

# HAVING A WOOL E. BULL TIME IN DURHAM



Photograph by Tony Farrow

**THANKS TO BULL DURHAM, WIDELY CONSIDERED one of the greatest sports movies of all time, the Durham Bulls achieved instantaneous fame and recognition.** Yet, while Hollywood may have transformed the otherwise unheralded North Carolina minor league team into a national baseball phenomena, Durham maintains one of the richest and longest histories of any professional baseball franchise.

Although minor league baseball in Durham is extremely popular today, the city's present success is completely contrasted by the utter failure of its first team in 1902. On May 5th of that year, the Durham Tobacconists, and the rest of the independent North Carolina League initiated play. A mere two months later though, Tobacconists owner Judge William G. Braham refused to send his players to the New Bern Truckers due to the fact that in his opposing squad's opinion, the North Carolina League was dead. This opinion held true, as the Tobacconists and the rest of the league would never resume play.

A decade later, the city of Durham received an early Christmas present on December 12: a new minor league baseball team. Thus, in spring of 1913, Durham would play its first official game as the Bulls, a team name with strong ties to the city's legacy.

"Durham is the 'Bull City' based on the Bull Durham Tobacco, which was started here in the 1800s," says Matt DeMargel, the Bulls' director of media relations and promotions. "The name just fit."

When Durham's Blackwell Tobacco Company originally dubbed their product Bull Durham Tobacco, it was surprisingly a mistake on the company's part. John Green, the man accredited with conceiving the name "Bull Durham Tobacco," was trying to use a bull logo for his Durham, North Carolina commodity to parallel the bull logo of Colman's Mustard, which he erroneously believed, was manufactured in Durham, England.

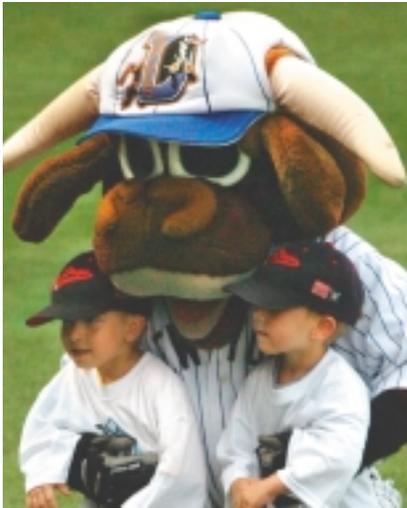
Despite the name not technically fitting, the Bull Durham trademark was nonetheless the most famous in the world at the brink of the twentieth century. In fact, the term "bullpen" was conceived because Bull Durham advertisements were so frequently spotted in baseball stadiums behind where relief pitchers warmed up.

While the original Durham Bulls folded with the North Carolina State League in 1917, the Bulls' nickname continued to be resurrected by different ownership groups throughout the years, despite changes in leagues, affiliations, and stadiums. The Bulls' name even outlasted its namesake; the manufacturing of Bull Durham Tobacco ceased in 1988.

When the Bulls began play in the Piedmont League in 1919, the ensuing 25-year campaign would see many 'firsts' for Durham professional baseball. The Bulls would play their first game outside of North Carolina; they would play their first home game at El Toro Park. Later in their first month, the Bulls would have their first mas-



**RUNNING OF THE BULL:** Wool E. Bull is off and running during a Bulls game, entertaining fans along the way.



Photograph by Samantha L. Craig

**BULLISH WITH HUGS:** Wool E. hands out hugs to two young Durham fans.

cot: a live bull. In 1932, the Bulls served as a Single-A farm team for the Philadelphia Phillies—their first affiliation with a major league franchise. At season's end, their stadium would undergo its first name change to Durham Athletic Park (commonly referred to as the DAP.) The Great Depression would bring about the first time the Bulls could not operate due to the area's economic status in 1934. After resuming play in 1936, DAP erupted in flames for its first—and only—time on July 2, 1939, thus leading to the construction of the stadium's first steel grandstand.

Ironically, Durham's most prosperous baseball era to date concluded with a series of 'lasts', when the last place Bulls played their last Piedmont League game on September 5, 1943.

Once again, the time when the Bull City had no Bulls baseball did not last long—as an expansion Durham Bulls joined the start-up Class C Carolina League in 1945. With a 5-0 triumph over the Burlington Bees on April 27, Durham began 27 straight years with minor league baseball. Over this period, the Bulls would prepare promising prospects for the Detroit Tigers (1948-1961), Houston Astros (1962-1966), and New York Mets (1967.)

In 1968, for the first time since 1902, the professional baseball team in Durham did not go by the Bulls. Meanwhile, the team was experiencing a significant decrease in popularity among local

fans—a problem the city had never encountered before.

“Durham was always a good baseball market,” says DeMargel. “The only time it struggled was in the late 1960s when the minor league teams kind of fizzled out here.”

In an ultimately futile final attempt to save its professional baseball, Durham merged with the nearby Raleigh Pirates to create the Raleigh-Durham Mets in 1968. This dual city ball club would play half of their home games at Durham Athletic Park and the other half at Raleigh's Devereaux Meadow.

After serving a one-season stint under the Phillies in 1969 (as the Raleigh-Durham Phillies) management decided to pay tribute to the local heritage, in 1970, by dubbing their now unaffiliated team the Triangles.

“The Triangle is the area of Durham, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh that many times is marketed as a whole,” explains DeMargel of the North Carolina tri-city community on the Atlantic Ocean coastline. “Durham is the top of the Triangle, Raleigh the right corner, and Chapel Hill the left corner.”

Unfortunately, the Triangles would never even complete a trio of seasons, as Raleigh-Durham folded a few weeks prior to the start of the 1972 season.

