

RICKWOOD TALES

Rickwood Calendar 7/21/23 to 10/21/23

- **Aug. 3:** Park Closed - Private Event
- **Aug. 5:** Peace Baptist Church (Private Event)
- **Aug. 13:** USAA Baseball Tournament
- **Aug. 17:** Alabama Public TV Documentary
- **Aug. 26:** Sportscard & Memorabilia Show
- **Sept. 2-3 & 9-10:** Perfect Game Baseball Tournament
- **Sept. 16-17:** USAA Baseball Tournament
- **Sept. 23-24:** Perfect Game Baseball Tournament
- **Oct. 7-8:** Private Event (Tentative)
- **Oct. 15:** 2nd Annual Home Run Derby
- **Oct. 18-22:** Private Events
- **Oct. 23:** MLB Construction Begins

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/>



MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL COMING TO RICKWOOD FIELD ON JUNE 20, 2024!

We are certainly thrilled by Major League Baseball's recent announcement that Rickwood will host a regular season game on **June 20, 2024**, between the St. Louis Cardinals and the San Francisco Giants. The game is the result of ongoing discussions with MLB and presents a great opportunity to showcase America's Oldest Ballpark to a national audience.

MLB is sensitive to the historic nature of the ballpark. All the permanent changes that are coming will be consistent with how the ballpark has evolved over its 113 years.

There is still a lot of restoration work to do at the ballpark to get it ready for the game. We are thankful to our partners in the mayor's office and the city council, who have already committed a lot of money for the work, but there will be additional funds needed to make the game a reality.

We hope to honor the last two surviving members of the 1948 Birmingham Black Barons, Willie Mays and Rev. Bill Greason, at the game. Both Mays and Greason were integral members of the Black Barons during the 1948 Negro American League Championship run and Birming-

ham's appearance in the last Negro League World Series.

Fans have also asked about the Rickwood Classic, which has not been played since 2019. The bonus to MLB's announcement includes the Classic's return.

The 24th installment will be played on **June 18, 2024**, between the Barons and the Montgomery Biscuits, and will be broadcast nationally on the MLB Network. We look forward to hosting the Classic for many years to come.

BIRMINGHAM-SOUTHERN COLLEGE WINS THE SECOND RICKWOOD COLLEGE CLASSIC, 13-3

On May 2, the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Birmingham-Southern met in the second annual Rickwood College Classic in front of 500 fans under bright blue skies on a perfect day at Rickwood Field. Last year the Blazers won the game going away, 10-4. However, the Panthers entered this year's contest ranked number 7 in the Division III baseball poll and determined to exact a measure of revenge.

BSC shortstop Noah Best opened the scoring for the Panthers in the top of the first inning with a triple to right field scoring centerfielder Cam McNearney, who had reached on a walk. The Blazers trailed 1-0 until the third inning when BSC scored seven more runs on just five hits. Third baseman Ty

Truett, who had no home runs on the season, opened the frame by smashing a long homer over the right field wall, and was met by jubilant teammates as he headed back to the dugout. Later in the inning, catcher Jack Fleming matched Truett by hitting a home run of his own. By the end of the inning, BSC led 8-0 and took a 12-0 lead into the sixth inning.

UAB finally scored in the bottom of the inning when third baseman David Harris hit his first home run of the season, a three-run shot, which got UAB closer, and stirred the enthusiasm of the Blazer's fans.

However, BSC scored again in the top of the seventh when JT Weisberg hit a double to end the scoring. The Panthers shut

out the Blazers in the bottom of the seventh to complete the 13-3 win, as the game was called because of the 10-run rule.

BSC finished the 2023 season with a 39-11 record, a Southern Athletic Association championship, and a trip to the Division III playoffs. The Panthers won three games in the tournament but were eliminated in the NCAA Regional. UAB finished the season 17-36, but figures to improve next season under head coach Casey Dunn.

The Friends of Rickwood are looking forward to hosting the Rickwood College Classic again once the renovations to the ballpark are completed.

PHOTOS FROM THE SAVANNAH BANANAS GAME



ABOVE: Even the umpires get in on the fun during a Bananas game as they danced the Can-Can. BELOW: Bill "Spaceman" played in the major leagues from 1969 to 1982 with the Boston Red Sox (1969-78) and the Montreal Expos (1980-82). Lee had a 119-90 record in his big league career with an ERA of 3.91 (108 ERA+) and 713 strikeouts. He was an American League All-Star in 1973 when he finished 17-11 with a 2.75 ERA over 282.1 innings. He also started two games in the 1975 World Series and posted a 3.14 ERA over 14.1 innings. On June 24, the ageless pitcher threw an inning in relief for the Savannah Bananas. RIGHT: A collage of the action between the Savannah Bananas and Party Animals.



