

# Sea dogs at the Sportman's Grill

**Y**OU WILL FIND TWO of the founding members of Portland's storied Twilight League habituating the same dark haunt they've patronized since 1951 — The Sportsman's Grill, just a couple blocks up from Hadlock Field, where the Sea Dogs will make their debut April 18. It's a Saturday in March, just after the noon hour, and a light snow falls on an old city trying to recapture baseball — and with it, perhaps, its idle youth.

One of these two sportsmen, Dick "Obie" O'Brien, was reputed to have the best curve in the state; the other, Walter Bagster, threw a wicked heater. They both came out of high school in a dangerous time, the mid-1940s and the military snapped them up before the major leagues could. O'Brien headed east to Europe while Bagster turned left at Forest Street and plied due west, to the Pacific theater. Both returned safely after World War II, although O'Brien today claims he earned a sore arm for his troubles, a persistent kind of soreness that persuaded him to trade in his ball playing aspirations for a career in insurance.

O'Brien prefers to stand at the bar, not far from the door on Congress Street. There, a dim gritty light slips through the windows. O'Brien keeps his eyes fixed on the television and takes occasional sips from a glass of beer. The Red Sox are playing their second game of the exhibition season, and though they put up two runs in the first, O'Brien's muted responses betray none of the careless optimism you'd expect of a younger man — he's seen too much. Bagster, on the other side of the bar, in its darkest corner, is involved in a coin game with four other sports, counting up pennies, dimes, nickels and quarters in an intricate ritual to determine just who's supposed to buy the next round. If you ask, Bagster will attempt an explanation, but it takes too long and his competitors are an impatient bunch.

"Bagster had a great fastball. He was the fastballer, and I threw the drop — you call it a sinker now," O'Brien remarks. "There was a bunch of us out of Portland back then could've played pro ball. There was Dickie Carmichael, Lynn Southworth, Ricky Hall, Gene Class. Class was the greatest pitcher I ever saw. He was killed in World War II."

Now his eyes search the room, as if he might stumble upon some other Joe who just missed the call. "Earl Kitchen," he says suddenly. "I don't know if he had a tryout. Hey Walter! Did Kitchen have a tryout?"

"I don't know," Bagster hollers back.

"He could throw the ball faster than Roger Clemens, right?"

"You betcha!"

"What about Griffin? Eddie Griffin never had it?"

"Christ, no!"

"You and I could've had it."

"Yeah, but we were on the wrong side of two oceans."

Now O'Brien shakes his head, waves a hand just above the bar. He lets the conversation slide. He's not paying attention to the game on TV, but you know there's another game to watch now, one that's been replayed a thousand times before.

One with a handsome young pitcher on the mound, toeing the rubber, fingers set across the laces of the ball. This pitcher feels the scratch of the woolen uniform. His cap's askew as he leans in for the

signal. He can see the plate, and the one thing he's certain of: The ball will never reach dead center field, not with him on the mound. But he can't foresee all the things that will come between the pitch and the put-out.

Meanwhile, Bagster keeps an unlit cigarette perched between his lips as he hides three coins in his fist. He likes the Sportsmen's Grill, but with a new baseball team coming into the immediate neighborhood, he's cautious. "I been coming here 40 years and if I can't find a goddamn parking spot, I'll go down to the Eagles," he says.

Bagster's allegiances are clearly with the present. Nostalgia holds no sway in his heart. The past is rooted firmly in the dugout, riding the pine, collecting splinters. Bagster says, "I spent most of the war in the Philippines. Came out in '47 and founded the Twilight League. I worked 30 years at Bancroft-Martin's and ended up as a warehouse supervisor." Those are the parts and sum of his life, as he tells it. No regrets.

Tony Polito is the young man who keeps their glasses filled. Polito, who played Telegram League ball for Deering only a decade ago, grew up in the Sportman's Grill, where his father, a pugilist, was a favorite son. He says the Sea Dogs can't get here soon enough. There will be a lot of new business on game nights. And what will happen to the regulars, the Bagsters and the O'Briens? "These guys are never going to change," he says with a smile. "They'll always be sitting around the bar."

But Bagster is skeptical. "They're making a lot of changes here," he counters. "New televisions, big booths, pictures on the wall. Family-oriented. They know what a ball team will do for them. That's progress. But here's one thing I still want to know: How the hell do you watch five TVs at once?"

Down the road, the wind is playing havoc with the tarps covering the unfinished roofs of the luxury sky boxes at Hadlock Field. A virgin infield awaits under half a foot of snow. I-295, behind the snowy gauze, looms beyond the skeletoned outfield wall, a challenge, a promise, a threat. There will be a new team here in 40 days, and tickets are still being sold out of a trailer.

by J. E. Beaudoin

Portland

