



Blake Constable and Ken Tupling

Interview

October 8, 2003

Length: 1 hour, 23 minutes and 47 seconds

[*The interviewer is not introduced, but it can be assumed that George Jackson is speaking.*] George says that he is speaking to Ken Tupling and Blake Constable about sports in Bradford West Gwillimbury. Ken is speaking about his baseball experience. He says that they had a minor team and he coached it to help out. Mike [*last name is not given; but it is assumed that he is referring to Mike Kilkenny who played for the Detroit Tigers*] went on to play in the Leaside Baseball League and then met a scout by the name of Prentice* in Detroit. He played in the big leagues for Toronto as a relief pitcher. Mike went on to play for the Detroit Tigers. Blake says while they're on the subject of hardball, Ken would remember Frank Kell who was an active guy and a great curler. Frank had a sister named Margret Kell and she was married just north of Woodstock. Blake met up with her at the Kell reunion and she was very excited to tell him that her grandson from her first marriage (her first husband died) has been signed by a big league baseball team. George asks where they would play their games in town. They would play here at the diamond in Bradford. Mike was good, but he may have been his own worst enemy. Keith Kilkenny was Mike's grandfather and he played. Blake was from a family of six and had four brothers that all played baseball, so as a kid (from four or five years old) he was a spectator. He can remember Keith pitching for Bradford at Churchill. He thinks the league at that time would be Bradford and Churchill. It expanded into two different leagues; one was Stroud and he can't remember the other one. Later on, Keith was still pitching for Bradford and there was a league that was composed of Bradford, Churchill, Aurora, Newmarket, and Richmond Hill in 1932 or 1933. Blake remarks that he can remember it over Ken because he is older and Ken did not come to the area until 1945. Ken says he was unaware of that, but he was aware of Mr.





Kilkenny because he still played when Ken got there. Blake says Mr. Kilkenny played for a long time; Blake himself played for 25 years.

George says that the earliest record of baseball they have is the Newton Robinson Clippers who played in 1888. Lloyd Colborne used to catch for them and they were a hardball team. Lloyd played without a glove. Blake says that Lloyd played for a long time in Cookstown and Newton Robinson; he was a great guy. This Lloyd must have been the father of the Lloyd that they all knew. Ken says there was hardball around when Blake and Ken played; they had a hardball team and Ken pitched. It was only around for a year or two. Blake thinks this was around the same time that Churchill tried it (hardball). After Blake left Churchill, Churchill wasn't doing very well in the South Simcoe League for a few years and so they tried hardball. There was a hardball team in Angus, Beeton, Everett, and more. There was a community called Knock that had a hardball team. Blake remembers that he gave historical speeches there. Knock is in the geographic middle of Innisfil. Ken has never heard of Knock. Beeton and Alliston had hardball teams. When Bradford had a hardball team, they would play with Alliston.

George asks what created the interest in baseball in West Gwillimbury. Ken says that, from a softball standpoint, there was already interest when he came to town in 1945 and it started to bloom then. Blake says the interest had waned through The Depression in the early thirties but by the end of the thirties and before World War Two broke out, baseball was gaining support. However, it recessed again because so many big farm communities had a lot of the boys called to service and the ones that stayed were needed on the farm. It was like this until about 1944 and there was a different feeling then. From 1945 to 1950 there was no television or distractions so it gained popularity. One game between Fennell's Corners and Cookstown (to decide who would go to the playoffs) made the headline of the paper [*Blake shows them the newspaper clipping*]. There were about a thousand people watching the game and it was a community event. Blake thinks it's because people had just gone through a depressing time with having to deal with the war and loss of friends and family. When that was over, it was like a new world. There was also a big rivalry between Cookstown and Fennell's Corners, and the people





knew all the players who were playing. George notes that in current times when you go to see the Bradford hockey team you don't know the people playing, but back then you would have.