THE SAVANNAH BANANAS THRILLED FANS AT RICKWOOD

On June 22-24, the Savannah Bananas returned to Birmingham as part of the 2023 Banana Ball World Tour. The tour includes stops in 32 cities, along with home games at Grayson Stadium in Savannah. The Bananas played on Friday night at Regions Field; on Saturday, Rickwood Field hosted the game between the Bananas and their arch nemesis, the Party Animals.

Rickwood Field is easily the oldest ballpark the Bananas play in, so some might think that a game involving baseball's newest sensation, playing under modified rules in America's Oldest Ballpark might be an odd-fit. Of course, in addition to baseball, the ballpark has hosted everything from football, soccer, boxing, wrestling, to rock concerts.

The Bananas love our ballpark and the players know its incredible history. Pitcher Dakota "Stilts" Albritton explained, "People ask me, 'what's Rickwood like?'; and I tell them 'even when it's hot you get chills.'"

The game was a sellout. Over 10,000 fans patiently waited outside Rickwood for hours to get inside. The Bananas and Party Animals then put on an incredible show, which included choreographed dances by the teams and umpires, diving catches, a baby race, and, of course, a player on stilts. The Bananas won the game, 5-1. Legendary Red Sox pitcher Bill "Spaceman" Lee even threw an inning of relief. The 76-year old later shared hilarious stories of his life in base-

ball with fans in our conference room. Because there was more action than could ever fit into a column, the pages of photos included in this issue tell the tale. A Bananas' game is a 2-hour sensation of pure joy.

"People ask me, 'what's Rickwood like?'; and I tell them 'even when it's hot you get chills.'"



ABOVE: "Stilts" leads the Bananas into battle. BELOW: Fans lined up to get into Rickwood Field to see the Savannah Bananas play the Party Animals. TOP RIGHT: Rickwood's grandstand was completely packed with more than 10,000 in attendance. One of the Bananas even brought his guitar and played a song for the fans. BOTTOM RIGHT: The Bananas raise a baby to the heavens in the style of Mufasa lifting Simba in the movie *The Lion King*.



REMEMBERING DAVID OSINSKI

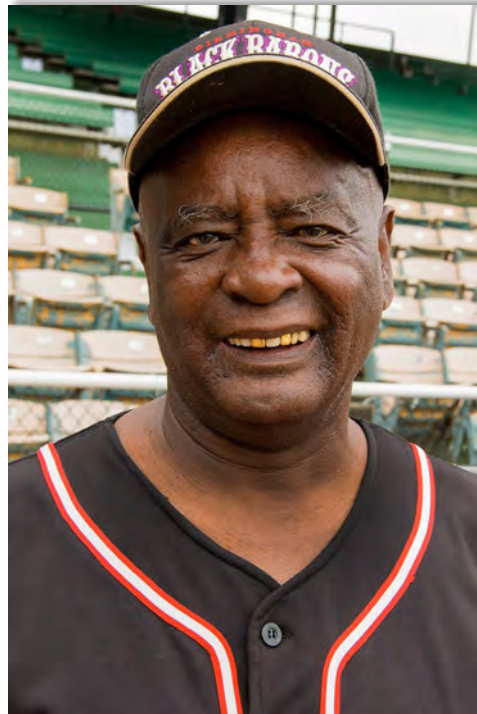
“David’s selfless service had a positive impact on thousands of children’s lives and his loss is immeasurable”



The Friends of Rickwood were sad to learn of the death of our good friend David Edmund Osinski Jr. (January 17, 1948–June 27, 2023). David was one of the founders of the American Baseball Foundation, a non-profit organization that helps educate at-risk children through sports-based academics both in Birmingham as well as internationally. David’s selfless service had a positive impact on thousands of children’s lives and his loss is immeasurable.

REMEMBERING HENRY ELMORE AND EARNEST FANN

“Bob and Earnest were fixtures at the annual Rickwood Classic and will be missed greatly.”



The Friends of Rickwood were sad to learn of the deaths of Henry “Bob” Elbert Elmore, Sr. (December 2, 1941–January 8, 2023) (left), and Earnest Fann (July 24, 1943–May 16, 2023) (right). [Photos By Bill Chapman]. Bob was a third baseman for the Birmingham Black Barons and the Philadelphia Stars from 1960-62. Earnest was a catcher and relief pitcher for the Negro American League’s Raleigh Tigers in 1962 and also played for several minor league teams from 1962-64, including the Brunswick Cardinals, Daytona Beach Islanders, and Burlington Bees. Bob and Earnest were fixtures at the annual Rickwood Classic and will be missed greatly.

