

At Bruce Beach, baseball is played the cottage way—barefoot and across generations. But that doesn't make the rivalries any less fierce

# THE HUNDRED-YEAR PITCH

BY STACEY MAY FOWLES  
PHOTOGRAPHY DANIEL EHRENWORTH



**"WITHIN CERTAIN SET BORDERS WE ARE FREE TO ROAM, OR MEDITATE; TO FOOT IT, OR SWIM IT—AS WE CHOOSE; TO MISS MEALS, OR TO PARTY WITH OUR FARMER NEIGHBOURS, TO WATCH THE ELATION OF THE KIDDIES IN THIS THEIR EDEN WONDERLAND; TO ENJOY THE DELICIOUS MISHAPS OF HOPEFUL SPORT."**

**—BRUCE BEACH COTTAGERS' ASSOCIATION, 1932**

**"EVERYONE IS A WINNER AT BRUCE BEACH**—except at the North-South Game." Eight-year-old Chris Buchanan tells me this over lunch on the back deck of his family's waterfront cottage on Lake Huron, just south of Kincardine, Ont.

It's mid-afternoon on Saturday, the day before the community's annual famed baseball matchup, and while his clever joke gets a laugh from those sitting at the table, it's also pretty astute. This picturesque summer locale is as laid back, kindly, and close-knit as they come—except when the topic turns to the very serious business of baseball. And the North-South Baseball Classic is as serious as it gets. The 8th Concession Road divides Bruce Beach into fierce North and South allegiances, creating a time-honoured grudge match that's been a focal point of summers here for more than a century.

Chris knows better than most how important the game is to this community. His father, Mike, is the South's team captain and its dominant starting pitcher. Despite the fact that Mike is a humble sort, more interested in chatting about the game's storied history than about what he can do on the mound (a lot, I will find out later), there's certainly been enough talk about what has, over decades, evolved into the World Series of Canadian cottage baseball.

Located on "Ontario's West Coast," Bruce Beach is the kind of idyllic community where you let your kids roam free in the sand, safe in the knowledge that your neighbours will not only keep an eye on them, but will likely feed them as well. This coveted locale was founded as a summer resort in 1894, and its present-day incarnation consists of over 200 numbered cottages. Boats and pwc's occasionally clip by on the water, while clusters of children laugh, splash, and float on brightly coloured inflatable beds in its shallows. *Amicitia et Peritia*—friendship and experience—is fittingly emblazoned on the community's flag.

A blissful refuge for both Canadians and Americans, most of these cottages have been passed down from one generation to another over multiple decades. Given how many conversations erupt, a casual walk down the beach always takes longer than anticipated. I hear stories of childhood Bruce Beach friendships from folks who are now in their seventies. One cottager considers herself a newbie because she's only been coming for 22 years. >>

Kids 12 and younger from all over the beach, including Pete Buchanan (right), meet up to play organized baseball every morning from Monday to Friday. There's another game for kids 11 and older on Wednesday evenings.





**WHEN ASKED WHAT THE NORTH-SOUTH GAME HAS MEANT TO THIS COMMUNITY OVER THE YEARS, ROSS KLOPP SHEDS A FEW TEARS. "IT'S JUST PART OF TRADITION," HE SAYS THOUGHTFULLY. "EVERYTHING HERE IS TRADITION"**



Ross Klopp (above, with wife, Mary Lou) was on a diamond even before his time at Bruce Beach. As a young man, he played local ball in Kitchener-Waterloo. "I don't think we ever won a game, but we had more fun than anybody else." His talents were better suited to Huff-Clark field: "I was one of the local heroes because I was left-handed, and right field is pretty short."



The true pride of this community is its sports. They have been playing golf here at Bruce Beach since 1903, when a local reverend introduced the game to cottagers with a six-hole course. The present-day nine-hole non-profit course, the oldest in Bruce County, operates on the honour system (golfers need only pay what they can). Some tennis courts, a casual yoga club, and a number of organized games and recreational events entertain throughout the summer. Most afternoons, Bruce Beach's children set up a community "candy shop" for a few hours, and cottagers ride their bikes over to buy liquorice, frozen treats, and other sweet things.