Blake says that Abe Brown (Tom Brown's father) was at every game in Bradford and Fennell's Corners. He would sit and talk to old Herb Sr., probably smoking a cigar. Mount Pleasant had a team in the league at one point and they would get a good crowd. Blake can remember the guys on that team; he played for Churchill at the time. Roger and Leighton* Giffin* were a godsend at the time; Ross Clubine pitched; Lloyd and Clarence Kneeshaw weren't mentioned much but were good players; Joe Gordon played with them for a while as well. Art Kneeshaw played for Mount Pleasant before coming to play for Bradford. Doug Drysdale (the man that runs the Christmas tree farm and is related by marriage to the Moriartys) played for Mount Pleasant as well.

Ken remembers when he was 15 or 16 and playing in a tournament at Churchill. On the field, Blake was pitching and his brother Jack was catching while wearing a sleeveless undershirt, no mask, and with a cigarette in his mouth. Blake's other brother Mackenzie was playing first base and he was good. Ken would try to go to second base from first but he would step on his foot; he was very tall and had a good stretch. Harry [*last name is inaudible*] set the standard for the league. Blake's brother Mackenzie (who only played in Churchill because he died at 36) could hit Harry. Blake refers to Mackenzie as Maggie and Mac as nicknames. This is because his oldest brother Bill (who ended up as a police officer) always had nicknames for his brothers. Jack was called Kogen*, Ralph (who died when he was 20) was called Ryer*, and Blake was Buckwheat or Chucks. Ken says he has played baseball in Newmarket, Toronto, and other places. One of the best hitters he has seen was Blake's brother Jack. He was strong and quick which made him a good batter. Another great player that Ken remembers was Bill McCallum* who played pro hockey but also pitched for Newmarket. He was a left handed hitter and did well.

Blake has artifacts from 1936 to 1960 because his sister in-law (Bill's wife) was a fan and if she was not at the game she would take all the clippings out of the newspaper about the game.

The Bradford Witness did not write good articles on the games but the Barrie paper did because





George Story was Red's brother who played for a Barrie team. George Story was a good writer and got a following. The South Simcoe League was more exciting than others. In the mid-1950s, as the South Simcoe League tapered down, Blake started to pitch for Bradford; they were in a league with three or four Barrie teams and a Minesing team. Ken is looking at a picture from 1953 when Bradford won, and it wasn't called the South Simcoe League, it was the Simcoe County League. The air force out of Camp Borden had a team and they were in it; Barrie was in it as well. Towards the end of the glory days of the South Simcoe League, for at least one year, they tried an interlocking schedule. It was a very busy year because they had their own schedule, but also worked some of these other teams in. Blake can remember pitching against [*name is inaudible*], Ron Stewart, and Ray Garrett. [*They look at more newspaper clippings.*] Blake shows them one newspaper clipping that features the game between Cookstown and Fennell's Corners in 1949. Billy Thornton played for Tottenham. In the late 1940s Blake pitched for Churchill. Occasionally Blake would pitch for other teams.

Ken was 21 or 22 and was just appointed Justice of the Peace. Ken and Pat were both playing for Bradford at the time. One day, Pat was worried they were going to be late for their game. They both changed into their black baseball uniforms and Pat suggested they take the unmarked police cruiser to the game, with Ken driving. They were on Highway 400 and Pat made him go 80-85 mph. They came tearing into the entrance. Blake says Fred [*last name is inaudible*] was dangerous to drive with. He had a five passenger coupe and he would be turning around to talk to everyone while driving dangerously fast.

George asks where they played the early games in Fennell's Corners. Blake says it's in his notes but he cannot remember off the top of his head. Blake says it was in 1941 because he was 15. Bradford, Newton Robinson, and Stroud were in the league at the time. Blake had been pitching from the time he was five because he watched Jack Reeve* and knew since then that he wanted to be a pitcher. Blake played with his dad and brothers because his dad was a ball player. In Public School and High School, Blake was always a pitcher. One summer, he started working for his brother Jack on a farm. Ken Bell came along to talk with him (because they both had their eye on the O'Neill girls) and he told him that Fennell's Corners needs a pitcher. Blake





went to watch a game and that was the first time he ever saw Joe Magani*. Blake played about four or five games until June and then he needed to get his appendix removed so he was done for the year.