THE FRIENDS OF RICKWOOD MOURN THE PASSING OF CHUCK STEWART

It was around 1992, I was living in Statesboro, Georgia. I had been collecting baseball gloves since the mid-1980s. I thought I was the one who had invented the glove-collecting hobby, but an ad in *Baseball Weekly* proved me wrong. Shortly after joining the newsletter offered by Joe Phillips, a letter from Chuck Stewart of Alabaster, Alabama came.

He was a collector of vintage gloves, especially ones of players from Alabama. He also shared with me information about an organization named Friends of Rickwood. I immediately joined, even though I had never been to Rickwood. Chuck and I continued to correspond. Then in 1992, I began working for a company based in Birmingham. While attending meetings there I would drive by Rickwood. During one of these trips, I met Chuck in person.

Chuck Stewart had another connection to Birmingham baseball. His first wife was the daughter of Danny Ryan, catcher/coach for the Barons during the 1950s. Chuck wanted his children to know his family's baseball history.

It was through Chuck that I met other Southern Association historians such as Pam Henderson, Mickey Newsome, and Dan Creed. Chuck was the centerpiece, bringing baseball people together from many different backgrounds.

Everyone who came in contact with Chuck was able to broaden their knowledge and appreciation of the sport and make new friends. Chuck Stewart will be missed for his friendship and his Alabama baseball knowledge.

- Clarence Watkins



Chuck Stewart photo by Bill Chapman

“Everyone who came in contact with Chuck was able to broaden their knowledge and appreciation of the sport and make new friends. Chuck Stewart will be missed for his friendship and his Alabama baseball knowledge.”



BSC's Ty Truett returns to the dugout following his home run in the Rickwood College Classic.

RICKWOOD'S CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE 1936 BIRMINGHAM BARONS

If you wander over by the third-base side of the grandstand, you will notice 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 seasons.

Before the 1936 season, Birmingham named Riggs Stephenson as the Barons new player-manager. Stephenson, who grew up in rural Hale County, Alabama, had starred at the University of Alabama as a fullback and defensive back on the school's football team and played short-stop for the Crimson Tide's baseball team. He enjoyed a successful 14-year major league career with the Cleveland Indians and Chicago Cubs batting .336 compiling 1,515 hits.

In February, Rick Woodward also announced that the club had awarded a contract to a company to install lights at Rickwood Field so that fans could attend night games. The original design included five towers on the field and three on the stands supporting 225 lights generating 365,000 watts. The first night game was played on May 21 as the Barons beat the Chattanooga Lookouts before 13,749 fans. LeGrant Scott's three run homer over the right field roof in the

seventh inning helped secure the victory for Birmingham.

The Barons overcame a slow start to finish with a record of 82-70 (.539) in the Southern Association (A-1), which was good for third place in the Southern Association behind the Atlanta Crackers (96-49) and Nashville Vols (86-65). However, Birmingham's record was good enough to qualify for the SA's Shaughnessy playoffs.

The Barons hitters batted .243 in 1936. The club favored steals (52) to home runs (45) due to Rickwood's deep outfield fences, but the margin had gotten much closer than in previous campaigns. Notable players included Bud Clancy (.321, 13 homers), Scott (.318, 12 homers), Hal Sueme (.309), Joe Woodard (.307, 6 homers), and Stephenson (.355, 3 homers).

The pitching staff had a 3.79 ERA and was led by George Darrow (21-7, 3.66, 223.2 IP), Roy Joiner (17-8, 3.61, 221.2 IP), and Clyde Shoun (15-11, 3.44, 204.1 IP). 12 players on the Barons' 21-man roster spent time in the big leagues.

The Barons got hot in the post season, nipping the Nashville Vols (3-2), and sweeping the New Orleans (3-0). However, Birmingham's fortunes turned bitter as they were swept in the Dixie Series by the Tulsa Oilers. Barons' pitcher Clyde Shoun, who had won three games in the SA playoffs, was charged with losses in three of the Barons defeats in the Dixie Series.

Despite the defeat, the Barons, who *The Birmingham News* described as "a distinct dark horse at the start of the campaign," earned a rightful place on Rickwood's championship wall with their SA playoff series title.

"Before the 1936 season, Birmingham named Riggs Stephenson as the Barons new player-manager."



On a perfect day, Birmingham-Southern College won the second annual Rickwood College Classic, 13-3.

DID YOU KNOW?



