



Rustlers **INTERVIEWS**

Interview with **Peter Finney**: the last of the original Life Members of the old Prahran Baseball Club, (he gained Life Membership in 1970). Prahran amalgamated with Cheltenham BC in 1972, so although Peter never played for Cheltenham, he is 'related to us by marriage' so to speak.

This is a bit of a different interview; more of a reminiscence from Peter on his time in baseball.

Unfortunately, as I have never represented Cheltenham, my story will be quite different from that of John Ferguson, who has become a legend at both Prahran and Cheltenham, following on from his father Jack, who was a very well known Victorian baseball identity before and after the Second World War.

My baseball career started in 1957, aged 16, at the Oakleigh Baseball Club, through a number of my mates from the Carnegie Cricket Club. In those days, most baseballers played cricket in summer. It was as coach of the under 16 team at Oakleigh I first ran into Alan Tanner and Graeme Black who were later to become important members of the Prahran teams of the 60's. I became Secretary of the Oakleigh Club in 1960, aged 19, and served in that position until 1962, when I decided to head off to Prahran.

In those days, baseball was broken up into Major and Minor leagues, roughly the same teams represented in VFL and Association football at that time. I was lucky enough to be chosen to represent Victoria against South Australia in what was then called a Minor league competition on the Queen's Birthday Weekend.

In those days, I shared the pitching with **Alan Tanner**, before the days of raised mounds, and at times we had to pitch from a rubber plate virtually covered in mud.



Jack Wadsworth, Jack Ferguson & Jimmy Scott

I can remember meeting "Mr Baseball" **Jack Wadsworth** (left in picture), one night at a clinic, where he taught us to slide properly on a wooden floor in a hall. He was, to me, someone I always looked up to, as he was always available to pass on his vast knowledge of the game.

At that time the minor league teams all had players who had played in Major teams, and we

came across many such players, and probably the best of these was **Jack Potter**, coach of Flemington, who played 3rd base, but who virtually played shortstop as well, being such a smooth mover. Incidentally, he was also one of the best cricketers never to play Test cricket.



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Anyway, as Oakleigh never quite made the step up to Majors, I decided to try my luck at Prahran following **Alan Tanner** who went the year before. What a pleasure to play on much better grounds against some of the champions of Victorian Baseball. Our home ground at Como Park had a wonderful surface, but it was virtually impossible to hit a home run, as there were no home run fences to aim for.

Prahran had been one of the powerful sides of the competition for years, with many champion players, but, in my time, we had a very good defensive team, but probably lacked the batting power of Coburg, Essendon and Sunshine. I can remember many games where the score after nine or ten innings, was 1 or 2 to nil, mainly because of the heavier balls and wooden bats of those days.

Some other star players of those days were just natural sports people, and easily the best pitcher of my time was **Ernie Bolton** of Coburg, who gave up 15 runs in 18 games in the early 60's. Some other great pitchers of those days were **Alan Connolly** (Melbourne), **Doug Provis** (Fitzroy), **Howard Drough** (Malvern) and our own **Norm Nancarrow**, who with **Ted Wale** carried our Prahran team for some years, and also played many games for Victoria.

Two other outstanding players of those days were **Don Deeble**, a freak 1st Baseman who could catch anything thrown or hit his way, and who could get 4 hits in a game, to all parts of the field, and bunt safely if needed. The other one would have to be **John "Nookie" Swanson**, a left hander who could hit the ball the length of Coburg Football Oval and who threw 3 runners out from centrefield in one of our close games. What a wonderful all round sportsman he was.

I was fortunate enough to be involved with the night baseball that was held at South Melbourne in the late 50's and early 60's, playing for the Tintara Tigers in 4 games, against such players as **Bob Mathers**, probably the toughest player of all time, **Ross Straw**, the long time Victorian coach, and many other stars from our Major competition.

