

The decade of the 1920s is regarded by many as the Golden Age of Sports in America, and baseball enjoyed a heyday as the most popular professional game in the land. The ball was livelier now, and Babe Ruth led the sport into an exciting era of home run sluggers and high-scoring games. The day of tight pitchers' duels—contests which featured hit-and-run, stolen bases, and bunting to play for one run—faded rapidly under a barrage of home runs as batters swung from the heels. Fans responded eagerly to a more electric style of baseball that proved perfectly suited to the accelerated pulse rate of the Roaring Twenties.

Babe Ruth was a sensation in 1920 when he walloped an astounding 54 roundtrippers (he duplicated this total in 1928, but in 1921 he hit 59, and in 1927 he slugged 60 homers). Prior to the 1920s, the Texas League home run record was 22, set by San Antonio first baseman Frank Metz in 1911. The next season Metz hit 21 homers, but until the 1920s no other Texas Leaguer had ever hit more than 18 home runs.

The Texas League wasted little time in joining the power parade. Scores went up dramatically, as did batting averages and, of course, ERAs. The leading team batting averages during the previous decade had ranged from .240 to .270, but in seven of the ten seasons of the 1920s the team batting average leaders hit over .300, and in 1927 the Waco Navigators established a league record .316 team mark. A record 3,778 extra base hits were pounded out around the league in 1925, and 7,044 runs were scored that year. In 1926, 1,024 home runs were hit, and in 1929 Texas League batters rapped out a record 12,711 base hits. In 1921 “Hack” Eibel, a strong Shreveport first baseman who, like Babe Ruth, also was a lefthanded pitcher, blasted 35 home runs (and led the circuit in triples) to set a new Texas League record. But the mark did not last for long.

During the next three seasons, the home run leader was Fort Worth first sacker Clarence Otto “Big Boy” Kraft. The veteran slugger hit 32 homers in 1922 and 1923, then poled 55 in 1924—the highest total in organized baseball that season and a record which would stand for 32 years in the Texas League. Kraft retired after the 1924 season, but his place on the Fort Worth roster was capably filled by longtime major leaguer “Big Ed” Konetchy, who led the Texas League in 1925 with 41 roundtrippers and 166 RBIs. By this time every team in the circuit was on the prowl for sluggers, and hitting exploits continued through the decade. Indeed, in 1929 an all-time total of 17 players scored 100 or more runs during the season.

For the first six years of the 1920s, the Fort Worth Panthers dominated the Texas League with an awesome combination of power hitting and overwhelming pitching. The architects of the most sustained team success in league history was a management trio: two men who became part owners in 1916, W. K. Stripling (team president, 1917–1929) and Paul LaGrave (team secretary and business manager—equivalent to a modern general manager—in 1916–1929), and Jake Atz (field manager, 1914–1929). Stripling and LaGrave collected fine players and paid them so well that they stayed in Fort Worth, even after stellar performances brought offers to play in higher classifications. Of course, independent minor league owners were under no obligation to sell outstanding players, which is a major explanation for the Texas League dynasties of the period.

An infielder by trade, Jake Atz found himself in Fort Worth in 1914 as a 35-year-old player-manager. He did not manage a complete season until 1917, when he won 91 games for a second-place finish. He brought the Panthers (soon they were being called “Jake Atz’s Cats”)

in second again in 1918, and the next season won the most games — 94 — but lost in the playoffs to Shreveport. Then Atz's Cats hit their stride, winning six consecutive Texas League pennants. Atz's victory totals during his string of championships were: 1920 — 108; 1921 — 107; 1922 — 109; 1923 — 96; 1924 — 109; 1925 — 103. The 109 wins in 1922 and 1924 set an all-time Texas League record.

In each of the six years, Fort Worth far outdistanced the closest challengers. Although each season except 1923 was split (a ploy to create playoff competition), Fort Worth won both halves every year. The only playoff the Panthers had to face occurred in the second half of 1925, when Fort Worth tied with archrival Dallas. But Atz's Cats triumphed over Snipe Conley's Steers in three straight, and Fort Worth had won the second half as well as the first half, thus guaranteeing their sixth straight flag without a playoff series. In 1923, with no split season, Fort Worth finished thirteen and a half games ahead of second-place San Antonio.

Five players were on the Panther roster during all six championship seasons. Leftlander Joe Pate was a 20-game winner in each of the six flag years, and in 1921 and 1924 he won 30. Paul Wachtel, the righthanded spitballer, also was a six-time 20-game winner for the Panthers (he won 21 in 1919 and 19 in 1923). Pate and Wachtel won 26 apiece in 1920 to start the pennant run, and over the six years they made a combined contribution of 292-121 Ponderous Possum Moore caught for Fort Worth from 1919 through 1926; his best seasons were 1921 (.298) and 1924 (.311). Ziggy Sears, who spent 11 seasons in Texas League outfielders, hit .304 in 1922, .323 in 1924, and .321 in 1925. Dugan Phelan, a five-year National League veteran, played 13 seasons in the Texas League; with Fort Worth he was a third baseman and pinch hitter who batted .300 in 1922.