The St. Louis Cardinals will be playing the San Francisco Giants next year in the first regular season major league game at Rickwood Field. Thanks to the diligent research of Joe DeLeonard, we have confirmed that Rickwood has hosted more than 230 major league teams in spring training exhibitions either against other big-league clubs or the Birmingham Barons. The first confirmed game occurred on March 11, 1911, when the Barons defeated the Philadelphia Phillies, 4-3, in front of 1,500 fans. The most recent exhibition game was on April 6, 1986, when the Barons defeated the Chicago White Sox, 5-3. In the photo above, Hank Bauer inspects Billy Martin's shoe before the Yankees' 6-2 win over the Barons at Rickwood on April 6, 1953. **Photo: The Birmingham News, Alabama Media Group/AL.com.**

"Thanks to the diligent research of Joe DeLeonard, we have confirmed that Rickwood has hosted more than 230 major league teams in spring training exhibitions either against other big-league clubs or the Birmingham Barons."

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!



Willie Mays, c. 1949

RICKWOOD IS MORE THAN THE OLDEST BALLPARK

The Board of Directors of the Friends of Rickwood Field fully understand the organization's role as caretaker of an iconic ballpark. They also realize the historical importance of Rickwood and constantly share the ballpark and its significance to a broad community of people.

As the home ball field for Miles College and two Birmingham high schools as well as numerous tournament teams, Rickwood provides an experience steeped in history to many youth groups. But Rickwood goes far beyond with its influence.

More than two decades ago, Lamar Smith was instrumental in developing a relationship with the downtown Birmingham Public Library. With several board members being baseball memorabilia collectors, it was decided

that special displays related to baseball would be provided each year for Black History Month in February as well as the World Series in October. Incorporating books available for checkout at the library and supplemented by various baseball memorabilia, the displays have encouraged reading and have been readily embraced by the community.

After the beginning, displays have been requested and provided for the Homewood Library as well as two large baseball exhibits at the Vulcan Museum.

In addition, many displays were created for the annual local banquet of the American Baseball Foundation that combines baseball and reading experiences for local youth.

For nearly twenty years Rickwood has also hosted the Southern Association Conference recognizing the history of baseball in the South. Each year the conference has a theme such as "Baseball in the War Years" or "The Birmingham Black Barons, the Atlanta Black Crackers, etc." Displays are created to support the theme.

With several other venues over the years, the current count of special displays created by the Friends of Rickwood is around 70. The displays are nostalgic and eye catching. Most importantly, they play a role in encouraging youth to read and understand the role of baseball in Birmingham, as well as American history and society.

"More than two decades ago, Lamar Smith was instrumental in developing a relationship with the downtown Birmingham Public Library."



This year's displays at the Birmingham library featured photographs of former Negro League players that were included in Bill Chapman's *The Color of Baseball* exhibit, which previously appeared at The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute during SABR's Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference.

“DUSTING ’EM OFF”: FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Where to begin? . . . In April 2021, I started reaching out to Major League Baseball (MLB) in hopes of bringing an off-site game to Rickwood. MLB had scheduled a “Field of Dreams” in Iowa so why not do the same at America’s Oldest Baseball Park?

I tried contacting MLB by phone, email, and even Facebook with no success. In August of 2021, Ben Powell and I were at Rickwood when four members of the Mississippi Braves stopped for a tour. One of our visitors was Doug Mansolino, the Atlanta Braves minor league infield coordinator. Doug immediately fell in love with Rickwood. As we were standing on the roof looking down at the field, Doug remarked, “You should have a field of dreams game here.” He graciously offered to call MLB on our behalf. We finished a very fun visit and bid one another farewell.

True to his word, Doug reached out to MLB and received a warm reception. In October, I received an email from MLB officials saying that they wanted to visit Rickwood to discuss having a game at our park. Later that month, MLB arrived with an entourage of experts from various disciplines to tour and discuss a

potential game. We had to commit to secrecy as the MLB officials stressed that we were in the exploratory stages and word couldn’t get out about the visit. They indicated they would approach the mayor to discuss bringing a regular season game to Rickwood.

As we moved into 2022, MLB reached out to the mayor’s office and got a commitment to make repairs and upgrades to Rickwood. The work would include infrastructure repairs on wood, concrete, and steel and a total replacement of the playing surface, enlargements of the dugouts, extended netting for fan protection, and padding of the outfield walls. To their credit, the team at MLB is very committed to maintaining the historical integrity of the park. At this time, we are still discussing some of the suggested upgrades to determine which will be permanent and which will be temporary.

