

Baseball



A National Tradition

by Phyllis McIntosh



“As American as baseball and apple pie” is a phrase Americans use to describe any ultimate symbol of life and culture in the United States. Baseball, long dubbed the national pastime, is such a symbol. It is first and foremost a beloved game played at some level in virtually every American town, on dusty sandlots and in gleaming billion-dollar stadiums. But it is also a cultural phenomenon that has provided a host of colorful characters and cherished traditions. Most Americans can sing at least a few lines of the song “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” Generations of children have collected baseball cards with players’ pictures and statistics, the most valuable of which are now worth several million dollars.

More than any other sport, baseball has reflected the best and worst of American society. Today, it also mirrors the nation’s increasing diversity, as countries that have embraced America’s favorite sport now send some of their best players to compete in the “big leagues” in the United States.



Baseball is played on a diamond-shaped field, a configuration set by the rules for the game that were established in 1845.

Baseball's Origins: Truth and Tall Tale

In the early days of baseball, it seemed fitting that the national pastime had originated on home soil. So it was that generations of Americans learned that one Abner Doubleday, later to become a Civil War hero, had invented the game in 1839 in the quaint town of Cooperstown, New York. It's a great story—but completely untrue. There is no evidence that Doubleday had any connection with baseball and may never even have seen a game. The Doubleday myth was based on the supposed childhood memories of one old man and popularized by a patriotic baseball promoter eager to prove that the game was American through and through.

In fact, bat and ball games had been played for thousands of years, as evidenced by wall paintings in ancient Egyptian tombs. By the 1700s, the British were playing games, sometimes called rounders, in which players ran around several bases

after hitting a ball with a stick. Imported to the New World, these games evolved into American baseball.

Just a few years ago, a researcher discovered what is believed to be the first written reference to the game in the United States—a 1791 ordinance in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, banning the playing of “baseball” and other ball games within 80 yards of the Town Meeting House in order to protect the building’s windows. Loosely organized and unruly games, often called “town ball,” no doubt threatened an increasing number of windows throughout the early 1800s.

Modern baseball was born in 1845 when Alexander Cartwright of the New York Knickerbockers Base Ball Club devised rules that spelled out, among other things, the number of players on a team, the diamond shape of the playing field, and distances between bases. The regulations also banned such questionable practices as hitting a base runner with the ball to put him “out.” The following sea-

son, the Knickerbockers played the first officially recorded game under the new rules, losing to the New York Base Ball Club by a whopping 23–1.

The game quickly grew in popularity. In 1859, Amherst and Williams colleges in Massachusetts competed in the first intercollegiate baseball contest. Seven years later, Vassar College fielded the first women's team. During the American Civil War of the 1860s, soldiers on both sides enjoyed an occasional game of baseball, even in prisoner of war camps and on the battlefield within the sound of enemy fire.



The pitcher throws the ball from a mound in the center of the infield.



Baseball Basics

Still played much as it was a century and a half ago, baseball requires two teams of nine players each. A game consists of nine innings. During the first half of an inning, players of one team take turns at bat and try to score runs (scores in baseball are called runs, rather than points or goals), while the other team plays in the field and tries to keep the batting team from scoring. In the second half of the inning, the teams swap places.

The game takes place on a diamond-shaped field, with the four corners marked by home plate, first base, second base, and third base. Foul lines extend at 45-degree angles from home plate; the area within those lines is fair territory, or the main field of play. The area enclosed by the bases is called the infield, while the area beyond the bases bordered by the foul lines, and usually a fence, is the outfield.

When a team is playing defense, three of its players are in the outfield, four are in the infield, the pitcher throws the ball from a mound in the center of the infield, and the catcher squats behind home plate to catch any balls that the other team's batter does not hit.

The batter (Derek Jeter of the New York Yankees) hits the ball as the catcher and umpire crouch in their positions behind home plate.

