

The Real Pirates of the Caribbean

By Jim Flanagan, Editor, www.fastpitchwest.com,
photos by Maddy Flanagan

It is hard to imagine a more idyllic setting for a fastpitch tournament than the small Bahamian Island of Man-O-War, with the field just steps from a white sand beach and turquoise ocean. The island is home to the Real Pirates of the Caribbean, Haziel McDonald's Texaco Pirates men's team, which hosted the first ever Bahamian Invitational Men's Fastpitch tournament on the island in May 2007. As can be seen from the photos on these pages, Man-O-War is an island of spectacular beauty, charm and

star Derek Mayson to play with the Pirates at the AAU tournament. Rather than just having him meet the team in Orlando, the team invited him to come to Man-O-War to train with and get to know the team. An experience of a lifetime for a young player, I thought, when I heard the story.

In 2006, the Pirates stepped up to play against the best teams in the world, traveling to Kitchener, Ontario Canada, to compete in the ISC World Tournament, which served as inspiration for the first ever Bahamian Invitational tournament hosted on their home island, Man-O-War Cay, held May 24-26, 2007.

While at that 2006 ISC World tournament in Canada, Haziel



Backdrop: Man-O-War Cay, Bahamas: to left - preferred mode of transportation; below- The Future Texaco Pirates - the island youth team; Rob Fawcett, Doug Sleep, and Rob Schweyer tasting some island coconut before game

Left: Visiting player enjoying the tournament; right top - Resident Pirate William Weatherford fishing for lunch; right bottom - Pitcher Rob Schweyer shows off a conch shell he dove for

gracious hospitality. We were pleased to be there and bring you this first hand report.

Fastpitch in the Bahamas is not entirely new. Decades ago, neighboring island teams competed in a local Bahamian league. But the fields had gone quiet over the years, with just the local children playing there. Faded news clippings from the 1960s were the only remnants of the games played. The field at Man-O-War Cay in the Bahamas, paid a price for its location at the edge of paradise, and had been largely washed away by hurricanes.

In recent years, fastpitch has been re-born in the Bahamas, largely due to the dedication of Man-O-War resident Haziel McDonald and the players on his Texaco Pirates team, who rebuilt the weather ravaged field, bringing in heavy equipment on a barge to do so. With a collection of talented players on the island, the game returned to Man-O-War.

In 2004, McDonald took the Texaco Pirates to the Disney complex in Orlando, Florida, for the AAU International Tournament, where they won the consolation championship. The team included pitcher Edney "The Heat" Bethel, borrowed from a neighboring island in the Bahamas. Bethel started out as a catcher for the Bahamas' Pan-Am games team before learning to pitch from International Softball Federation Hall of Famer, "Dougie" Smith of the Bahamas. The team has returned to the AAU tournament every year since, improving its performance each time.

In 2005, the Pirates invited young 21-year-old Canadian super-

McDonald shared some aerial photos of the Pirates home field on Man-O-War with me, one of which is included here in Softball Magazine. He graciously extended an invitation to Maddy and I to visit Man-O-War, and to cover and broadcast the tournament. Needless to say, it didn't take us long to accept.

The story of the tournament, and a bit more about Man-O-War follows below.

Man-O-War Cay

Former residents of England who made their way to the island instead of America, settled Man-O-War Cay (pronounced "key" in the late 1700's. Some of the players on the Texaco Pirates can trace their roots all the way back to those original settlers. The island developed a reputation for world class ship building and hard working, resilient residents, traditions that are carried on to this day.

Man-O-War Cay is located in the Abacos Islands, about an hour plane ride from Florida airports. The international airport in the area is at Marsh Harbor (MHH), about a half-hour boat ride from Man-O-War. Man-O-War has a population numbering in the hundreds.

Tip-to-tip, the island is about 2.5 miles (4km) long. At its widest point, it is about a half mile wide, at its narrowest point, about two golf carts wide. That narrow isthmus is one of the most beautiful spots, where a narrow roadway separates the windward side of the island with waves crashing and a small white sand inlet beach. With the exception of a few maintenance vehicles, all travel on the island is by golf-carts, which adds to the charm of the island.