That brings us to 2023. Although the City of Birmingham has committed over \$2 million to the project, we need to raise an additional \$2.5 million to make the dream a reality. Rickwood has partnered with retired Alabama Power executive,

Steve Spenser, the Logan family (owners of the Barons), and our own Tom Cosby to raise the funds. I will provide an update on those efforts in the next newsletter.

Work will begin in late October of this year and will be finished well before the scheduled events in June 2024. Not only will we have a major league game between the Cardinals and Giants on June 20, 2024, the Rickwood Classic also returns on June 18. The MLB game will be called “A Tribute to the Negro Leagues.” It will be broadcast on FOX and will share with a nationwide audience the history of our park and its place in baseball history. This game will not only share Rickwood’s story but also showcase our great city.

Finally, I hope that everyone will come to Rickwood on October 15, 2023, for our Home Run Derby. This will be our last public event before work begins. This is an incredible time for Rickwood, and I can’t wait for the future to unfold. It’s an exciting time to be a Friend of Rickwood!

- Gerald Watkins

“Not only will we have a major league game between the Cardinals and Giants on June 20, 2024, the Rickwood Classic also returns on June 18.”



A Birmingham Barons display (L) and a collector’s display at the Southern Association Conference (R)

The Friends of
Rickwood

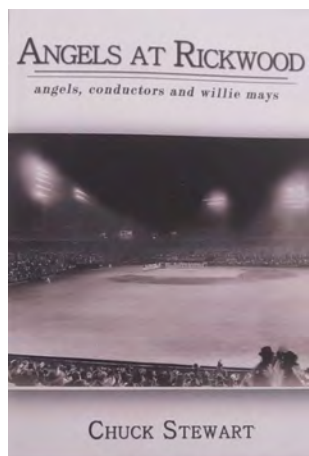
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THE RICKWOOD LIBRARY: *Angels at Rickwood*

Chuck Stewart's *Angels At Rickwood: Angles, Conductors and Willie Mays* is a wonderful story about a young girl named Annie Payne, who lives in Helena, Alabama in the 1990s. Annie is one of the best players on her little league team but faces adversity early in the book when she strikes out and her team loses its first game.

Her coach encourages her, reminding her that all losses are team losses, and everybody strikes out. But one of her teammates doesn't see things that way. He is also the local bully, Andrew "Corny" Cornwall. Stewart's marvelous descriptions of Corny's background bring his character to life and the reader feels Annie's apprehension about getting home from the ballpark without a confrontation. Corny is upset about losing the game and he chases her from the ballpark throwing rocks as she crosses a creek desperately trying to escape to the safety of her home.

Annie is soon rescued by a neighbor, Kat Bryant, a kindly retiree, who invites Annie into her home setting the stage for the story that follows. Kat serves her homemade brownies and comforts her over the game and the bully. She also tells Annie about her own life growing up in Birmingham during the Depression and her own experiences playing baseball. Stewart artfully weaves flashback scenes into the novel as he takes the reader on a trip through Kat's distant but colorful memories.

Like Annie, Kat was a tomboy and was the best player on her team in the early 1930s. She shows Annie her glove, which her mother made using a leather satchel her uncle had carried during World War I. Inside the glove is a Southern Association ball signed by Billy Bancroft, who was a second baseman with the Birmingham Barons. Bancroft lived in Annie's neighborhood. On off-days during the 1931 season, he helped coach neighborhood kids in Woodlawn who would eventually play in a big game against kids from Avondale who were coached by another Barons' player.

The ball in Annie's glove was hit by Bancroft to win Game One of the 1931 Dixie Series at Rickwood Field in the greatest game ever played in Birmingham. The game was Kat's first at the ballpark. Her father allows her to skip school to attend the contest and Stewart vividly captures the first moment Kat sees the wonders inside:

"Never in her life had she seen the color green like she saw it that afternoon. The Symmetry of the grass and dirt with chalk lines so straight God must have reached down from heaven with the world's largest yardstick to draw them."

While that game and the ball are special, Kat soon tells an incredible story about meeting an angel named Harold at the game, and the events that happened that day, which only Kat could see. Harold has the unique job of watching over fans at their first games. Soon, other angels appear at the game and Kat learns that they all have important jobs. Kat also tells Annie about meeting Willie Mays with his parents in Rickwood's right-field stands. Mays is only an infant, and Harold asks Kat to share something special with him at the game.

Annie later learns that angels are real and even Corny the bully learns a lesson. The story ends with Annie planning her own visit to Rickwood Field. *Angels At Rickwood* is a warmhearted story that baseball fans of all ages will enjoy. The book occupies a magical place in the Rickwood Library.

- Jeb Stewart