"Our lake use is limited," Ross Klopp explains when I ask him why land sports—and not water, as is common to cottaging—have become so important to the culture of this community. Ross himself is a local sports hero; a leftie who started coming to Bruce Beach when he was only 13 years old, he went on to play first base at the North-South game for 40 years, until his knees gave out. He explains that their beautiful beachfront community precludes the more standard Muskoka-like dock. "Here you gotta pull the boat in every night. You end up with a hernia."

On weekday mornings throughout July and August, kids can bring a glove to the field next to the tennis courts. Future Vlad Guerrero Jr's and Bo Bichettes are coached by a member of the community, and "everyone goes home a winner!" (And with a Freezie on Freezie Fridays.) At 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings, the men show up at the lush green Huff-Clark Baseball Field for a casual matchup, getting as many friendly innings in as they can before it's time for an early lunch. Everyone who shows up can play: women are not excluded from the game—a few have certainly hit the field over the years—but traditionally it has been a men's social activity.

Good-natured baseball camaraderie is all that really counts, at least until this much-anticipated August long weekend, when the full nine innings of the North-South Baseball Classic are played to great chatter, fanfare, and ceremony. "There's an awful lot of kibitzing going on," Ross adds with a laugh.

Many of the Sunday morning ball players will hit the field for the Classic for the first time when they are just 16 years old, and many will play until their knees, hips, and hamstrings just won't let them anymore.

When I ask what this game has meant to this community over the years, Ross even sheds a few tears. "It's just part of tradition," he says thoughtfully. "Everything here is tradition."

**F**RANCES STEWART IS BRUCE BEACH'S local historian, and the daughter of Bill Stewart, one of the original organizers, players, and umpires of Bruce Beach baseball on Huff-Clark field. I join her on the verandah of her family cottage, the same place where the men would gather to drink beer after the big game back in its early post-war days.

She explains that many of the earliest cottagers held firm Christian beliefs, and one quarter of the early Bruce Beach Cottagers' Association members were reverends. Because of that, the community's rules were established around the observance of the Sabbath, and the first game was played in



**"THE FRESH AIR BLOWING OFF LAKE HURON IS ALWAYS REFRESHING AND STIMULATING, AND RESTORES TO GOOD HEALTH THE INDIVIDUAL LOOKING FOR A RESPITE FROM A PERIOD OF PHYSICAL OR MENTAL STRAIN"**

**—FROM A HISTORY OF BRUCE BEACH BY IAN MACEACHERN**

The beach is public and has a vibrant life of its own. It's a favourable place for daily walks, and the strong off-shore winds also make it a popular destination for watersports, such as board sailing and kite surfing.



**A LEGACY OF TOGETHERNESS HAS A GREAT DEAL TO DO WITH THE CLOSE-KNIT CULTURE OF PRESENT DAY. "WHEN MY DAD WAS SICK WITH CANCER, AND HE COULDN'T RUN THE BASES ANYMORE, HE STILL BATTED, AND OTHER PEOPLE RAN FOR HIM"**



1923 at Tout's Grove, a modest green space next to a row of painted wooden pews facing a stone altar. It's a quiet, sacred place where cottagers still come to worship on Sundays, and where the occasional wedding or memorial service is held.

At one particular meeting in the late '40s, the association asked the sports committee to cease the Sunday morning baseball games altogether. They cited rules that prohibited unnecessary bathing on the Sabbath as justification—bathing that would of course be necessary after nine dusty and sweaty innings.

"Eventually baseball won out," Frances tells me. "They finally came to an agreement that baseball could be in the morning and church would be—and still is—in the afternoon." The compromise was that the cottagers in the area would not drive past the church, use powerboats, or go for a swim between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., so as not to disturb the church's hours of outdoor worship.

Though the community's initial religious influences may have temporarily threatened cottagers' enjoyment of the game, Frances says that its legacy has a great deal to do with the close-knit culture of the present day. "When my dad was really sick with cancer, and he couldn't run the bases anymore, he still batted, and other people ran for him," she tells me. "The ministers believed that you look after each other, you share. I think that still affects us now."

**A**T THE SATURDAY PICNIC, there's lots of talk about tomorrow's North-South Baseball Classic. Cottagers from both sides of the beach line up for pulled pork sandwiches and iced tea, feasting and chatting on folding chairs and at tables marked with their family names. Joyce Pottier is selling grey and green Bruce Beach Baseball T-shirts that are folded neatly and laid out on a table. As the sun goes down, the men on tomorrow's roster tell numerous tales of good pitches, bad calls, and so many balls hit into the trees.