George says there had been two diamonds at Fennell's Corners. Blake says the first ball game he watched (with Joe Magani* playing) was played at the old Brown Property where they now park. It belonged to the Brown family but it wasn't being used so they let the Fennell's team play on it. Blake does not remember seeing a game on Herb Hughes' farm but knows that there was a diamond there. Then there was increasing interest and a lot of it had to do with Jack Hughes. He was such an enthusiast and a promoter of baseball. He talked the Kells into selling part of their farm on Highway 89 for \$400 (which was not very much money). They were farmers and did not want to part with their land but Jack talked them into it. It was then made into a baseball diamond. Art Evans helped them get poles for lights and the Corner* boys from Lefroy did the wiring. To raise money, they sold tickets for a draw and raised \$6700. The prize for the draw was \$1000 or something similar. Blake remembers that the tickets were \$10 which was quite a bit of money at the time. Jack Hughes was the most energetic about it; this was in 1943. Lights came in to the diamond in 1947. Blake started playing in Fennell's again in 1949 but did not move there until 1950. Bradford would get lights a little bit after Fennell's. Art Evans was instrumental in getting the same deal for Bradford.

Blake talks about when Bradford took out the old radar control posts and put in the new lights. The tops of the poles had been cut off. They took the roots and stumps out of the ground (they were B.C. Red Cedar), loaded them on a truck, and brought them to the land fill site that Blake was working at. He saw that it was nice, pressure treated wood so he had it put off to the side because he thought something should be done with them. That sat there for years and when he retired they were still there so he hired a truck and took them off to a milling place and had them trimmed down and used them to make the deck on the back of his house.

Ken asks about what happened to Jerry Pryke. Blake says he was a wonderful ball player and nice guy. He played professional football with the Sarnia Imperials and worked on the Avro project. When the project was scrapped, he was out of a job so he moved to San Francisco and





thought it was a great place to live. At one of the May 24th Ball Tournaments, they had the Barrie team there which had some junior hockey players on it. Barrie's coach [*name is inaudible*] said there was a bad call against his team, and things got heated. Jerry Pryke came over to the bench, grabbed [*inaudible*] and said, "Are you gonna put up, or shut up?". These tournaments would most frequently be held at Churchill on the weekend of May 24th. Later on, these were held at Fennell's Corners because there wasn't as much baseball interest in Churchill. Innisfil would occasionally hold a tournament on July 1st.

[*George is reading from what might be a newspaper clipping.*] In the 1932 Softball Tournament, eight teams competed: Fennell's, Cookstown, Newton Robinson, Glencairn*, Elmgrove, Churchill Juniors, and two teams from Bradford. After preliminary rounds, Fennell's and one Bradford team were left in the running to fight it over. Fennell's won over Bradford. Blake would like to talk about the Churchill Juniors. Some players on this team were Jack and Bill Constable, Harry Sloane, Marshall Reeve, Bill Brown, Lloyd Graham*, Ernie [*last name is inaudible*]. In 1930, they were in a league with Bradford, two teams from Barrie, the Allandale Imperials (named after Imperial Theatre), the Roxie Aces (named after the Roxie Theatre), and Midhurst. Churchill beat the Allandale Imperials in the final game for the Simcoe County Championship. The picture sits up in the Churchill Hall. During this time, Blake was five years old so he wasn't at the game but he remembers the night. Jack was 18 and Bill was 20; it was a very exciting game. Ken Gilfoil* was a good pitcher and played in the professional league in the USA after leaving Barrie. Jack was able to hit his pitches and allowed Churchill to win.

Lloyd Hughes and Earl Steele* (who lived in Steele's Corners) drove into Blake's farmyard in Innisfil to see his brother Mac and asked him if he was interested in forming a Junior Ball team because they didn't have the chance to play on the Senior Ball team. In 1931 and 1932, the Churchill Juniors were formed. They wanted to form this team because there were players like Don Beatty* and a few others who were good at ball but not good enough to be on the senior team. The Hughes were raised right on the Gilford Road. Lloyd Hughes and Mac were about the same age then, just teenagers. George asks if Blake ever played any Scotch Settlement teams and he says only once. The Scotch Settlement tried to get a team going but it never





worked for them. Bob Brown, Norman McKay, and Doug Turner were on that team. George says his family has a link to Fennell's as well. Their son Bill played for Fennell's with Jim Brown, Doug Brown, and the Kell boys for four or five years; this would be around the 1960s or a little later.

