

Little Hurler, Big Name, Weak Heart



“Pembroke Finlayson” was surely a mouthful of a name for a 5’-6,” 140-pound lad. Known as the “Midget Twirler,” young Mr. Finlayson made two very brief appearances in major league baseball, pitching for the Brooklyn club, before reaching the age of 22.

He might have worked his way back to the bigs if he’d only made it to age 23.

Pembroke Finlayson was born in Cheraw, South Carolina on this day in 1888, the son of Henry Wright Finlayson and his wife Charity. Among Pembroke’s siblings were brothers Richmond Tooks Finlayson, Henry Angus Finlayson and Jennings Finlayson, and sisters Daisy, Sallie, Mammie Lou, Carrie Isabel and Winnie Kennedy Finlayson. The Finlaysons had a penchant for colorful monikers.

South Carolina was hardly a bastion of big league baseball talent in those days; there weren’t many South Carolinians who had played in the big leagues. The first was Charleston native John Bass, who started at shortstop (batting ninth, three spots behind the pitcher) for the Cleveland Forest Citys against the Fort Wayne Keokuks in the very first game of the National Association on May 4, 1871 – said by some to be the very first professional ballgame ever.

After that, there were very few other Palmetto Staters in the majors during the early days of baseball. Charleston briefly had a ball club in the Southern League during the

1890s, the Seagulls; and from out of that city came Tom Colcolough, who had a winning record (8-5) despite an ERA of 7.08 for the 1894 Pittsburgh Pirates, and Pat Luby, who pitched over a 100 games during the 1890s with the Chicago Colts and the Louisville club. Luby equalled a record in 1890 for most hit batsmen in an inning (3). Doc McJames from Williamsburg County, a graduate of the South Carolina Medical College in Charleston, was in and out of the majors for a few years before dying in 1901 from injuries suffered in a horse buggy accident at the age of 28.

Later, of course, there was a promising rookie breaking into the majors in 1908, a contemporary of Finlayson's from Pickens County, who went by the name of [Shoeless Joe Jackson](#). But baseball around the turn of the 20th century was still a game dominated by Northeastern city boys, and Pembroke Finlayson might not have commanded much attention as a ballplayer had his father not moved the family to Brooklyn in 1901, where Henry Finlayson plied his trade as a dry goods wholesaler.

In Brooklyn, young Pembroke was surrounded by baseball. You could hardly swing a bat without hitting an industrial or commercial team -- collections of laborers who toiled at their labor during weekdays but put on company colors on summer evenings and Saturdays to play for bragging rights -- or some other "diamond nine" sponsored by a church or a gentlemen's lodge. As a teenager, Finlayson showed enough prowess on the mound to be tapped to pitch for a club called the Marquettes, sponsored by the Church of [Thomas Aquinas](#), who played their home games at the Marquette Oval at 4th Avenue and 8th Street in South Brooklyn. He also caught on with the Missouri-Pacific ballclub, a commercial team sponsored by the colorful railroad magnate George Jay Gould, though it is unclear whether Finlayson ever actually worked for the line; he may have been a ringer, which would have been consistent with Gould's business practices.

Finlayson apparently commanded enough attention as a local phenom to be signed, at the tender age of 19, by the Lynn Shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts. Despite sounding like another industrial team, the Lynn Shoemakers were a franchise of the New England League, a Class B rookie circuit whose president was Tim Murnane, an old hand who had been a regular on Harry Wright's champion Boston clubs during the 1870s. The league had some bona fide stars, including owner/manager [Jesse Burkett](#) of the

Worcester Busters and player/manager [Sliding Billy Hamilton](#) of the Haverhill Hustlers – aging heavyweights who settled in New England to play out the final days of their Hall of Fame careers. Finlayson’s club dragged in at the end of the 1907 season in a distant second place to Burkett’s Busters for the New England championship.

