

ST. JOHN'S RETOOLS FOR A COMEBACK IN '66

BASE BALL'S MOST DECORATED CLUB LOST NEW ENGLAND FOR THE FIRST TIME LAST SEASON

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (Mar. 16, 1866) – In the first eight years of the New England Championship, the list of New England champions was as follows: The St. John's Baseball Club eight times. They never won the N.E.C. by a single game, taking it by margins varying from three games (three times) to an ex-record fifteen (1859). They also lifted the Tucker-Wheaton Cup four of the first eight times it was contested, a remarkable feat in a 48-team competition.

That changed in 1865, when an eleven-game losing caused St. John's to fall from co-leaders after half the season to a fourth-place finish, with their final record of 36-34 being the worst in team history by a full five games. Reaction after the season was immediate, with their 3B Coach retiring, their Batting Coach being fired, and their Pitching Coach, Bench Coach, & 1B Coach deciding to leave the team. Only manager Todd Rogers remains from last year's coaching staff. Five former N.B.B.O. players have been brought in to take over the various coaching functions, with new Batting Coach James Testo said to be particularly good at his coaching specialty.

With the new coaching staff settled, it was time for the front office to work on fixing what went wrong on the field last season. The most obvious issue was the offense, which scored roughly 100 fewer runs than it did in 1864. Changes at C, 2B, & SS left the team with production that was below replacement level at three positions. Their other issue was with the second pitcher role, where Joseph Jefferson struggled and allowed the most home runs in the Northeastern League.

St. John's attempted to recruit a number of big-name targets, most notably four-time All-Star 2B Leslie Arnett and already legendary SS Anthony Mascherino. They missed out but were still able to make upgrades to the lineup. First, three-time All-Star C Dag Nielsen was brought in from Reading Athletic, likely to be a significant offensive upgrade over the now-backup George Tyburczy. The other notable move for the lineup was the signing of SS Everton Butters from Victory. Butters is below-average with the bat, but is a plus in the field and, most importantly, should fit in extremely well with the St. John's philosophy of extreme aggression on the basepaths. Butters stole 42 bases last year, and over his four-year career he has been successful on more than eighty percent of his stolen base attempts. The import of Butters allows Thomas DiMola, who struggled as a SS last year, to move to 2B, where he is regarded as a steadier fielder.

To fix the pitching situation and bring in someone who will provide better support for William Tighe, the club has recruited three-time All-Star Harold Perry, who was 15-13 with an average E.R.A. for Continental last year. The 32-year-old Perry has a career record of 151-112 and has won 20+ games in a season three times, and the front office that given a season of support from St. Johns' typical scoring and defense he should have a fine season in 1866. Arthur Smith, who was 17-13 for Bedford last season, will step in should Perry falter.

The offseason moves, though not as earth-shaking as St. Johns hoped they would be, will put the team on better footing going into the 1866 season. They have five lineup members ranked in the top five at their positions according to the Writers Pool: C Dag Nielsen (2nd), 1B Collin Henderson (3rd), LF Nelson Townsend (1st), CF William Johnson (3rd), & RF Konrad Jensen (1st). William Tighe is ranked 9th at pitcher, and Leopold Pfeiffer is on the cusp of the top ten at 3B. Add in the veteran presence at the second pitcher spot and what figures to be the excellent fit of new SS Everton Butters, and there should not be a repeat of last year's crushing disappointment.

The rest of the New England Championship was able to celebrate St. Johns' downfall last season, but they would be best served to understand that those celebrations may only last for one year.