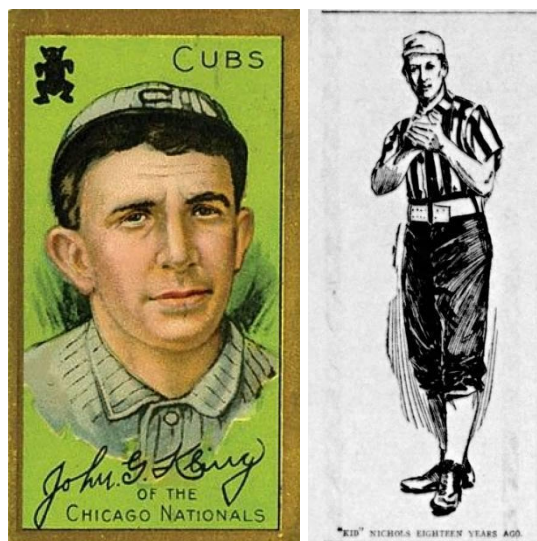


INSIDE BASEBALL

Johnny Kling and ‘Kid’ Nichols Took the Game Indoors



Hometown heroes, Johnny Kling and Charles “Kid” Nichols

By Pat O’Neill

Hearing the birds flirt and argue with fresh gusto, and seeing the first blushes of green blurring the trees and bushes this weekend made me think of God’s other great creation: baseball.

Thank you, Lord!

Driving through midtown on Saturday morning, I passed the Spanish style home on the curve at Valentine Road and Southwest Trafficway that once belonged to Hall of Famer, Charles “Kid” Nichols. Cutting across Armour Boulevard to get to the MLB Urban Youth Academy on Paseo, I passed the once tony residence hotel where John Kling once lived.

I was reminded of Johnny Kling a few weeks ago when my friend Lonnie Shalton wrote, in his always interesting Hot Stove blog about Kling’s ownership of the Kansas City Blues baseball team back in the 1930s. I might before going on about Mr. Kling, that one Thomas J. Pendergast once owned a slice of that team, as well.

Kling, who grew up in Kansas City in the late 1800s and lived here all his life, was more than a baseball “fan”atic; he was a man married to the sport his entire life. A guy who loved nothing more than a good, competitive game of... just about anything.

Famous as the hard-nosed, batter-baiting, quick-throwing catcher for the dynastic Chicago Cubs in the first decade of the twentieth century, “Noisy John” Kling often played baseball all year-round.

A reliable, high-.200s hitter in the bigs, in the winter of 1907 Kling brandished a bat of regulation length but as skinny as a policeman’s billy, and swung at spheres six inches ‘round. For that was the year he and his fellow Kansas Citian (and the future Hall of Famer), Charles “Kid” Nichols, introduced Indoor Baseball to local fans who could never get enough of the game.

“NICHOLS AND KLING TO ORGANIZE AN ALL-PROFESSIONAL TEAM” was the headline over the story in the Star and the Times on Dec. 9, 1907.

“There are enough professional baseball players from various leagues, majors and minors, now hibernating in Kansas City to form two classy aggregations of indoor baseball athletes,” the paper reasoned.

While Kling was one of those active players “hibernating” in Kansas City, “Kid” Nichols had come home that year to retire, after a 17-year Hall of Fame career pitching for Boston, Philadelphia and St. Louis. Both rabid sportsmen, Kling and Nichols had already played a bit of indoor baseball, which had been gaining popularity in cities on the East Coast. And both were passionate participants in other sporting games, as well: Nichols a highly competitive bowler, and Kling a world-class billiards player.

Kling, along with his famous Cubs teammate Joe Tinker, had first introduced indoor baseball to Kansas City and formed their own team a few years before, but no local nines dared come together to challenge them.

“Speed is the first essential of the indoor game, and there are now plenty of fast ballplayers wintering in Kansas City to form two cracking good teams,” Nichols told

the newspaper in December of '07. "The play is fast and exciting and most excellent for the spectator."

Played in the Kansas City Athletic Club gym at 10th and Central Street, and in the old Hippodrome at 12th and Charlotte, the indoor game called for nine players to a side, just like the national pastime. But the bat was the circumference of a billy club and the ball was oversized, like a modern softball, but much softer. On a hit, the batter was allowed to run to either first or third base. If the batter chose to run from home to third base, he then had to earn his way to home, via second and first.