Pate and Wachtel had impressive pitching support throughout the string. In 1920 and 1921 there were four 20-game winners on the staff: Pate and Wachtel won 26 each in 1920, while curveballing Buzzer Bill Whitaker was 24-6 and control artist Dick Robertson was 20-7; in 1921 Pate won 30, Wachtel 23, Whitaker 23, and southpaw Gus Johns won 20. There were three 20-game winners—Pate, Wachtel and Johns—in 1922, and in 1923, when Wachtel “slumped” to 19 victories and Pate won 23, Ulysses Simpson Grant “Lil” Stoner took up the slack with a 27-11 season (then he went directly to the major leagues). In 1925 Pate, Wachtel, and Johns won 20 or more, and southpaw Jim Walkup was 19-7. It was the greatest pitching staff in Texas League history.

The Panthers' leading slugger was Big Boy Kraft. He played seven seasons in Fort Worth (1918–1924), and in 980 Texas League games his batting average was .317. In 1921 he won the batting title with a .352 percentage, and he also led the league in at bats, runs, and hits. Kraft established the Texas League lifetime records for the most consecutive years scoring 100 or more runs, most years scoring 100 or more runs, making 200 or more base hits, making over 100 RBIs, leading in extra base hits and home runs. His finest season was 1924, when he hit .349 and belted 55 homers and an all-time record 196 RBIs.

The dominance of Fort Worth for the first six years of the decade overshadowed various heroics by players on other teams. Twenty-six-year-old Ike Boone, a six-foot, 200-pounder with three years' experience as a minor leaguer, signed on with San Antonio for 1923. It was to be his only year in the Texas League, but Boone had an unforgettable season, leading the league

in batting average (.402), runs (134), hits (241), doubles (53), triples (26), RBIs (135) and total bases (391—the next year Big Boy Kraft established an all-time record 414 total bases). Boone also pounded 15 home runs and hit safely in 37 consecutive games—still the longest hitting streak in Texas League history. Boone finished the season with the Boston Braves, but he had enjoyed the most productive offensive year in modern Texas League play. Two seasons later San Antonio fans watched infielder Dan Clark flirt with .400 before finishing at .399. Wichita Falls Spudder fans cheered four batting champs during the decade: Red Josefson (.345 in 1920), Homer Summa (.362 in 1922), Arthur Weiss (.377 in 1924), and Tom Jenkins (.374 in 1926). Waco produced back-to-back batting champs: former major leaguer Del Pratt (.386 in 1927, plus a league-leading 32 home runs) and outfielder George Blackerby (.368 in 1928, plus a home run championship the next year).

A notable team exploit of the 1920s was Wichita Falls' impressive 1922 winning streak. On July 21 Victor Keen outdueled Snipe Conley and the Dallas Steers, 2-1 in 17 innings. Then the Spudders returned to Wichita Falls for a four-week home stand. During the streak Keen won seven games (he went 13–4, then finished the season with the Cubs), while Floyd “Rip” Wheeler also won seven (he was a 22-game winner in 1922 and again in 1923), including complete game victories in both halves of a doubleheader against San Antonio on August 3. On August 12 Keen squared off against Snipe Conley again. By the middle of the game spitballer Conley was complaining of burning lips, and soon his lips and tongue were so swollen that he could not talk. One of the Spudders—an aggregation notorious for their addiction to practical jokes—had applied colorless creosote to the game balls, and as Conley wet his fingers throughout the contest he severely burned his mouth. The Spudders won the game, 4-3, for their twenty-fifth consecutive victory. Spudder hopes of surpassing Corsicana's 27 straight in 1902 were thwarted the next day, when Roy Mitchell (who had beaten Wichita Falls the day before the streak started) pitched the Steers to a win. Dallas protested the Conley loss, however, and when the league upheld complaints over the “Creosote Incident,” the official total stood at 24 consecutive victories—the second longest skein in Texas League history. But even after winning 24 in a row, the Spudders still trailed mighty Fort Worth by half a game. At season's end the Spudders were 94-61—good for second place to Fort Worth's 109-46 record.