It must have been a heady atmosphere for young Finlayson, who acquitted himself well enough to be noticed by the scouts of Brooklyn owner Charley Ebbets, who signed him along with a former Brown University second-sacker named Harry Partee, on February 22, 1908.

Unfortunately, the Brooklyn ballclub of the National League in 1907 was not the heralded Brooklyn Dodgers of the 1940s and 50s, the ballclub of Duke Snider, Don Newcombe, Roy Campanella, Pee Wee Reese and Jackie Robinson. The Brooklyn Superbas of 1907, as they were then known, had been on a slow and steady slide since Ned Hanlon led them to the National League pennant in 1899 and 1900. Under the guidance of a new manager, Patsy Donovan, they went from finishing 5th in 1906, to 5th again in 1907.

1908 wasn’t looking much better. After a 13-22 start, Ebbets reassured reporters on May 30: “[Outfielder Harry] Lumley and [First Baseman Tim] Jordan will get to hitting, and then Brooklyn will begin to crawl up.” Staff aces Irvin “Kaiser” Wilhelm and Nap Rucker, a 34-year old spitball specialist and his 23-year old knuckleballing protégé, were pitching well enough, but none of Brooklyn’s starting batsmen were showing much promise at that point. The fact that you’ve never heard of Harry Lumley or Tim Jordan should be a clue to the outcome of Ebbets’ prediction ...

At any rate, a little over a week later, Pembroke Finlayson made his major league debut before a hometown crowd of about 5,000 patrons. Cincinnati, holding second place in the National League in a close race with the Cubs, had already beaten the Superbas in the first two outings of the series at Brooklyn’s home field, Washington Park – located a mere five blocks north of where Finlayson used to pitch for the Marquettes. On June 6, the third game in the series, Brooklyn scored first, in the second inning; but Nap Rucker gave up two runs to the Reds as he struggled through the third inning. At the start of the

fourth inning, Donovan sent Finlayson to the mound.

It was a bit of a disaster, unfortunately. In 1/3 of an inning, Finlayson walked four straight Reds, leaving the score at 3-1 when Donovan pulled him and replaced him with George Bell. Bell would do no better; by the end of the 4th inning, Bell had given up 5 more runs. The final score was 8-2, and soon Finlayson was sent packing, back to the minors for the remainder of the season.

That was June. Brooklyn finished the season in 7th place with a dismal record of 53-101, only a handful of games ahead of the basement-dwelling St. Louis club. The Superbas pitchers had three 20-game losers among them (Wilhelm, 16-22; Jim Pastorius, 4-20; and Harry McIntire, 11-20), and were a mere six more losses away from having five 20-game losers (Rucker lost 19, and Bell lost 15). The team batting average for the 1908 season was an appalling .213.

In some ways, Finlayson's return to the minors was the best thing that could have happened to him. Ultimately, during the 1908 season, Finlayson apparently managed to get innings and good practice with the Rochester Bronchos in the Eastern League, the Nashville Volunteers of the Southern Association, and the Brockton Tigers in the New England League, where Brooklyn kept an option on his contract.

While Burkett and his Busters coasted to another New England championship that year, the Tigers finished in 4th place under the management of Steve Flanagan. Finlayson could perhaps be forgiven for not focusing on his game as the 1908 season drew to a close, for in February of 1909 it was reported that Finlayson had eloped with his hometown sweetheart, Catherine Hoff, daughter of a Brooklyn merchant, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a month ahead of their planned March 6 wedding. "Call it off, we are married," they are alleged to have wired home. The couple leased an apartment in Brockton, where Finlayson would be playing in the Spring.