"The first half of the summer is full of trash talking from the year before," Mike explains. "The second half of the summer is filled with trash talking about the game on the August long weekend."

It also seems that everyone's version of a historical play in question is slightly different, depending on what end of the beach they're from. "To play here, the only thing you can't have is thin skin," Dave Tiernan, the North's team captain tells me. "Every error you make will be talked about endlessly."

The North has been victorious over the past few years—a fact they're more than happy to repeatedly brag about—but there hasn't typically been a consistent winner over the game's history. "Good luck and good neighbours have determined that North and South win about half the time," claims the Bruce Beach Cottagers' Association, which is exactly what makes all

It isn't just the adults having all the fun at Bruce Beach. A track and field event for the kids on the golf course complements the North-South Classic on the August long weekend. There's also a big bike riding culture—it's common to see kids and adults alike cycling along the quiet dirt road behind the row of beachfront cottages.





**TO PLAY BASEBALL AT BRUCE BEACH, THE ONLY THING YOU CAN'T HAVE IS THIN SKIN. "EVERY ERROR YOU MAKE WILL BE TALKED ABOUT ENDLESSLY"**



Local records show that world-class tenor Jon Vickers played nine innings in dress pants and a white shirt immediately after his wedding in 1953. And this kind of dedication doesn't end on the August long weekend—the community has started a North-South hockey game that's played every Thanksgiving in a nearby town.



the relentless ribbing so fun. The coveted Bob Apsey Memorial Cup—named posthumously for one of Bruce Beach's iconic players—has been passed from one cottage mantel to another, up and down the beach. Members of the North are quick to tell me they won the all-important 100th anniversary game a few years back, and members of the South team are quick to tell me how irrelevant that distinction is.

I ask Mike if he's at all nervous about taking the mound for the South in tomorrow's game. "Nervous? Never," he says with his signature calm.

**T**HE SUN IS ALREADY BLAZING BEFORE 9 a.m. on Sunday morning. The North team and the South team casually congregate on the field for warm-up play, the captains diligently sketching out rosters. The youngest player today is 16—a legacy started by his dad and grandfather before him. The oldest is 78, playing at first base with graceful ease.

A whiteboard is clipped to the backstop fence to record the score with a dry erase marker, and the 11-year-old scorekeeper—Mike's other son, Pete—is ready to flip the large hand-made laminated cards that display the score. Over the years, the North-South game has had to cobble together its own unique rules of play, based on the dimensions of its ad hoc field. A tree that grows along the first base line is painted white, indicating what constitutes fair and foul. A ball in the trees in right field is an automatic single. Also, there's no risk of plate collisions here—the runner simply touches the backstop to indicate he's safe.

"Because the field is an unusual shape, we have it marked in the trees: one section in right field is a single, double, and triple," Mike explains. "We've adjusted the rules to fit the field. I've hit into right, so I get ribbed all the time because it's like 'Oh you're just hitting it into the trees' and now you're stuck on first."

On this field, your jersey number is your cottage number, though some of the players have swapped or borrowed theirs, so there isn't great value placed on accuracy. I also notice that the catcher, on the receiving end of some light warm-up tosses from his pitcher, isn't wearing shoes.

As we get closer to that much-anticipated first pitch, Dave Tiernan's wife, Donna, drives a convertible onto the field. The car is packed with gleefully hollering North-beachers unfurling a cheeky "We The North" flag behind them.

**S**TRIKINGLY DRESSED IN BLUE AND BRIGHT white, Nancy Huff-Allen (left) settles into a prime shady seat under a canopy tent along the third-base line. It's a fittingly regal spot, given a lot of the people here refer to her as the "Queen of Baseball." She's been spending her summers on Bruce Beach for more than 90 years, since she was only three months old, and has known some of the "boys" on the field since they were babies themselves.

It was Nancy's family, specifically her father, Sid, along with Jim and Beatrice Clark, who purchased these eight acres of land from local farmer Leonard Tout in 1942. "All the boys were saying 'Uncle Sid, we want to play baseball,'" she tells me. "And he loved baseball. So they took the trees down and started working on the field."

