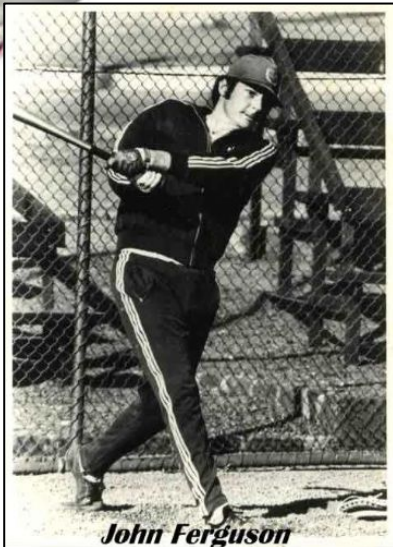




Rustlers **INTERVIEWS**



Interview with John “Ferg” Ferguson, long-time Rustler Legend Part 1

This is a cracking interview; in it, Ferg gives us some gems about his time in baseball, including where the Rustlers name originated!

Because Ferg is a treasure trove of information, memories and stories, too much for one interview in fact, we have split this interview into 2 parts.

Here’s **Part 1**.

Chelt website: So Ferg, tell us how long you've been involved in baseball. How did you get into it? Tell us a bit about your baseball background.

Ferg: After a few seasons as a bat boy, my career started as an 8 year old playing for Prahran's U13s in 1956. I shared centerfield with Alan Black, who incidentally is still playing. Our team had 10 players so our coach (Gordon Lockart) used to toss a coin to see whether it was Blackie or I who started. I managed a slow roller to shortstop late in the season for my first hit.

I got in to baseball through my dad (Jack) who was the catcher in the strong Prahran sides prior to the Second World War and the playing manager of our last Division 1 flag in 1949. He subsequently managed Claxton Shield and Australian teams and the Heinz Hornets when baseball was first played under lights at South Melbourne in the early 1950s as baseball looked to be about to take off. There were usually four or five thousand fans behind the plate and they really got heavily involved.

We always seemed to have players around for dinner and I remember playing catch with Jimmy Scott (Claxton Shield and Best Player Division 1 in 1952) in the backyard. Jim was always working on a new pitch and I had dad's catching gear to catch his fork ball (The "Whammy" as he called it) - moved all over the place like a slow knuckle ball and a mask was essential.

The family moved to Bendigo in the late 1950s and I joined Bendigo East and learned a lot from my first coach, John Hutchison, who had been an outstanding local player. I went on to play in the VPBL championships. Bendigo Juniors won in 1963. Although still a junior, the following year I played in the senior section. I remember playing third base in the morning game and then pitching a complete game in the afternoon against Mt Gambier for a 3-2 win. I started at shortstop on the Sunday, but found it hard to throw to first base on the full so the manager moved me over to second for the rest of the series. Rest days for juniors had not been invented back in those days. Bendigo juniors were very strong in the late 1960s and many players went on to play in Melbourne and the Claxton Shield including Denis Kennedy, Daryl McGregor (Sunshine) and Russell Edwards (Essendon).

That year in Junior All Stars I played in a 3-way series over a long weekend against Victoria and South Australia and I faced a couple of pitchers - Norm Nancarrow (Vic) and Neil Page (SA) who introduced me to real curve balls - both were exceptional pitchers and for the first time I became aware there was a much higher level of competition out there.



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We moved back to Melbourne in 1965 after I finished High School and I played in Prahran's seconds for most that first season until the second basemen in the Firsts (Billy Creighton) belted the Melbourne University catcher (Tom O'Meara) and was given a few weeks off. Bill Anderson was the Club Coach and manager and he was putting together a pretty good team. Plenty of pitching in Ross Chapman, Norm Nancarrow and Alan Tanner - all State pitchers at the time. Ted Wale was behind the plate, Col Hyland and Peter Finney were in the outfield and provided the power at the plate.

I can vividly recall my first at bat against Ernie Bolton (great lefthander for Coburg) in one of my early games. Ernie's first pitch was straight at my head and I ducked only to see it break sharply back over the plate for a strike. I felt stupid and was determined not to be shown up again. The next pitch looked to be in the same place so I decided to hang in there and nearly lost my head. Needless to say two more curves and I was happy to sit down for a while. That team went on to lose the 1966 Grand Final 8-6 to Essendon.

Bill Anderson retired after 9 seasons at the helm and Col Wale took over. Both had played Claxton Shield and were great to play for, but by the late 1960's baseball was struggling to grow in the inner suburbs due to the shortage of specialist facilities and juniors.

Chelt website: How long have you been involved with Cheltenham baseball club?



Ferg: I have been with Chelt since the amalgamation in 1972. Prahran (**left**) merged because with plans afoot to move to Summer baseball, there was no prospect of a suitable ground in that suburb and we already had ties with Cheltenham players who were then playing with us - Ross Upfill, Charlie Siddel, Russell Robinson and Bruce Lyons.