[*Blake brings out pictures to look at.*] One picture is of Bruce Collings who has since passed away. They were Blake's first neighbours. George says for a year or so before he passed away, Bruce was working on his family history with help from Joe Saint. Then Bruce passed away, and now no one knows what happened to the family history. [*Tape cuts out*]

[*Tape resumes*] Joe played the position of short stop. In his younger years, he put weight on and then he wasn't so good. He had a bad batting average but when he did hit it, it was very powerful. [*They continue to look at different pictures.*] They see one picture and remember the annual banquet for the league they used to have; there would be so many people that they couldn't house them all. The Churchill Community Hall (where it was held) was practically new at that time but since then the town has torn it down and built a bigger one. Blake says good umpiring made good ball games. Art Kneeshaw was one of the finest umpires they had, as well as [*first name is inaudible*] Crawford from Minesing. They were good and fair, so there weren't many arguments.

Ken tells a story about Art Kneeshaw umpiring a game in Schomberg for the York County Championship. Art was umpire behind the plate and called Ken to be umpire behind bases because the other umpire was sick. There was a big crowd, and Ken was just a kid. Ken was behind second base and he called a player out. The other team was from Maple and they had some rowdy fans that were very mad at Ken and started to come onto the field. Art's brother-in-law Joe Wood came from the stands to defend Ken. Blake says a great part of playing was that they all got to know the other players and were friends.

Ken has a story about Joe Wood and Hurricane Hazel in 1954. Ken got in a big truck with [*name is inaudible*] and went down the 400 Highway to see if they could help any of the people in the marsh. Joe Wood came in the truck as well. [*Name is inaudible*] told Ken that all





he would need to do is pull the big brake when he told him to, because the brakes will be wet. Ken looked out the window and saw pieces of the 400 Highway floating by. Joe Wood took his shirt off, got out in front of the truck, tied a rope to the truck, and started feeling down the highway with his feet to make sure that the truck did not come off the road.

Blake was going to be married the day after the hurricane. The day of the hurricane, he had some business to finish in Toronto and he picked his brother Bill up on the way back. They crossed the Holland Marsh but the whole thing was a lake (this was at about seven o'clock). There was no visibility. He came across Highway 88 and drove through a creek there but he should not have driven there because the road might've been gone. Their wedding rehearsal was to be that night in Gilford so they tried to get there but couldn't. However, Blake was able to have his wedding reception the next day. The last road that Blake tried to cross was Highway 14. They knew there was a chance that there was big trouble there. They edged down and all they could see was water racing through. They stopped, got a little closer, and saw a maroon coloured car. They thought someone had drowned and so they lowered his brother-in-law down with a rope but could not find anyone. They went into Bob Brown's house and tried to call someone but the phones were out. They were standing around waiting and heard footsteps from the east. It turns out the people left their car because it stalled and water was racing around it. They walked east to try to find a phone and when they got back the whole bank had fallen in. Blake's fiancé did not think they would make it to the wedding but they did; half the guests got there. George says that on the Beeton flats, many cows died during the hurricane because they were unable to pasture and it caused them to drown. Blake says on the 7th line of Innisfil, east of Highway 11, there was a railroad track that came through from Lefroy to Barrie. The morning after the flood, his sister-in-law went to the creek that went under the 7th Line, through that field, and under the railroad track just north of the 7th Line. The railroad path was at least 50 feet and 20 feet high, and the rails and ties were hanging like a swing bridge because of how the hurricane washed out everything beneath it. North of Highway 89 was washed out completely in two different places. Ken says you never hear of road inspections being done anymore. He can





remember West Gwillimbury doing that; it was a big day. Blake can remember road inspections when he was on Innisfil Town Council as well. By the end of the 1970s, that idea died out.

Blake says his brother Bill was a pitcher and as of 1936 or 1937, there was Bradford, Churchill, Utopia, and Midhurst in the league. At the Midhurst Park, there was a maple tree far away from where they were playing and Bill hit a ball right over the tree. Al* Crawford told Bill it was the longest ball he'd ever seen. Ken says Mr. Crawford was a nice guy and, according to Blake, a good hockey player in his youth. He tried out for the American League but never made it to the professional league. He was a good curler and horseshoe pitcher as well. He won the Canadian Championship for horseshoes with his son in law Geordie Miles*. Al* Crawford died in the Cookstown curling rink and his brother Jack was there with him. Ken says the Giffins* knew Mr. Crawford better than he did.