The Superbas had done little in the off-season to improve their lineup. Jordan, Lumley, Rucker and Wilhelm were all on hand for what promised to be a veritable repeat of the 1908 season. By September, the Superbas were a joke, in 7th place again with a 41-75

record through the end of August. Finlayson was brought into Washington Park again on September 1, just in time for a whopper of a loss against pitcher Orval Overall and the 2nd place Chicago Cubs. As the *Chicago Tribune* whimsically reported it:

The Cubs crossed the great divide which separates Manhattan from Martini, and whaled the life out of Charley Ebbet's pets, 12 to 0, by way of trying to keep from freezing in the ocean blasts, which felt as if they were [Dr. Cook's](#) advance agents from the north.

[[Player-manager Frank](#)] Chance's men kept up their vengeful record on this trip by beating Mr. Bell, who was responsible for ringing down the curtain on their winning streak during the last series with the eastern clubs in Chicago. What the Cubs did to Bell is plainly to be seen in the score by innings, which show eight large tallies in the first two rounds, which were Bell's limit. In that time we slaughtered his delivery for nine clean hard swats, of which [[leftfielder Joe](#)] Stanley and Chance got two apiece, and were helped out by some bush league work behind the belfry.

Finlayson, one of thirty odd stars gathered by Brooklyn's dragnet from the minors this year, was asked to finish Bell's job, and, without having much in the way of pitching wares, he was a lot better than Bell.

Finlayson gave up a double to Chance in the 4th inning, who scored on third baseman Harry Steinfeldt's bunt. He then pitched four spotless innings, before giving up three runs in the 9th. Overall gave up only two hits on the day.

Finlayson saw no further action in Brooklyn for the season. The Superbas managed to pull ahead of the Cardinals in the last two games of the season to eke out a 6th place finish. Charley Ebbets took no consolation from the Superbas relatively strong finish; in December of 1909, he put a score of his stable of players on the market – and among them was Pembroke Finlayson. It is unclear whether Ebbets had any firm bites for the little man, however. During the 1910 season, Finlayson pitched for the Lawrence Colts in the New England League, and the Providence Grays (managed by future Hall of Famer [Jimmy Collins](#)) and the Rochester Bronchos in the Eastern League.

At the end of the 1910 season, Brooklyn, again holding Finlayson's contract, sold him outright to the Memphis Turtles in the Southern Association. There he again came under the tutelage of Strawberry Bill Bernhard, who managed Finlayson briefly while the boy made a stop in Nashville during 1908. Bernhard was a star pitcher with the Phillies around the turn of the century; in fact, he is credited with having earned the first major league save of the 20th century, in a 10-inning, 19-17 nail-biter between the Phillies and the Boston Beaneaters. He was a minor star with the Phillies until he joined [Nap Lajoie](#) and several others in a controversial jump in 1901 to the Athletics, the Philadelphia franchise of the new, renegade American League. Banned from playing in Philadelphia for his contract jump, he signed with Cleveland and became the first Cleveland pitcher to lead the league in win percentage, with .783 (18-5) in 1902. He retired from pitching in 1907, and earned a winning record as a manager for Nashville for three years (221-187) before moving to Memphis.

The Turtles, so-named for the shell-shaped infield at Memphis' Russwood Park, were in dire straits when Bernhard arrived, having suffered 8th and 7th place finishes for the prior two years. In his rebuilding effort, Bernhard apparently liked what he saw of Finlayson a few years before, and secured him as a key member of his pitching staff.

Finlayson, too, seemed to like playing for Bernhard. He earned a record of 11-4 with the Turtles until, in mid-summer, he was diagnosed with a serious heart ailment. After doctors' consultations, it was decided that Finlayson required surgery, and on August 1, the Turtles put Finlayson on waivers, due to the uncertainty of his return to the lineup.

Finlayson went under the knife and began his recuperation. Anxious to return to baseball, however – especially in light of his happy situation in Memphis -- Finlayson jumped the gun on his recovery and began throwing pitches in the winter of 1912. The strain proved to be too much. Finlayson died of general peritonitis and myocardial adenitis at the Norwegian Hospital in Brooklyn on March 6, 1912 – what would have been his third wedding anniversary had he and Catherine not eloped. He left his wife
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