Interestingly, Cheltenham also did not have a permanent baseball home and it came down to the fact that most of the Cheltenham and Prahran people of that time took a liking to each other and committed to take up the challenge. Allan Burdett, Leo Anderson, Jim Upfill, Colin Anderson,

the Johnsons, Trevorahs, Roberts, Babidges and Knorrs from the old Chelt pitched in with Graeme Aiscough, Al Tanner, and Ted Wale and made it work where most of the previous amalgamations have failed.

We became the "Rustlers" because we played our Division 1 games at the Kingston Centre for a couple of seasons and the grounds were used by a local farmer to graze his cattle. Before we could mark the diamond we had to chase the cattle off to the other end of the field. Jim Upfill remarked that we looked like a bunch of cowboys. The term cowboys quickly evolved to Rustlers.

Chelt website: What are some of your highlights / achievements in baseball?

Ferg: As a Player:

- 1966 Lost the Div 1 Grand Final (8-6) to Essendon
- 1969 Summer Premiership 2-1 against Alphington (Al Tanner pitched a 16 innings complete game)
- Regular member of the Claxton Shield team in the 1970's (winning 2 Australian Titles)
- Played in the friendly Internationals against the touring Japanese sides in the 1970s
- Division 1 Home Run Award for 1976/77
- Gold Glove in Div 1 at Shortstop in 1977

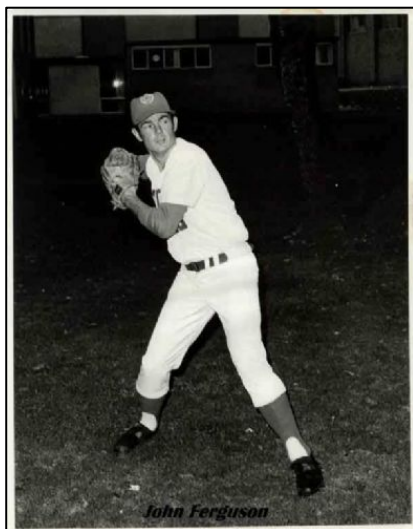
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As a Manager:

- DBA U18's to 5 consecutive VPBL championships
- Manager of the Year for Division 1 in 1977/78 (Finished third)
- Division 2 Club Championships in 1980/81 and 1981/82
- Division 2 Premiership in 1981/82
- Club Coach and First Nine Manager for 10 seasons between 1977 and 1990
- Cheltenham U18s to the State title in 2004/05
- Silver Medal at the World Masters in 2005
- Australian Sports Medal 2000

Chelt website: *Any stories for us?*

Ferg: I have always been dead against the view that left hand batters will always struggle against left hand pitchers. It is the individual match ups that are important. Anyway there was a game at Straw Field where we were playing South Australia - Dick Shirt, a big rangy left hander was pitching - Dick was one of the first Australians to be signed and he was very quick. I had only got to play first base that day because Garry Thompson (a right hand hitter) was injured. Victoria quickly got bases loaded in the first innings, but Max Grant and John Wadsworth struck out and when I arrived at the plate, Dirk came down off the mound and said "bloody beauty, I love lefties" - unfortunately for Dick he tried to throw a fast ball past me and I managed to push it down the left field line for a double and a couple of runs. Standing on second base I looked at Dick and said - "So do I." I picked up another hit in the seventh and scored as Vic won 3-2. Not a bad day for the lefties!



Late in the 1970s, as an assistant coach the Claxton Shield side, I meet Charlie Lau, the legendary hitting coach for the Royals and Yankees who had been brought out on an instructional tour. Charlie was about 54 and it was obvious that he just loved to talk about hitting and working with young players. The set up was that the state team pitchers would throw to the hitters and Charlie would observe and then offer advice and suggest changes. The problem was our pitchers were too competitive to throw good BP and Charlie asked if there was someone who could just lay it in there - belt high. I got the job.

I was always happy to throw and the hitting improved remarkably, so much in fact Charlie decided to demonstrate what he was on about rather than just talk about it. Charlie then hit screaming line drives all over Straw Field for about 10 minutes - proving conclusively that our Aussie hitters had a long way to go. In the wrap up later that day, Charlie was

gracious enough to say that I could throw BP to his Yankees anytime I happened to be in New York and that certainly made my day. If I had my time over again, I would be on the next flight out. Subsequently as a manager, I have always tried to give due credit to the people who assist players prepare and practice. Good BP throwers and fungo hitters are invaluable.

