

The squeeze play that made history

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BROWNBRIDGE/The Windsor Star Bud O'Brien visits the Maidstone baseball diamond where his team, the Maidstone Shamrocks, won a championship in 1943. This weekend the baseball park will be rededicated in honour of the Shamrocks. O'Brien is the team's sole surviving player.

He stepped on to the red earth of the ball diamond behind St. Mary's Church in Maidstone. He remarked that in the nearby Catholic cemetery were many of the boys he played with on that glory day in October 1943.

Bud O'Brien is the lone survivor. He's now 89. The papers called him the "fair-haired boy of Maidstone." And it was his play in the ninth on the ninth of October — a squeeze play — that gave nine farm boys something to remember for the rest of their lives.

Three thousand fans turned up to watch the old Maidstone Shamrocks, a ragtag team of ballplayers, steal the Intermediate B Ontario Baseball Association championship from the favoured Royal Canadian Air Force team from Camp Borden.

I walked with Bud across the diamond. He carried a battered fielder's mitt as he shuffled to home plate where history was made 67 years ago. He spoke quietly about that game, about how he rose

early that morning like any other day and how he did what farm chores that had to be done. He was 22 then, one of the youngest on the squad.

Bud loved the game more than anything in the world and somehow he knew deep down that day would be his. He wasn't far off in that prediction.

It was in the ninth inning with the score tied at two that Bud came to the plate. He hadn't had a hit all day. He looked for the bunt sign and it was clear — there was a runner on third and he needed to get him home.

“It was a squeeze play,” Bud said. “I knew what I had to do — I had to get the ball down.” And that he did. Bud dumped the ball halfway between the mound and the plate and the pitcher fielded it but before he could even rifle it to the catcher, Spike Hillier, the runner, was already sliding home in a cloud of dirt.

Bud can't forget that moment just as he was making contact with the ball, how he could hear his teammate storming down the line.

“I knew then we were going to win,” he said.

Saturday, Bud will be back at that diamond as part of the community's rededication ceremony and he'll throw out the first pitch for a senior men's league.

As we talked, he rattled off the names of teammates, his old buddies, including John Penner, former mayor of Leamington, who started on the mound and had eight strikeouts before his arm gave out.

Odd, but none of the players were from Maidstone itself, said Bud, whose family farm was just down the road in Oldcastle.

Bud stood at home plate and I watched him survey the field. When I asked what he did after the game, he said they partied right on the field.

“It was a perfect day — it was warm, and we stayed right here,” recalled Bud.

But when the Camp Borden team wended their way back to Windsor, they decided to return and roar with their planes over the ball diamond.

“And they wagged their wings when they came over the field,” Bud remarked with a smile.

It was a gesture of goodwill he would never forget.

Bud went on to play for a couple of more years and eventually left the farm for a job as a purchasing agent for the Ford Motor Company. He worked there for 40 years and married and had seven children.

Today he sits on the wooden bleachers at the St. Mary's Ball Park and silently cheers his grandchildren who carry on the O'Brien tradition.

He wouldn't miss a game of theirs.

And if Bud scans the lineup cards, many the names remain familiar — the Kavanaughs, the Jessops, the Sextons and the McCarthys, the grandchildren of the men he played with on that fall day in the midst of war.