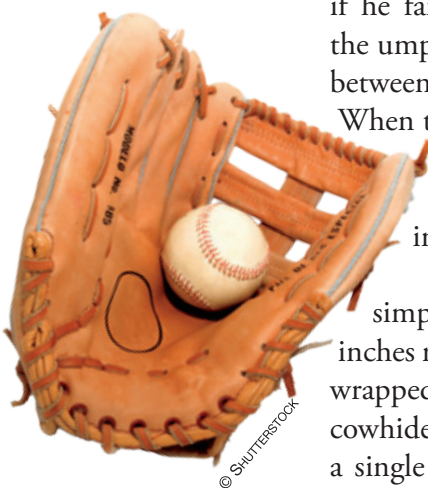


A runner (#33) races to first base, trying to get there before the first baseman catches the ball to put the runner out.

The batter stands at home plate and attempts to hit the ball out of reach of the defensive players in the field. As soon as he hits the ball, he drops his bat and begins to run around the bases. If he reaches first base safely, he is said to have hit a single. If he reaches second base, he has hit a double, and if third base, a triple. A ball hit over the fence in fair territory is a home run, and the batter and any other players ahead of him on the bases all score runs.

If the ball is caught in the air or can be thrown to a base before the batter reaches it, he is out. The batter also can strike out if he swings at and misses three pitches or if he fails to swing at three pitches that the umpire decides were in the strike zone between the batter's armpits and knees. When the batting team has three outs, its turn at bat is over, and it goes to the field for the second half of the inning.

Baseball equipment is relatively simple. The ball itself is about nine inches round with a rubber or cork center, wrapped in yarn and covered with white cowhide. The bat, traditionally made of a single piece of wood, is a tapered stick no longer than 42 inches and thickest at the hitting end. It typically weighs no more than 33 ounces. Fielders use a padded leather glove or mitt with webbing between the fingers to aid in catching the ball. All batters wear protective helmets shaped like their baseball caps. The catcher wears a chest and neck protector and face mask to defend against missed balls.



Fielders use padded leather gloves to help them catch the ball.

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Baseball may be the only game in which the defense has the ball and where independent decisions by individual players determine the action of the game. Players, fans, and sportswriters keep careful track of player statistics, such as batting



A catcher wears a chest and neck protector and face mask to shield him from uncaught balls. The protection is needed because professional pitchers can hurl so-called fastballs at speeds of 88 to 97 miles per hour.

average (number of hits divided by times at bat) and home runs or a pitcher's wins and losses and earned run average (runs allowed per nine innings pitched).

Unlike in games such as football, basketball, hockey, and soccer, a clock does not limit play. The game continues until one team wins. Typically, a baseball game is nine innings, but if the score is tied at the end of nine innings, extra innings are played. The longest game in the professional major leagues, a 1984 contest between the Chicago White Sox and the Milwaukee Brewers, dragged on for eight hours and a total of 25 innings. Because of a curfew rule, the contest had to be completed the following day.



A Little League player aims a crucial throw while a teammate looks on in the background.



While rules standardize the playing field for most sports, even major league baseball fields vary considerably. A hard-hit ball can be an easy out in one stadium and a home run in another.

Little League players on the bench watch their teammate at bat while another teammate waits near second base for his chance to run.

Growing Up with Baseball

Many American children get their first introduction to baseball as young as age five through tee ball. In this game the ball is not pitched but is placed on a tee at proper height for a youngster to hit it. Another variation of baseball played by all ages is softball, which uses a larger ball that is pitched underhand.

A popular tradition for 9- to 12-year-olds is Little League baseball, created in 1939 by a man named Carl Stotz in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Over the years, Little League has grown to become the world's largest organized youth sports program, with nearly 200,000 teams in all 50 states and more than 80 countries. There are 11 World Series tournaments in various divisions of Little League, still played in Williamsport.

Nearly a half million students play on 15,000 high school teams, making baseball the fourth most popular high school sport behind football, basketball, and track and field. At the collegiate level,



The first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, was established in 1869. Today the team, seen playing here, is known as the Cincinnati Reds.

baseball ranks second behind football, with some 30,000 players on more than 800 teams.