A significant innovation of the 1920s was the Dixie Series, which became the most popular baseball event in the South for nearly four decades. As far back as the 1890s, Texas sportswriters had urged a post-season playoff series between the champions of the Texas League and the Southern League, forerunner of the twentieth-century Southern Association. But the Southern Association was more advanced in classification than the Texas League and had nothing to gain and a great deal of prestige to lose by such a series. In 1920, however, when Fort Worth and Little Rock clearly dominated their respective leagues, Paul LaGrave contacted R. G. Allen, president of the Little Rock club, and reached an agreement for a seven-game series after each team wrapped up its regular schedule. Little Rock, managed by Kid Elberfeld (who had played the 1896 season for Dallas en route to the major leagues), did not officially represent the Southern Association—which proved convenient for the association, since the powerful Panthers won the series. But the seven games had attracted 36,836 ticket-buyers and nearly \$50,000 in gross receipts, and the opportunity for future profit was obvious.

In 1921 the Texas League was elevated to Class A status, and the two now-equal circuits made formal arrangements for the Dixie Series. Fort Worth prevailed again, this time over Southern Association winner Memphis, and the next year Panther fans chartered a “Dixie Special” and brought along a Dixieland band, cowbells, and raucous enthusiasm. Fort Worth lost to Mobile in 1922, but during the next three years Jake Atz’s Cats beat New Orleans, Memphis, and Atlanta in succession. By this time the Dixie Series had attained the status of a “little World Series,” and was avidly followed across the South and Texas.

In 1926 Fort Worth’s long monopoly over the Texas League championship finally was ended by archrival Dallas. Panther ace Joe Pate at last went up to the major leagues, while Paul Wachtel, now 38, slipped to 16-19 (Wachtel could not advance to the majors during the 1920s because the spitball, his most effective pitch, had been outlawed). The league did not declare a split season, and the resulting 156-game pennant race proved to be the closest since before World War I. Galveston had dropped out of the Texas League in 1924, replaced by Waco, and the eight member cities in 1926 drew 1,159,906 paid admissions—an attendance record that stood for two decades.

Dallas attracted 286,806 of those fans. Snipe Conley had become a playing manager during the 1925 season, and in 1926 he pushed his team relentlessly toward a pennant. Snipe no longer pitched regularly, but 6’6” Slim Love (21-10) and southpaw Dick Schuman (17-5) led a solid mound corps, while R. L. Williams (.369), E. J. Woeber (.330 and 25 home runs), J. N. Riley (.329), and Charles Miller (.321, 30 homers and 118 RBIs) added lethal bats. Dallas battled for the lead throughout the year, but when Fort Worth dropped a late-season doubleheader, Conley’s Steers took a stranglehold on first place. Then the Steers went on to beat New Orleans in six games for a Dixie Series triumph.

During league meetings preceding the 1923 season, circuit executives determined to follow the example of the rest of organized baseball and eliminate spitball pitching. Like the majors and other minor loops, the Texas League permitted current spitball practitioners to continue business as usual. Nine spitballers were sanctioned by the Texas League: Snipe Conley, Paul Wachtel, Slim Love, Ed Hovlik, Dana Fillingim, Hal Deviney, Larry Jacobus, Tom Estell, and Oscar Tuero. Most of these men were veterans nearing the end of the line; Estell and Tuero pitched until 1932, the last pitchers to *legally* throw a loaded baseball in the Texas League.

Edward Hock, who spent nine years in the Texas League, usually as a third baseman, was at shortstop for Houston when the Buffs lined up against Dallas on May 5, 1927. In the bottom of the third Dallas outfielder Rhino Williams walked. Fred Brainard dropped a sacrifice bunt, but both runners were safe when the ball was bobbled. Then Jodie Tate lashed a line drive up the middle. Moving to his left, Hock speared the ball, stepped on second for out number two, then chased down Brainard as he tried to scramble back toward third. It was the second unassisted triple play in Texas League history, following Roy Akin’s unique effort from third base in 1912. Overall, there were six triple plays during the 1927 Texas League season.

Another remarkable fielding performance of the 1920s was turned in by Frankie Fuller, who played second base for San Antonio from 1920 through 1924 and for Houston in 1925. In each of the six seasons he led all pivot men in double plays, participating in a total of 531 double

plays during the six years. Twice, Fuller took part in more than 100 double plays per season, and in 1922 he led the league in starting double plays—the only time a second baseman has surpassed all shortstops in that category.

The Wichita Falls Spudders proved to be the class of the league in 1927. The Spudders won their opener, and never relinquished the lead during the season. Third baseman Walter Swenson hit .300; second sacker Pete Turgeon, the Spudder leadoff man, hit .305, scored 115 runs, hit 31 doubles, 11 triples, 18 homers with 94 RBIs; center fielder Howard Chamney, an ex-University of Texas great who averaged .308 in 1,129 Texas League games from 1924 to 1932, hit .306; right fielder Lyman Lamb hit .314; even the utility man, Stanley “Rabbit” Benton, hit .322. But the offensive star of the team was left fielder “Tut” Jenkins, the defending champ (.374 in 1926) who hit .363 with 25 homers, 147 runs scored, and 129 RBIs.