[*George references a picture.*] It is from 1948 and shows the Bradford team with Ken, Tobias, Collings, George Carson, Art Evans, Carter, James, and Steve Simone*. Blake says Steve Simone* was the nicest sportsman he ever played with. When they finished playing at the end of the year, they always had a banquet. It was often held in Cookstown but they were never sure where it would be. Ken can remember getting razed at Cookstown one year because he won the batting title. Harry Couse would say, "But you couldn't hit me!". Blake says Harry Couse made them all better because they had to work harder. Blake went with his wife to Saskatoon knowing that Harry was hospitalized, but he didn't know how serious it was. He passed away during that time and Blake felt bad. George asks for a photo of Harry, and Blake and Ken say they will look for one. Blake says that Lloyd Hughes passed away about two years ago. It was Alan Dawson that gave the eulogy at the funeral.

Blake considers himself fortunate that he was able to play with the Barrie, Fennell's, and Churchill teams. They started an industrial team in West Toronto and Blake used to go down with Russ Kinnear* and Joe Osin* to pitch for them at Redding Park* by the stock yards. The league executive decided Blake couldn't play there anymore since he didn't live there. Blake says his life would have been very different without sports. He notes that Ken was multi-talented,





but Blake wasn't a good skater. He played a bit of hockey in his youth in Stroud. He remembers that Bill [*last name is inaudible*] would hit very hard, but he didn't have any speed.

George asks if any of the ball parks had bleachers. Blake answers that there was a man from Bradford who built the bleachers in Fennell's newer park. [*George's grandson Greg, son of Bill, enters the room and is introduced to everyone. He is there as part of his volunteer work.*] Ken says he had lots of artifacts in an envelope that he was keeping and his wife found it for him. Included in it were old copies of the Bradford Witness. Tupling Insurance (Ken's company) sponsored a tyke team because his son was playing on it. In one of these newspapers, Ken found an article from 35 years ago about them winning the championship with his son Scott scoring three goals and would like to give it to his grandson.

Blake speaks about good players that he remembers. He says Cubie McCuik* played for the Bradford team when Blake was a boy (about six or seven) and spectator. He played short stop just about center field, but no one remembers him. Ken says one of the Nesbitt girls might know more about Cubie*. Blake says Cubie* could be way out there deep and handle a lot of stuff. At that time, Keith Kilkenny would be pitching for Bradford. Ken says that Peter Kilkenny might know more about Cubie*. When Blake played in Gravenhurst, it was pretty exciting because they won the town league and then the district. They won the Intermediate League playoffs for Ontario and got to the finals but Meaford beat them. The catcher on this team was a man named Jimmy Webb who had come to play for Gravenhurst in the same year as Blake. In some ways, he was better than Blake's brother Jack. Jimmy once caught in Montreal playing with Bill Durnan who was one of the best fast ball pitchers in the town.

Ken says one of the ladies in his office has a daughter attending university who was last year's backup goaltender for Canada's National Women's Team. Ken ran across a book that he wanted to give to her because their family is obviously interested in hockey. He flipped the book open and saw Bill Durnan. Ken can remember Bill very well; he was one of Canada's best ball pitchers and goaltenders.





George asks if there was ever a girl's baseball league. They look at a picture of the Scotch Settlement team and identify a blonde girl in the first row as Lillian Edwards. Blake says that he knew her well; she loved to play. Neither Blake nor Ken knew of a girl's league in the area. Blake sees Connie Bateman in the picture and says she used to date his brother Bill. Margaret MacDonald was on the team as well. George sees Muriel Kneeshaw written in the caption of the picture, but he think the name might be a mistake.

Blake says as he mentioned before, through the war years there was a lull in softball. During this time, his brothers Mac and Jack, and Ralph and Jack Reeve would go to the service station on the 5th Line corner and pitch horseshoes. [*Tape cuts out*]

*Note: * Indicates that the word or name is written as it sounded, and therefore may be incorrect.*

