

16th Annual Rickwood Classic

The Birmingham Barons 2011 home schedule includes the 16th annual Rickwood Classic, a regular-season game played at legendary Rickwood Field. The event bridges Birmingham's rich baseball history with the current culture of the Southern League, and both teams involved will again be outfitted with vintage uniforms in tribute to a specific time or era.

This year, the Rickwood Classic is scheduled for Wednesday, June 1 at 12:30 p.m. The Barons will host the Chattanooga Lookouts, and State Farm will sponsor the event for the 8th consecutive year. 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the last year of the old Southern Association that suspended operations at the close of the 1961 season, after 61 seasons of play. At the time, fan interest was at an all-time low and teams were losing money. Overall attendance in the league that year was only 647,831 – what a contrast to our average attendance of over 2 million fans per year now!

An interesting sidebar is that in 1961, no post-season play was scheduled because the previous year had barely garnered 20,000 fans. Therefore, at the end of the regular season, the race for the pennant ended up being between Birmingham and Chattanooga. The leading players for Chattanooga were third baseman Wayne Graham (.331, with a league-leading 199 hits and 51 doubles) and righthander John Boozer (19-9). Birmingham's star players included RBI champ Stan Palys (.333, 13 HR, 114 RBI), run and walk leader Legrant Scott (.314, 129 R, 123 W), and outstanding lefthander Howard Koplitz (23-2, 2.11 ERA, and the league's final 9-inning no hitter on June 30). Under Manager Frank Lucchesi, the Lookouts edged out the Barons by a one-game margin and were declared the final Champions of the Southern Association.

The Lookouts will make their third appearance in this classic. The Barons defeated Chattanooga in the two previous contests, 12-6 in 1997 and 14-4 in 2002. In a bit of a twist, the Barons will sport the road gray uniforms from the 1961 season while the Lookouts will wear home white uniforms from the early 1960s.

The guest of honor at this year's Rickwood Classic will be Gaylord Perry who was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1991. During his 22-year major league career, Perry was a two-time Cy Young Award winner (1972 and 1978) and a five-time all-star. Infamous for his spitball, Perry won 314 games in his career with eight teams (Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Kansas City Royals, New York Yankees, San Diego Padres, San Francisco Giants, Seattle Mariners and Texas Rangers). He ranks eighth in strikeouts with 3,534, sixth in innings pitched with 5,350, and was a five-time 20-game winner. Mr. Perry will be signing autographs for fans and will throw out the first pitch at this year's classic.

Rickwood Field was home to the Barons through the 1987 season. Modeled after Philadelphia's Shibe Park and Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, Rickwood Field was constructed in 1910 shortly after A.H. "Rick" Woodward purchase the Barons from J. William McQueen. With the distinction of currently being the oldest ballpark in America, the Rickwood was the minor leagues' first concrete and steel ballpark. When the Barons christened Hoover Metropolitan Stadium in 1988 (now Regions Park), Rickwood Field went unused by the Southern League until 1996 when the first Rickwood Classic was played. In 2010, the Rickwood Classic was named the Minor League Baseball Promotion of the Year. Again this year, this event promises to showcase our future stars as well as honoring the rich tradition of our past.