Man-O-War is a close-knit community. Two of the more popular



Texaco Pirates, Man-O-War, Bahamas: Back row, left to right: Rob Scheller, Andrew Albury, Lyle Sawyer, Doug Sleep, Tim Albury, Grant Albury, and Barry Kahler; Front row, left to right: William Weatherford, Rhys Casley, Edward "Cheno" Lamb, Haziel McDonald (Mgr), Fred Sweeting, and Nathaniel Malone. (Not shown: Lee Roberts)

spots are the island grocery store, managed by Pirates skipper Haziel McDonald and his wife, and the Hibiscus restaurant, near the marina, which welcomed and hosted arriving fastpitch players to the 2007 tournament. At the store, a number of photos and trophies are proudly on display, including the 2004 AAU Consolation award. Another gem we spot in the store is a vintage postcard – which is a photo of current Pirate player and Man-O-War resident Fred Sweeting – at age nine or so – and a dead ringer for Opie on the Andy Griffith show. Fred now coaches the youth team on Man-O-War.

The island also has a couple of marinas, some gift shops, a hardware shop, boat rentals, dive shops and a number of churches. Freshly painted white-picket fences intertwined with bougainvillea set off the pastel clapboard houses, built by ships' carpenters and trimmed in gingerbread. Unbelievably beautiful white sand beaches are within minutes by golf cart, with snorkeling and swimming areas as far as the eye can see. Visiting Man-O-War Cay is like going back in time, to a quieter, more peaceful time.

The 2007 Bahamian Invitational Tournament

In planning for the first ever Bahamian Invitational Tournament, the host Pirates went all out. They invited a number of world class men's fastpitch players to Man-O-War, picking up a couple of them to play for the Texaco Pirates, and seeding some of the local island teams with others, which served to expose the fans at the tournament to high caliber, but also competitive play. The imported players were some that the Pirates had met at the AAU International and ISC World

Tournament: New Zealand's Rhys Casley, USA's Barry Kahler and pitcher Doug Sleep, and a trio of talented pitchers from Canada, all named "Rob": Rob Scheller, Rob Schweyer, and Rob Fawcett. Casley, Kahler, Sleep and Scheller suited up with the Pirates, while Schweyer and Fawcett joined the eventual runner-up team, visiting Miami, Florida Presidente. Many of the visiting players arrived early, or stayed over, to enjoy the island's beauty and hospitality.

Somehow, amidst all of the other tournament preparations, Haziel McDonald found time to shuttle players and visitors on his boat (from the Marsh Harbor Airport to Man-O-War Cay), meeting and greeting them dockside, with assists from a number of his Texaco Pirates team, Grant Albury and William Weatherford, and hosting a dinner for a number of his guests. A day later, he was up in a cherry picker putting new light bulbs in at the field and making the



Haziel McDonald, manager of the Pirates welcoming fans and players on opening night

final preparations. By 8pm Friday night, he was in uniform, making out the lineup for his beloved Pirates in the tournament opener.

Those arriving at the field on opening night of the tournament saw rows of golf carts lining either side of the street leading into the ballpark, a scene that might have one thinking they were at a PGA event, with a shotgun start. The Pirate wives and other locals set up concession tents behind home plate, next to a sea wall, from which you can hear the waves breaking. In the daylight hours leading up to game time, a sparking turquoise ocean provided a picture postcard backdrop to the field.

Before the first pitch, Pirates manager Haziel McDonald was the man-of-the-hour-on-Man-O-War, serving as the master-of-ceremonies, welcoming players and fans alike, and introducing a group of local school children on hand to sing the Bahamian National anthem before the first pitch. On hand to umpire were ISC umpires, Mssrs Gretz and Scott, who arrived at the game by walking out the door of the guesthouse they are staying in, behind first base. Following pre-game festivities, Miami won the coin toss, and took the field.

Three batters into the game, Rhys Casley of the Pirates brought the crowd to its feet with a towering home run over the right field fence, and the first ever Bahamas Invitational saw its first run scored. It would prove to be the first of six home runs on the weekend for Casley, who became as popular with local fans as Babe Ruth was in his barnstorming days. Local kids raced their bicycles to the home beyond the right field fence, to see where the balls landed.

Game 1: Home Runs by Casley, Kahler and Albury Power Bahamas Offense: Texaco Pirates 4, Miami Presidente/Florida USA, 3

Game one was a night of dominant pitching with Rob Scheller and Doug Sleep combining for eighteen strikeouts for the host Texaco Pirates, while their counterpart, Rob Schweyer struck out fifteen for visiting Presidente team of Miami, Florida. But, in spite of the sometimes overpowering pitching, it will likely be the home run slugging that Bahamian fans will remember from this opening act, which saw the host Texaco Pirates rally from down 3-1 in the sixth, to win 4-3, scoring two in the sixth and one in the seventh. Six of the seven runs scored in the game came across the plate on home runs.