Sunshine spectators used to take a leisurely lunch and then sit directly behind the visitors' dugout and really get struck into the visiting players. Although we usually accounted for Sunshine fairly comfortably in the early 1970's I remember a game where they had a "star import" at right field and we quickly fell behind about 0-7. The supporter group were ecstatic and really outdoing themselves with suggestions as to how we could vastly improve our game, parentage etc. When you are in the on deck circle with the fence only a meter away it was hard to not hear the comments. I remember saying something like - "You need to pull your heads in", (very politely of course), "there are still 6 digs to play and you and I both know that one of your 'wonderful players' will find a way of presenting us with the game."



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Anyway, our bats lit up and I arrived back in the on deck circle about 10 minutes later with the scores tied with the bases loaded. The spectators were still pouring it on and I suggested that this was about the time when their team usually blew up. On the next pitch my brother Paul lifted a lazy fly to their "star player" in right field who misplayed it for 3 or 4 runs. The spectators immediately shut up and retired to the bar. We went on to a comfortable win.

In my late forties, playing only on an as required basis, Mick Trevorah managed to qualify me for the Fourths Grand Final as a spare pitcher in case Col Upfill and Peter Burnett needed help late in the game. We were playing Malvern who were undefeated all season having beaten us by 20 runs in the first game, 15 runs in the return match and by 8 runs in the second semi final. Anyway, to cut a long story short I got to pitch the last couple of innings and we managed to hang on to win 10-9.

After the game, I heard the young Malvern pitcher lamenting to the umpire about the fact that it was the only game they lost all season. He couldn't understand it as they had easily accounted for us in the 3 previous games. I took a great deal of pride from the response from the Umpire - a former Bonbeach player who had been around the traps. He said "Listen son, I played against this Cheltenham Club for over 20 years, Firsts or fifths, you can't ever write them off, they never give up, they always come back at you".



John and Paul Ferguson

Chelt website: What was favourite position as a player?

Ferg: Probably third base. But as a young player I wanted to be a catcher. When I joined Prahran we already had two catchers - Ted Wale who was in the Claxton Shield side and Charlie Siddel who probably should have been at some stage. Consequently, I filled in where ever I was needed.

My younger brother **Paul** (left) who was to be the Australian second baseman for many years joined me in the second season and I played third then first and later a few seasons at shortstop at a time when we needed to get some extra bats into the team at third and first base.

Chelt website: What's the funniest thing you've seen at the club / on the field?

Ferg: In a game at Como Park in the last 1960's, we were playing Coburg, Al Tanner was pitching and we were ahead by a run late in the game. Coburg had men on second and third with 2 out and John Swanston who was the best player I have seen in my time, was at the plate. Al and his catcher Ted Wale decided to pitch him very carefully but with the count at 2-1 Swan pulled a low pitch a mile down the right field line. Ted and Al conferred and made the wise decision to intentionally walk him and take our chances on the next hitter. Ted set up for the intentional walk and Swan relaxed. As Al let the ball go I heard him yell "Oh no!" and the ball sailed belt high right down the middle to strike Swanston out. Swan could not believe it but neither could we. It just goes to show that you don't have to be good if you're lucky.

For several years prior to the move to Summer Cheltenham fielded 3 teams in the VBA and 3 teams in the DBA. In a DBA finals game at Noble Park, I was helping out the DBA A Grade Manager Al Burdett by coaching third base. We were playing Noble Park who had an unconventional and very good right hand pitcher called David Bell. He had an excellent pickoff move to third base.

The games against Noble Park were always tight and this was no exception - Chelt was down by a run late in the game when Russell Robertson, one of the talented but highly strung young players of the time, led off with a double and was moved over to third with a bunt by Lance Purton, so Kevin



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Knorr who always hit Bellie well could take his shot. Allan Burdett yells out - "Ferg remind Robbo about Bellie's move. Get him to stay on the bag - no lead, just wait for the hit."

Time must have been called so I took Robbo aside and told him to "Just keep your foot on the bag and wait for the hit". "I know, I know"; says Robbo and he takes up his position on the bag, tapping it with his foot. Two pitches later Robbo is picked off in spite of never being more than a foot from the bag. Back on the bench Al was not happy and asks Robbo in no uncertain terms "Didn't Ferg remind you of Bellie's move and tell you to keep your foot on the bag?"

"He certainly did," said Robbo, "but I guess Bellie just got me between taps!"

Shortly after the amalgamation we heard about these wonderful things called pitching machines, unfortunately we were not even close to being able to buy one, so one of our players - Terry Anderson decide to make one. As a qualified engineer he did a pretty good job and it was unveiled at Park Road one Sunday. Unfortunately, the calibration of the speed left something to be desired - slow was about 110mph; way too fast to hit. Being curious we decided to see just how fast the top speed was. We pointed the machine skyward thinking it would shoot a massive fly ball to centre field. Well the last we ever saw of the ball was a spec heading towards the Bay. Terry re-calibrated the machine and we used it for many years - you just had to get used to its unique personality.

To be continued in Part 2