

This Week in Saratoga County History

Lefty Milligan: One of Saratoga's Finest Athletes

Submitted by Sean Kelleher, March 1, 2023

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John "Lefty" Milligan

When people think of Schuylerville, they think of history. The region is known for the 1777 Battles of Saratoga. Baseball is not what people think of Schuylerville. However, for years, the community was known for the pitcher John Milligan one of the finest athletes in the county's history. He hurled for the Philadelphia Phillies of the National League and the Washington Senators of the American League.

John Milligan was a noted Schuylerville High School athlete in basketball and baseball. In 1921 the Saratogian wrote, "Milligan has been pitching stellar ball all season." Milligan then embarked to pitch at Cornell University. "Among the more promising new pitching prospects is John A. Milligan, left-hander, who performed brilliantly for the freshman team last year," reported by Cornell Alumni News on March 20, 1924. Milligan batted left-handed and threw right-handed. The Boston Daily Globe reported on May 4, 1924, "John Milligan, a stocky southpaw, had the [Harvard] Crimson battery eating out of his hands throughout." Milligan played two seasons for Cornell. He was instrumental in starting at triple play against Columbia and pitching a no-hit game against Virginia which he lost 1 to 0 because he gave too many bases on balls.

Milligan continued to play ball in Schuylerville. The Saratogian reported on July 15, 1924 that the "Veterans Royal Giants of Albany . . . composed of (many) colored [sic] players have arranged to represent Schuylerville for the remainder of the baseball season. The team comes here highly recommended, and the games should prove a great attraction for the village . . . John Mulligan, a baseball pitcher for Cornell College will pitch with the outfit... The opening game will be played Sunday with the Mechanicville K. of C. team at the Fort Hardy Park diamond. "

Milligan's first major league game was on August 11, 1928 for the Philadelphia Phillies (1928–1931). The New York Times reported the next day that Philadelphia lost to the New York Giants 4 – 0. "The Phils played a mean trick on a young fellow named Jack Milligan yesterday at the Polo Grounds. The youth hadn't caught his breath from the excitement of being in the major leagues when he was flung to the fury of the Giants, a team that was practically invincible the way it played yesterday. Young Mr. Milligan was hired yesterday morning and fired at the Giants in the afternoon. He never had a chance."

"Johnnie Milligan, Schuylerville lad, yesterday (September 24, 1930) turned in his first major league victory, when, pitching for the Philadelphia club of the National League, he turned back Brooklyn, 6 to 3 . . . His chief weakness has been his inability to control the ball, his wildness having cost him a regular pitching assignment with the Phillies. The New York baseball authors with the Brooklyn team gave Milligan a lot of credit for winning the match. The New York Times said: "The Dodgers . . . could not solve the efficient pitching of Jack Milligan, a southpaw. Milligan, whose hurling this year won a pennant for the Wilkes-Barre club, for which he turned in twenty victories." The New York Tribune said: "Milligan pitched as though he might be the answer to many Philadelphia prayers for a pitcher. Aside from the first inning, he never gave the Robins much chance to do any hitting, and in the few times they did get men on the bases, he stopped them cold," according to the Saratogian on September 25, 1930.

Milligan's final game was on June 23, 1934 with the Washington Senators. In a five-season career, Milligan posted a 3–8 record with 38 strikeouts and a 5.17 ERA in 35 appearances, including 12 starts, four complete games, and 116⅔ innings of work. Milligan played professionally with Newark, Baltimore, Buffalo, Albany, and Toronto in the International League; Syracuse, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, and Albany of the New York–Penn League; Nashville of the Southern Association; Dayton of the Central League.

Even as a professional ballplayer, Milligan found time to play local baseball. The Saratogian reported on October 9, 1933 that "'Lefty' John Milligan, Schuylerville's favorite son and ace port-sider for the Scranton team of the New York–Penn League, exercised his trusty wrong-side flipper with such effect yesterday that at the end of nine chuckers, the men of Easton had failed to acquire a semblance of a hit . . . Big John Milligan was in superb form and only on one occasion was he extended. His burning fastball, crackling curve, and deceptive change of pace completely overwhelmed the visitors, fourteen of whom were strikeout victims and none of whom collected anything close to a safe hit."

After retiring from the diamond, Milligan took over the Broadway Theater in Schuylerville. In addition, Mulligan was a commercial pilot. In 1941, "Milligan demonstrated his skill in the cockpit by a successful takeoff from the state road (Route 9) at Round Lake. While State Police held back traffic for the stunt that was given approval by the Civil Aeronautics Authority," according to the New York Times on November 7, 1942. In that year Mulligan was called on to serve the nation's war effort by instructing military aircraft pilots at Carlstrom Field, Florida, operated by the Riddle Aeronautical Institute. After the war, he settled in Fort Pierce, Florida, where he died on May 15, 1972.

Mulligan will be remembered in Schuylerville history for his athleticism. It seems fitting that on October 17, 1928, on the 151st anniversary of the surrender of Saratoga, the village of Schuylerville honored Milligan with a parade. "A local resident has said it never rains on 17 October. It poured instead last night. In spite of pouring the Schuylerville Fire Department Fife and Drum corps and citizens, automobiles escorted John A. Milligan Philadelphia National League baseball pitcher from the home of his parents on Green Street to the Hotel Schuyler, where 80 enthusiastic residents sat down to the dinner given under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce to "Johnnie" or Lefty Milligan, as he is popularly known," according to the Saratogian the following day.