Rhys Casley, Barry Kahler and Grant Albury had big nights for the host Texaco Pirates. Casley had a towering home run and a double, scoring two and driving in one, Kahler a game-tying 2-run homer in the sixth, while local Man-O-War Pirate Grant Albury provided two hits, including the biggest one of them all, a tie-breaking

The Real Pirates of the Caribbean

seventh inning home run that provided the margin of victory.

Miami, for their part, made the most of just two hits, scoring three runs in the first two innings. After Casley put the Pirates on top 1-0 in the top of the first with his home run, Michael Baillou, Jr. coaxed a leadoff walk to start the bottom of the first, and came home to score on a Carlton-Fisk-esque home run, which had fans craning their necks to see where it would land. It stayed fair, and gave Miami a 2-1 lead. The visitors extended their lead to 3-1, when designated hitter Frank Gonzalez walked to lead off the second inning, was sacrificed over to second by Serrano Baillou, and scored on a flair single down the right field line by Miami's Tony Currey, a ball which fell just beyond the reach of the Pirates right fielder and second baseman.

It was the last base runner that Miami would have on the night however, as Rob Scheller settled in, to retire the next seven in a row, six on strikeouts, giving way to Doug Sleep, who retired all nine batters that he faced, eight of them on strikeouts. But in spite of that fact, Miami clung to the 3-1 lead into the sixth inning, riding the right arm of Rob Schweyer who had all of his pitches working, most notably the big rise ball that no one seemed to be able to catch up with. But in the sixth it was Casley again that provided the spark for the host Pirates, lining a vicious double down the left field line, followed by a game-tying-two-run-homer by Barry Kahler to straightaway center field.

In the top of the seventh, it was local son, Grant Albury, hitting in the designated hitter's spot, who provided the margin of victory, battling past a two-strike count, for the game winning home run to straight away centerfield. The pitch he hit was a good inside rise that Albury appeared to just muscle out of the park. Three "Sleepy" strikeouts later, and the game belonged to the host Pirates.

WP-Doug Sleep; LP-Rob Schweyer; HR-Rhys Casley (TP), Alexis Hernandez (MP) Barry Kahler (TP), Grant Albury (TP), 2B-Rhys Casley (TP), E-Miami (2), K's: Rob Scheller (TP) 10 in 4 inn; Doug Sleep (TP), 8 in 3 inn; Rob Schweyer (MP) 15 in 7 inn.

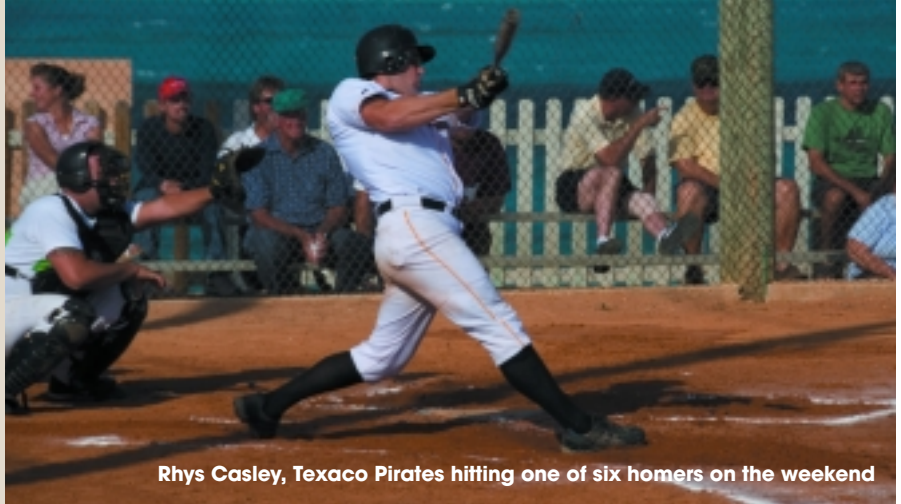
Players and fans got a scare in the fourth inning when home plate umpire John Gretz took a hard drop directly on his knee, which knocked him down and nearly out of the game. Gretz recovered and managed to finish the game, but was icing down when last seen after the game. One does not surrender work in the Bahamas easily.

