

MUDDY and MUDDONNA

Mascots of the Toledo Mud Hens

TEAM HISTORIAN JOHN HUSMAN CAPTURES THE ESSENCE OF TOLEDO BASEBALL beautifully when he says, "Perhaps there is no minor league sports franchise better known." Yet while many baseball fans know the Toledo Mud Hens as Corporal Klinger's hometown team on the 1970s' mega hit show *M*A*S*H*, few are aware of the team's extensive history.

Baseball in Toledo, Ohio, dates back to 1883, when the team won the league championship in its inaugural season. Toledo fans should have savored this victory—the team has since won only five league pennants in a grand total of 107 seasons! For those keeping score at home, that is worse than the six championship victories in the now un-curse Boston Red Sox's 103-year franchise history!

In Toledo baseball's early years the team, then a member of the American Association, which was recognized as a major league, experienced constant nickname changes—six in nine seasons: the

White Stockings, Blue Stockings, Toledos, Maumees (after the indigenous Maumee Indians),

Black Pirates and Swamp Angels.

While the season itself was uneventful, 1896 was a monumental year in Toledo baseball history. The franchise played its home games at Bay View Park, a stadium just outside the city limits and surrounded by swamps and marshes. These wetlands were packed with American coots, more commonly known as mud hens among the locals. Inspired by the birds, the team adopted the name and it has stuck, for the most part, ever since.

After almost 20 years of continuous turmoil, the team finally found its niche in the minor league American Association (AA) in 1902, playing against seven other mid-western clubs. The Mud Hens continued to play in the AA through the 1955 season under the Indians, St. Louis Browns, Tigers and Braves. For the most part, the Mud Hens were perennial losers and struggled to maintain a loyal fan base.

Quite possibly the most significant event during the AA years was when local artist Robert Parsil penciled the original Mud Hen logo in 1948. "Mortimer the Mud Hen" became Toledo's official logo and infamous identity at the beginning of



Photograph Courtesy of the Toledo Mud Hens

the following season. Unfortunately, the birth of Mortimer also marked the death of baseball in Toledo for a decade; the city failed to host a team from 1956 to 1964.

In 1965, the National Pastime was once again revitalized in Toledo as the Mud Hens joined the Triple-A International League, a position they have maintained ever since. The beginning of this new era was slow until Gene Cook became general manager in 1978. In fact, Cook, the mastermind who helped ensure national awareness of Mud Hen baseball, sent Toledo native Jamie Farr, aka Corporal Klinger, a promotional package from the team containing jerseys and hats. Farr wore the merchandise around the *M*A*S*H* set and the Mud Hens were frequently mentioned in front of an international viewing audience. Brilliant promotional work!

Unfortunately, even with the newfound worldwide recognition,



the only numbers that went up for the Mud Hens were profits in merchandise sales as the team annually struggled in the standings. But, to this day the Mud Hens rank in the top three in annual sales out of all minor league clubs. The only major change for the Mud Hens was a new logo design, presented in 2002. The traditional image of Mortimer was finally abandoned for a newer, brighter logo—an angry, bat-wielding yellow mud hen wearing a navy blue hat and red and white pinstriped jersey. Toledo has had stints with several major league teams in the International League era but returned as the Detroit Tigers’ Triple-A franchise, boasting such players as Mike Maroth, Carlos Peña and Jeff Weaver in recent years.

Yet there is one Mud Hen that is happily stranded in Toledo. Muddy the Mud Hen has been a huge baseball fan for as long as he can remember. Born on July 6, 1989 in the swamps of the nearby Maumee River, the young American coot constantly found himself flying over Toledo ball games; he dreamed of growing up and getting a job there. Inspired by choreography in television shows like *Soul Train* and *American Bandstand*, Muddy spent hours upon hours working on his dance moves—he knew he could never



Photograph by Art Weber

Photograph by Lad Strayer

Image Courtesy of the Toledo Mud Hens

MUDDY'S DIRTY WORK: Toledo's main mascot has been working the crowds for over a decade until his wingman, Muddonna, joined the act in 2003; (Inset) The 1948 "Mortimer the Mud Hen" logo.

make the Mud Hens’ roster. The mud hen’s wish came true; he shakes his tail feather and chows on popcorn and Muddy Dogs at every home game.

For over a decade Muddy remained a mud hen bachelor—eating, cheering and sleeping was his life. This all changed when Muddonna arrived in Toledo in April 2003, just in the nick of time for a new baseball—and mating—season. Muddonna shares Muddy’s passions for baseball and dancing;

it is no wonder why the two coots constantly flock together.

The duo can be seen at all the Mud Hens’ home games, wearing their pinstripe jerseys and rooting for their favorite team. Hopefully Muddy, Muddonna, and all the Toledo fans will have more to cheer about this year. The team will try to rebound from a last place IL finish in 2004. Who knows; if the Red Sox could break their curse, maybe the Toledo Mud Hens can too. **|| Eric Karlan**

