. They're not just players, they're historians. They'll talk about a play that happened in 1860."

The players' dedication extends to bodily sacrifice. Broken fingers are routine. The afternoon's losing pitcher, the Spiders' Bob "Scoops" DiPietro, shows me a finger he injured a while back; the second knuckle appears to have been rotated a quarter

*As I watch incredulously from the on-deck circle,
Kid Speed takes off from third and steals second again.*

turn to the side. Rival pitcher Dan “Peachie” Salmon of the Westburys (“Peachfuzz” until his beard came in) shows me the thumb he broke in the first game he ever played here. “Actually, I broke it before the game. I was just playing catch to warm up.” He rebroke it a few weeks ago. “It was my own fault. I was holding my thumb wrong on a hard throw from Squid.”

The next morning, I recall Peachie’s story as I stand in the infield with my legs wide apart, my back to third base, watching a rocket from Kid Speed in deep center field streaking toward my chest. In suspenders and a short-billed cap, I’ve joined the 1866 Mineola Washingtons for the day. One of my finger joints is already red and swollen from a careless catch I made during warm-ups. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a Huntington Suffolk runner has rounded second and is heading straight for me like a sprinter on the home stretch. The ball slaps into my outstretched palms. I manage to hang onto it, pivot blindly and tag the onrushing Suffolk. To my relief, my hands hardly hurt at all. Perhaps this is because my pain circuitry is overloaded with signals from my right shin, where the runner just smashed into me. With three hands down to end the fifth, I limp toward the bench, comforted by a warm glow of accomplishment. Speed catches up to me: “I knew

there was plenty of time to nail that runner, so I just lobbed it in there to you.” Some things are better left unsaid, Speed.

Kid Speed, or Tom Heinlein, is a cheerful, unselfconscious and very fast-talking 28-year-old who’s the acknowledged phenom of both leagues. He’s not large, but he’s



Barry “the Magnet” Aguado (on one knee) has been run down by catcher Brian “Woody” Biscari and pitcher Bob “Scoops” DiPietro.

strong. On the base paths he’s a blur. Late in the game, Speed beats out a grounder, as he almost always does—he’s batting over .500—and promptly steals second and third. Then, as I watch incredulously from the on-deck circle, he takes off from third and steals *second* again. Later, I ask for an explanation. “Basically, I just wanted to show the crowd it could be

done.” In the 1860s, he says, runners on rare occasions would run backward to confuse the infield.

Al Dieckmann, this morning’s umpire, arrived at game time carrying a beat-up leather carpetbag and smoking a brown cheroot. Wearing a minister’s long black frock coat, black flat-brimmed hat, black vest and gold pocket watch, he looks like an undertaker in an old cowboy movie. He saw the getup in a Currier and Ives print of an old-time baseball umpire, he tells me, and borrowed the necessary garb from the museum’s costume room.

I step to the plate, intent on choosing a promising pitch to address. With Casey-like resolve, I ignore the first two. Behind the catcher, Old Dutch growls: “Warning on the striker!” I glance back at his baleful poker face, wondering if I’ve committed some sin of bad sportsmanship. Actually, Dieckmann explains later, the phrase simply means you’ve refused to swing at a good pitch, so now he’ll start calling them. Likewise, the first bad pitch draws a warning on the pitcher. In baseball’s earliest days, umpires didn’t call balls or strikes at all. With runners on base, a striker could watch 50 pitches go by, waiting for a wild pitch to advance the runners.

Finally, I smash a hard shot to the shortstop on one hop. I dash for first, hoping that he or the first baseman will bobble the ball, but the throw never comes. I’m out! By the rules of the 1866 “bound game,” I’ve just remembered, a ball caught on one bounce is a hand down; the fly game

was not universally embraced for another year or two. Dutch calls over to me, "Don't you hate that rule?"

As a striker, I sure do. As a pitcher, however, I could learn to love it. I find this out the following weekend, when I pitch six innings in relief in

ened ball is "egging"—elongating dramatically as it spins. Catching it is like trying to corral a small rodent. Luckily, Lusha bare-hands one foul tip after another, actually retiring the side this way in the sixth.

Sadly, my good fortune with foul tips is outweighed by the Brooklyn nine's ability to steal on me at will. With bare hands, there's no such thing as an easy catch; a hard peg to second is a daring gambit. The crowd's applause at the good plays is mixed with gasps and mutterings at all the scoring. I take it in stride—let them try playing this game without a glove. I end up losing 12 to 4, though technically, I believe, those were mostly unearned runs. Viewed from the 1860s, when scores of 40 to 30 were typical (the legendary Washington Nationals, an amateur team made up mostly of government clerks, once scored 106 aces to Louisville's 26), we played a defensive gem.

The spectators seem delighted at the spectacle of a live game from baseball's past, even if the play isn't always crisp. "I'm going to go back to Texas and start a vintage baseball club," says Tom Hampton, an engineer from Dallas, as he stands on the sidelines waiting for an 1880s game to start. Indeed, old-time baseball programs seem to be popping up everywhere. Clubs in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Florida and Rhode Island have just begun fielding teams. Colorado already has 6, and Ohio 13, including four women's teams and

the pioneering Ohio Village Muffins, founded in 1981 by the Ohio Historical Society. None of these play in leagues; for the most part, they play exhibition games, often at 19th-century restoration villages.

Most programs play by 1860 rules. Since the old rule books were fairly sketchy, today's vintage clubs are still refining their games. A traveling team drawn from Old Bethpage's players, the Brooklyn Atlantics, recently toured Ohio and Michigan to take on some of its peers. The competition was friendly, manly and sporting, though the Long Islanders snorted at some of their adversaries' rules as historically questionable. Playing the Greenfield Village Lah-De-Dahs in Michigan, a bewildered Peachie Salmon was politely scolded for sliding on his back to snag a pop-up. Tom Stoll of the Lah-De-Dahs explained to me afterward, "Our umpire will usually fine a player for leaving his feet in making a play, as a gentleman doesn't throw himself on the ground." The fine is 25 cents. Other teams call this the Lah-De-Dah rule. Doug Smith, manager of the Ohio Village Muffins, says his team no longer bans stealing. "The more research people do," he says, "the more holes are blown in some of the things we were doing."

For their part, the Old Bethpaggers are a scrappy, heads-up band, and they don't doubt their Victorian forebears were as well. During their Ohio road trip, several of the Brooklyn Atlantics repaired to a sports bar where a TV was showing highlights of the day's big-league games. "We were all going, 'That's *easy* with a glove,'" says Kid Speed, laughing. "Everybody in the bar was looking at us. They were figuring, 'Oh, typical New Yorkers.'"

Doug "the Scrivener" Stewart hit .429 but says his ERA is incalculable. Doug "Mathew Brady" Merriam is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Nick "the Nugget" Garcia, aided by a nonregulation glove, shows how to take some sting out of a catch.

an 1860s pickup game, Brooklyn vs. Long Island. If bounce catches didn't count, I'd still be out there. As for pitching, I quickly learn, the tricky part isn't delivering the ball—it's an underhand game, after all. It's catching the thing bare-handed every time it comes back. Catcher Larry Lusha helps me out by returning it on the bounce. On pop-ups in the late innings, the soft-