Spudder pitching matched the explosive attack. At 23-9, old pro George Washington Payne led the league in victories; Frederick Fussell led the league in winning percentage (.724) at 21-8; Joe Kiefer was 20-9; spitballer Tom Estell was 16-7; and Milton Steengrafe was 15-6.

This powerful club overwhelmed the Texas League, finishing 102-54 (second-place Waco was 88-68), then swept New Orleans in four straight in the Dixie Series to complete a splendid season. It was the only time during the first 16 years of the classic that a team from either league took the Dixie Series in four games.

During the Texas League meeting in February 1928, it was decided to divide the season at mid-summer; 1928 would be the first time the league had ever determined beforehand to have a split season. Houston ran away with the first half, opening a lead of seven and a half games by June 29. Right fielder Red Worthington (.353 on the season) and catcher-manager Frank Snyder (.329) led the attack. “Pancho” Snyder had just finished a 16-year major league career, and he expertly handled a superb pitching staff that boasted no fewer than four 20-game winners: James Lindsey (25-10), Wild Bill Hallahan (23-12, with a league-leading 244 strikeouts and 2.25 ERA), Ken Penner (20-8), and Frank Barnes (20-9).

In the second half Wichita Falls aggressively defended their title. Although some of the big guns of 1927 had moved up, Tut Jenkins (.348 with a league-leading 27 homers, 121 runs scored, and 122 RBIs), Rabbit Benton (.324) and catcher Pete Lapan (.324) generated considerable offense, while Milt Steengrafe (22-8) and big league veteran Mike Cvengros (21-8) headed a pitching staff that was not up to the previous year’s overall quality. But the Spudders dominated the second half, finishing with a margin of seven and a half games over second-place Houston. It seemed as though Wichita Falls would provide yet another dynasty for the 1920s.

In the best-of-five playoffs the Buffaloes won the first game in Wichita Falls, then dropped a decision to the Spudders. In the opening contest at Houston, Hallahan beat Cvengros, 1-0, on a two-hitter, and the Buffaloes wrapped up the series the next day. Having regained early-season form with their first flag since 1914, Houston downed Birmingham in the Dixie Series.

Competition was fierce throughout the Texas League in 1929. Fort Worth led in team batting (.303), but finished fourth; Waco led in home runs (188), but ended up fifth. During the year, Paul LaGrave died, and longtime Fort Worth president W. C. Stripling and the LaGrave estate

sold their interests in the Panthers. Jake Atz, the brilliant field general who had served since 1914, including the past 13 consecutive years, left the team. The splendid management combination that had fashioned the Panther dynasty was dissolved before season's end.

Dallas, sparked by the explosive bats of outfielder Randy Moore (.369) and Simon Rosenthal (.339), took the first-half championship by merely a half game over Shreveport. Bridesmaid Shreveport finished second again in the last half, this time to Wichita Falls. The Spudders were led by George Washington Payne, who pitched in 55 games and finished at 28-12. As usual, Wichita Falls fans enjoyed a number of fine hitters: left fielder Fred Bennett (.368 and 145 RBIs); catcher Pete Lapan (.367); infielder Rabbit Benton (.327); and almost everybody else in the lineup.

The race for the batting title went down to the last day of the season. Randy Moore won by a single percentage point and established an all-time league record for base hits (245). Fort Worth center fielder Eddie Moore, a speedy ball hawk and baserunner, set the all-time mark for triples (30). Texas League fans enjoyed the aggressive baserunning of Houston outfielder Pepper Martin, who led the league in stolen bases both years (1927 and 1929) he played for the Buffs.

Wichita Falls ended 1929 with the best record in the league, but the Spudders lost out to Dallas in the playoffs. Although Payne pitched in three of the four games, the Spudder ace ironically could not gain a playoff win. The Dallas Steers, with their second title in four seasons, were defeated in the Dixie Series by Birmingham—snapping a six-year losing streak inflicted by the Texas League on their Southern Association opponents.

By the time the season closed, the New York stock market had begun to wobble toward its disastrous collapse. The 1920s had been a period of unparalleled fan interest and attendance. The decade had exhibited great teams, a number of admirable pitching performances, and, above all, unprecedented hitting. It was the most exciting, explosive baseball that had yet been played in the circuit. But the 1930s would bring the Great Depression to the cities and ball parks and club offices of the Texas League.