The indoor game proved fairly popular for several more years, with several amateur teams competing for fun, and to keep in shape for the regular season. Kling's and Nichols' friendships with many of the major league stars of their era, brought a number of celebrity ballplayers to Kansas City to play indoor ball and helped draw attention and spectators. In February of '09, Kling's All Stars played a series of indoor baseball games against Rube Waddell's All Americans. Kling enlisted New York Giants star "Dummy" Taylor to pitch for his side and go against Waddell, whom the Times referred to as "the Peerless – not the beerless – 'Rube.'" National League umpire Charles "Cy" Rigler was brought in to call the series in the Hippodrome.

"It was a fast mix up in which players slid all over the court in their effort to steal bases and field the ball," reported the Times. The contest ended in a victory for the "not beerless" Waddell's All Americans, with a score of around 31 to 18, the scorer admitting to having lost count after 30.

A strange stat was created that year (1909), as Kling, in a dispute with the Cubs management, decided to sit out the entire season to manage his popular and lucrative billiards emporium at 1215 Baltimore and field his own team in Kansas City's amateur City League.

Note: Kling had played amateur ball with the local Schmelzer teams for several years in the late 1890s, before moving to St. Joseph (MO.) and taking up with its minor Western League team in 1900. It was in St. Joe that "Noisy Joe" was

“discovered” by Ted Sullivan and signed to a contract with the Chicago Orphans, soon-to-be Cubs, where he earned a reputation as “one of the greatest catcher the game has ever known” (*Sacramento Bee*, June 25, 1910).

Kling paid a fine for violating his contract by sitting out the 1909 season, but returned to the Cubs in 1910 and 1911, before finishing his major league career as manager of the Cincinnati Reds in 1913. Ironically, he had continued to field his own teams in Kansas City’s amateur leagues, “The Klings” often vying with the Schmelzers for local championship honors. In addition to his popular billiards parlor, Kling was co-owner of the old Dixon Hotel.



Kling upon taking ownership of the Kansas City Blues in 1933. Photo from KC Star Sept. 3, 1933

Charlie Nichols’ dance into and through “The Show” had been much like his friend Kling’s. Although born in Wisconsin, “The Kid” (a nickname given to him when he was a 17-year-old twirler blanking older men in Kansas City’s amateur leagues) moved with his family to KC in 1881. He was known to be part of the ticketless “knothole gang,” kids who scoped the play of Ted Sullivan’s Unions and Cowboys in 1884 and 1885 by standing atop their horses and peering over the outfield fence at Summit and Southwest Boulevard. About that time young Charles, who was working in a billiard parlor, formed a little ball team of his own called “The Blue Avenues,” who played their games in a field near 15th and Brooklyn streets.

What we know today as 15th Street, or Truman Road, was originally named “Blue Avenue.”

In 1887, Kansas City’s Western League team noticed what *The Star* called Nichols’ “great speed and perfect control and a wise noodle,” and put “The Kid” into their rotation. Nichols finished that season with a 21 and 11 record, before moving on to Memphis in the Southern League, then back to Kansas City, and then to Omaha, where he racked up 32 wins against only eight losses in 1889. He was spotted and picked up by the Boston Beaneaters in 1890, and it was there that he made the bones that walked him into Cooperstown in 1949.

The “Kid” was an immediate success in the majors, winning 20 or more games in each of the first 10 years of his 15-year stint with Boston. In 1902-03 “The Kid” took a hiatus from the big leagues to coach Kansas City’s Western League Blues, before signing on and winning 21 games as player/manager for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1904. He finished his storied career with the Phillies in 1905, posting a 10-6 record and a 2.27 ERA in half-a-season before injuries added up to retirement in 1906. The aging “Kid” carried back to Kansas City in his suitcase a career won-loss record of 362-205 and a lifetime ERA of 2.96.

Back to just having fun playing and managing amateur ball together and against each other, Kling and Nichols became fast friends, and even talked of opening a large billiard hall and bowling alley together. Kling died in 1947; Nichols in 1953.