*Cont'd on p. 88*

Setting up work behind cottages numbers 48 to 54, the pair began progress on a lofty plan to turn Tout's cow pastures into an official ballpark and recreation area for their community. It took a few years for the Huffs and the Clarks to finally complete their vision—they pulled down more than a few poplars and diligently seeded, fertilized, and watered the grass to make it baseball-ready. In 1944, the first of those Sunday games moved to their present Huff-Clark field home, and when the boys came back to Bruce Beach from war in 1947, the game really hit its stride.

Nancy takes a moment to gesture towards the field where a group of players are light-heartedly giving each other a hard time. "Look at this," she says fondly. "These guys have been after each other, having so much fun. Talking, and kidding, and razzing."

The Huffs and the Clarks still give their time to the ballpark, along with a baseball committee that has been formed to oversee upkeep every summer. Everyone contributes their own funds to pay for lawn care and annual maintenance. "It's more of a collective now," says Mike.

When Sid passed away in 1972, his family donated some modest cedar benches, and the community built a chain-link backstop and fence along the first-base line. About five metres directly behind home plate, a park bench sits under an inviting shady tree, dedicated in memory to area hero Bob Apsey.

For Bruce Beachers, the ballpark is as much a place to honour memory as it is a site for play and revelry.

**W**HEN DAVE NEWSON THROWS THE FIRST pitch for the North at 10 a.m. on Sunday morning, there are only about a dozen cottagers on the sidelines. They witness the South score a demoralizing eight runs in the top of the first. By the fifth inning, when the score is a slightly more even 13-6 for the South, over a hundred people have arrived to take in the action.

Children gather behind the chain-link fence, chanting team songs and waving huge flags in support of their end of the beach. Some of the older cottagers chat on blankets in rare patches of shade, periodically looking up when there's a rise in the action. Others brave the hot sun on wooden bleachers behind the backstop.

Around the seventh inning, the woman to my left in the stands informs me that the current batter and the umpire, both of whom are over 70, are childhood friends. (She adds that the umpire is her husband, so I should be cautious not to criticize any of his questionable calls.)

During a pivotal, potentially game-deciding moment in the ninth, a young woman in a pink shirt bikes through left field, and no one bats an eyelash.

Players and fans alike here honour both tradition and each other, placing trust in the fact that a play will be called fairly and that sportsmanship will rule the day. (Though, as always,



Mike Buchanan (above) is also the vice-president of the Bruce Beach Cottagers' Association. When he emailed 80+ guys to confirm for this story who caught the last out, most replied with some sort of ribbing, accusing other players of dropping the ball or colliding with one another.

they are not above some playful jeering.) Any on-field conflicts—like when a runner doesn't actually make contact with second on his way around the bases—are solved with minimal, and mostly jovial, shouting.

With the score 15-9, bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth, the trailing North gives one more valiant and thrilling push for victory. Baseball fans are on the edge of their bench seating, but it would seem that Mike's humble demeanour hides the fact that he won't be defeated on the mound.

In the final moments, Ron Zawacki makes contact, shooting a pop fly into the outfield that eventually lands in Charles Hughes' glove for the final out. The South is victorious, taking back both the trophy and at least a year of bragging rights.

A golden retriever joins the celebration on the field. There's raucous laughter as Bob Apsey's proud North beach daughter, Carole, begrudgingly hands the trophy over enemy lines. Group photos are snapped, beers are uncapped, plays are rehashed, and general celebration commences. While the North-South Classic's importance is abundantly clear, it would seem a community brought together by a hundred years of baseball isn't easily divided by a single match-up.

"It doesn't really matter who wins the game every year," Mike admits, and he's right. From the very first pitch to the last out, what this morning reveals is that everyone here does indeed go home a winner. 🐾

**POSTSCRIPT:** On January 12, 2020, beloved community member Ross Klopp passed away in Collingwood, Ont., at the age of 87. His obituary reads, "He lived for his family and summers since childhood at his beloved Bruce Beach where he was bestowed with an immeasurable wealth of lifelong friends." There are plans to hold a memorial service at Bruce Beach this summer in his honour.

*Writer Stacey May Fowles loves to watch a pitcher strike out the side, and she knows what it means to be passionate about baseball. Her essay collection, *Baseball Life Advice: Loving the Game that Saved Me* (inspired by her newsletter of the same name), came out in 2017. Her work has also appeared in *Toronto Life* and *Hazlitt*.*