Game 2: Rhys Casley Homers Twice for Host Pirates, Third in Two Days: Miami Presidente 4, Abaco Sluggers, Abaco Island 3

The Presidente team from Miami, Florida scored one run in the first and three in the second, making it stand up for a 4-2 victory over the Abaco Sluggers, a neighboring island team in the Bahamas. Miami's Alexis Fernandez, who homered in last night's game, scored two of the four runs, reaching on a single in the first and scoring on a sacrifice fly by Grant Albury, aboard on a walk in the second inning, and coming around to score on an error, wild pitch, and passed ball. The other two Miami runs came in the third, when centerfielder Roy Mueller reached on an error, and lefffielder Lazzaro Fernandez reached on an infield hit, and came home to score. The Abaco Sluggers plated their two runs in the third inning, on an error, a walk, and RBI single by Fred Sweeting. Once again, the pitching on both sides was dominant, with Abaco's Rob Fawcett racked up seventeen strikeouts in seven innings, while Miami's Rob Schweyer and Edney Bethel combined for eighteen of their own.

Game 3: Three More Homers for Rhys Casley, Six on the Tournament to Lead the Way for the Pirates; Texaco Pirates 6, Abaco Sluggers, Abaco Island 0

WP-Doug Sleep; save Rob Scheller (5), LP- Rob Fawcett, HR-Rhys Casley (2) (TP); Barry Kahler (TP); Tim Albury (TP), K's: Doug Sleep (TP) (8) in 4 inn; Rob Scheller (TP) (8) in 3 inn; Rob



Rhys Casley, Texaco Pirates hitting one of six homers on the weekend

Fawcett (Abaco) (13) in 7 Innings

Texaco Pirates Claim Title in Best of Three Championship Series: The host Texaco Pirates from Man-O-War Cay in the Bahamas claimed the first ever Bahamas Invitational Tournament title, with 10-1 and 5-2 wins over the Presidente team from Miami, Florida. For the third day in a row, Rhys Casley came up big, hitting three more homers on the day, to give him six on the tournament. For the second day in a row, teammate Barry Kahler went back-to-back with Casley, turning a 1-1 tie in the sixth into a four run outburst, and cruised to a 5-2 win. Doug Sleep was the winning pitcher, going the distance for the win, surrendering only a pair of solo home runs, one in the second and one in the 7th with two outs.

In the first game of the best of three championship series on Saturday, Texaco ran away with things, behind the stellar pitching of Rob Scheller and hitting of Rhys Casley. Casley entered the day with three home runs in the first two days, and has become the player that all of the local fans want to see hit. He did not disappoint them, with two home runs in the first game, running his total to five on the tournament. (Casley added one more on the day, in the second championship, for six in the tournament.)

First Championship Game: Texaco Pirates - 10; Miami Presidente - 1; WP- Rob Scheller; LP - Edney Bethel; HR - Rhys Casley (2) (TP); Alexis Hernandez (MP); **Second Championship Game:** Texaco Pirates - 5; Miami Presidente - 2; WP - Doug Sleep, LP - Rob Schweyer; HR- Rhys Casley (TP); Barry Kahler (TP), Serrano Baillou (MP), Michael Baillou, Jr.

The final day's games were broadcast on ballparkradio.com, with nine year old Aaron Albury helping out in the booth. Aaron plays on the island's youth team, and also served as our official island tour guide for the week.

Photos taken by Maddy Flanagan at the tournament are displayed at www.fastpitchwest.com and www.maddysphotos.com.

Next Year's Tournament: Plans are already underway for next year's tournament, to be held around Memorial weekend in May 2008. Interested teams can contact Haziell McDonald by email at mcdonaldhaziell@yahoo.com or contact Fastpitchwest at info@fastpitchwest.com

Postscript: Following the conclusion of the 2007 Bahamian Invitational tournament, along with some of the visiting players, we were treated to yet more Bahamian hospitality, taking a couple of day-boat trips with Pirate skipper Haziell McDonald, and players William Weatherford, and Grant Albury, their families and some visiting players. One was a trip to a neighboring island, while the latter, a deep sea snorkeling trip, in which we were able to dive for conch, while the Pirates spear fished and cooked up lunch. On the fastpitch field, or on the open sea, these fellows are the Real Pirates of the Caribbean.