As part of an effort to rejuvenate interest and attendance, the Carolina League resolved on adding four expansion franchises over the course of three seasons in the late 1970s—one being the Durham Bulls. With the revival of the Bulls in 1980 after Durham's eight-year baseball drought, the Carolina League's plan paid off in ways they probably could not have imagined.

Says DeMargel: “It was strong when it came back in 1980. They drew 175,000 fans that first year back and led the Carolina League. In fact, in almost every season in the '80s, they led the league in attendance... it was popular right off the bat.”

So one can marvel at how Durham's already record-high attendance, revenue, and popularity all skyrocketed in astro-

nomical proportions following the release of the blockbuster sports flick *Bull Durham* in 1988.

Filmed on site at Durham Athletic Park and surrounding Triangle locations, *Bull Durham* is the story of a love triangle: “A romantic comedy about America's *other* favorite pastime.” In the movie, actor Kevin Costner plays veteran catcher Crash Davis, who is assigned to the Class A Bulls to mature the hot, young—and wild throwing—pitching prospect, ‘Nuke’ LaLoosh. The love triangle comes into play, when Annie Savoy (played by actress Susan Sarandon), a Bulls groupie, romances the two players during the season.

What many people do not know is that the character of Crash Davis was based on an actual Bulls player. Lawrence “Crash” Davis earned his nickname at the age of fourteen when he collided with teammate Squeaky Davis while chasing down a fly ball. After playing three seasons of middle infield for the Philadelphia

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Photograph by Samantha L. Craig

**WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE:** Wool E. Bull and a visiting Shrek mascot help keep the kids in line.

Athletics, Crash finished out his career in the minor leagues, setting the Carolina League's single-season record for doubles as a Durham Bull in 1948. Little did he know that it would be his bizarre nickname, in a Carolina League record book, that would inspire Bull Durham director/writer Ron Shelton's main character almost four decades later.

With all the main characters donning Bulls caps throughout the movie, it is no wonder that the Durham logo remains one of the most popular and recognizable minor league emblems still today: a snorting, black bull leaping through the middle of a Texas tan "D" set on a royal blue backdrop. The design was created in 1980, succeeding a bull silhouette (1913-1917) and a simple cursive "Bulls" as the team's official logo.

The same year Bull Durham brought national fame to the Bulls, owner Miles Wolff proposed constructing a brand new facility with seating for 10,000-plus fans and applying for Triple-A status.

"The market was growing. The Triangle got bigger and it made sense for us to jump across the classification. We felt that this market could handle a Triple-A team," says DeMargel.

Seven years after his initial proposal, the first half of Wolff's vision came true when Durham Bulls Athletic Park opened in 1995.

Durham Bulls Athletic Park is most famous for two unique assets—one por-

trayed in, and one inspired by, Bull Durham.

Atop the left field wall is a large bull standing in a green field with the words: "HIT BULL WIN STEAK" and "HIT GRASS WIN SALAD." A tradition continued from the old DAP, any player who smacks a homer and hits the sign is treated to a complimentary steak or salad at the downtown Marriott.

The other notable landmark is the Snorting Bull located on the first base line. Every time a Bulls batter hits a home run, the Bull's tail waves feverishly and its eyes glow a fiery red. Contrary to the movie, the Snorting Bull was never part of DAP.

"[The Snorting Bull] was a prop for the movie. After the movie was over they just let the team keep the Bull," says DeMargel.

The Bulls needed to wait only three more years until Wolff's dream was entirely fulfilled. To accommodate the expansion of Major League Baseball to thirty teams, Durham moved to the Triple-A level International League as a farm team for the new Tampa Bay Devil Rays in 1998—a role they still assume today.

After becoming a Triple-A franchise, Durham Bulls Athletic Park raised the left field wall to 32-feet, dubbing it the "Blue Monster" and replaced the original Snorting Bull with a newer and larger version.

As Durham concludes its 103rd

anniversary with the close of the 2005 season, there remains one part of their heritage that reigns more popular and beloved by Bulls' fans over even the Snorting Bull and Bull Durham: the team's two-bat tall mascot, Wool E. Bull!

Wearing jersey number 00, Wool E. Bull was born in July 1992, at DAP before moving to the Bulls' new ballpark at age 2-3/4. His middle initial is not supposed to make one think of the hit song "Wooly Bull"; the 'E' stands for EDUCATION!

Says DeMargel: "There was a contest in 1992 and a fan named Jim Bickery selected that name, [Wool E. Bull], and said he wanted the 'E-for-Education' and the team jumped on it. The Bulls have always been a strong community team so it made sense to have some type of community tie with their most visible entity."

When Wool E. Bull is not making appearances at Triangle organizations and charity events, he is cheering on his favorite team, running contests, and having fun with the fans in the stands at all Durham home games—something the Bulls' original live bull mascot could never do!

DeMargel describes some of the promotions at the Bulls' games. "There's the Wool E. Bull Base Race... a kid gets to race Wool E. around the bases. He's got a hot dog launcher when he comes out in the sixth inning where he launches softie balls up into the crowd out of a giant hot dog. And he's got a mini go-cart he drives around in the eighth inning and throws softie balls into the crowd."

After capturing back-to-back Governor's Cup Titles in 2002 and 2003—the only time in the International League's 119-year history the feat has been accomplished—it looks unlikely that the Bulls will capture their third championship pennant in four seasons as they will end the 2005 season with a losing record in the South Division. In the meantime, Wool E. Bull and fans can look forward to next season, as the rich legacy of the Durham Bulls will surely grow with yet another season. ■ Eric Karlan