With Alan Tanner, I was selected to represent Victoria in 2 Chrysler Cup Competitions, held under lights at the Norwood Oval in Adelaide, at Christmas in 1962 and 1964. Unfortunately, South Australia was very strong in those days, and pitcher **Neil Page** pitched a perfect game in one game, against NSW, I think.

Prahran also entered a team in the 1965 Summer Baseball league, which played all of its games on Sundays on a ground opposite the St Kilda football ground, and beat a team of American airmen from Avalon Air Base in the grand Final. **Bill Crichton** was captain and Alan Tanner and I shared the pitching for the season, mostly in very hot and dusty conditions.

I think the highlight of my career at Prahran was playing in the Grand Final of 1966, at the Coburg Cricket Ground, which we lost 8-6, but I was lucky enough to hit a home run off **Bill**



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Heller, in a game which was telecast for the Channel 7 News. I remember the big brawl halfway through the game when every player was involved, but the two players who started it all were best mates, and I believe they went out for dinner together after the game.

During those years we had a very close-knit group of players and supporters and amongst those I met were a **Jim Upfill**, who was a very close friend of our coach, **Bill Anderson**, and we spent many hours at the Anderson home in Mentone discussing the coming weekend games, and working on plans for each opposing batter. Before then, I had not really been involved in the finer points of the game, but it was from listening to the likes of Bill and Jim that we all learned a lot about what was really going on.



Prahran 1971 1sts

Whilst at Prahran, I spent 6 years as coach of the under 16 team, and the outstanding player of that time was **Paul Ferguson** (front row far left, and John Ferguson, 3rd from left, in a 1971 Prahran team shot) who pitched at frightening pace to some very nervous batters.

In fact, in one game, I was umpiring in the middle, when one of Paul's pitches hit a batter on the helmet and knocked him to the ground, and the helmet was on the ground. I ran down to the home plate thinking the young fellow may be dead, but he was OK, but we found the ball in the

helmet, which was one of the old bike helmets. The ball had smashed through the plastic and was sitting on top of the lad's head. Phew!!!

Anyway, all good things must come to an end, and, after being married in 1968 and shifting to Frankston, I was appointed playing coach of the Frankston Baseball Club, where I came into direct competition with the very strong Cheltenham Baseball club, and came upon a very young and talented **Dav Whatmore**, who was built like a whippet and could run like a hare.

I was pleasantly surprised by the high standard of the baseball, with most teams being very competitive. Other players I remember were Big **Kevin Knorr** who seemed to hit the ball a mile, **Lance Purton**, great all rounder, and **Alan Burdett**, who seemed to know more about the game than many of our younger players.

By this time, the main baseball season had changed to summer, and because of my passion for cricket, I retired from baseball in 1971, only to return as an original member of the Mornington Baseball Club, in 1975. I was captain of the 2nd Nine, as the 1st Nine consisted of nearly all ex Victorian players such as **Doug Provis**, the **Bishop** brothers, and one of the **Blackmores** from Sunshine. From memory, the firsts won their Grand final and the seconds



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lost theirs. Not a bad start for a new club, but I think it was always going to be a big task for them after those players retired.

In 1981, I found myself back at Frankston Baseball Club, coaching the under 13s team, of which my son Gareth was one of the younger members, thus starting his career, which has continued right through with Frankston, and which was why I was at Springvale to watch his team play Dingley in the A2 Final recently.

I spent the next 10 years coaching the under 13s, then the under 15s during which we won an under 15s premiership in 1987.

I have not really been involved in baseball since then, but Gareth has continued his very successful career at Frankston, being second base in their very strong teams of the last 20 years.

Now, I am proud to say, Gareth has two young boys, one of whom, Travis had his first visit to T-ball at Cheltenham. It would be amazing for him to complete a full circle after all these years for the Finney name to actually play the Cheltenham Club.

I hope I have not bored you to death, but there may be some older players who remember "the way it was".

Fantastic – thanks Peter