Promising high school and college players may move on to the minor leagues, a feeder system, sometimes called the “farm system,” for the major leagues. The more than 200 minor league teams are classified as Class A, Double A, or Triple A, with Triple A ranked just below the majors. The best minor league players go on to play for major league teams.

remains one of two leagues in the majors today. The second, the American League, dates from 1901.

The rather presumptuously named World Series, which pits the champion team from the American League against the National League champion, began in 1903. As the number of teams expanded over the years to a current total of 30, the championship picture became more complicated. Each league now has three divisions, which hold end-of-season playoffs to determine which teams will compete in the World Series.

In the early 1900s, baseball was dominated by pitchers, such as Cy Young, Walter Johnson, and Christy Mathewson, some of whose records may never be broken. By the 1920s and 1930s, changes in the ball that made it travel farther and construction of ballparks with close-in fences favored hitters. The next few decades would produce a string of larger-than-life slugging heroes—such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio,

The Major Leagues: A Reflection of America

Major league baseball dates back to 1869, when a group of Ohio investors established the first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, still in existence as the Cincinnati Reds. The first professional league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, was formed in 1871 but gave way five years later to the National League, which



Team mascots—Mr. Redlegs, Gapper, and Rosie Red—pose on the field at Great American Ballpark, home of the Cincinnati Reds.

Ted Williams, Willie Mays, and Mickey Mantle—who remain legendary to this day.

In many ways, the story of major league baseball is the story of America's struggles and triumphs. In 1887, team owners were party to an unwritten gentlemen's agreement that would bar African American players from professional baseball for the next 60 years. Black players, many as accomplished as their white counterparts, competed in the Negro Leagues, which thrived from 1920 until 1947, when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers as the first black major league player in the 20th century, effectively ending segregation in baseball.

Meanwhile, America's pastime was becoming increasingly popular in other

countries, especially in Latin America, where baseball had been introduced by American sailors, Japan, which learned the game from American school teachers, and Korea, where it was introduced by missionaries. By the 1950s, Latin American baseball players were moving into the major leagues. One of the most popular was Puerto Rican Roberto Clemente, an outfielder with the Pittsburgh Pirates, who was tragically killed in a plane crash while delivering supplies to Nicaraguan earthquake victims. Just 11 weeks later, in 1973, he became the first Latino player inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame. By 2000, a quarter of all major league players came from outside the United States.

Just as American society has expanded geographically, so has baseball. For the first half of the 20th century, there was no major league team west of St. Louis, Missouri. New York City, with three teams, dominated baseball in the 1950s. The national pastime became truly national in 1958, when, like many other Americans, the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers decided to relocate to California. Baseball further extended its nationwide appeal by playing night games, televising games, and establishing teams in additional cities.

Baseball in Popular Culture

Although attendance at major league games remains strong, baseball is no longer as popular as it once was. Surveys show that many American sports fans now prefer football. And Little League participation has been declining since 1996, as more and more youngsters turn to soccer.

Nevertheless, baseball remains more ingrained in popular culture than any other sport. The baseball cap is popular



This postage stamp pays tribute to baseball great Jackie Robinson, the first black major league player.



Willie Mays, one of the best baseball players in the history of the sport, is honored by this statue outside the San Francisco, California, ballpark.



The baseball cap is popular attire both in and outside ballparks.



Poet Walt Whitman said that baseball "...has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere." Here a runner slides into home plate as the catcher tries to keep him from scoring a run.

attire throughout the world. The President of the United States still upholds a century-old tradition of throwing the first pitch at the first game of each new season. "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," written in 1908, is still sung in many ballparks during the seventh-inning stretch, another cherished tradition in which spectators stand and stretch between the two halves of the seventh inning.

Perhaps the sport's most lasting legacy is the host of baseball-related words and phrases that are part of Americans' everyday speech. If something is a success, we call it a "hit." To fail is to "strike out." Taking action or responsibility for something is "stepping up to the plate." An idea, comment, or proposal that is wrong-headed or unrealistic is "off base" or comes "out of left field."

Over the years, many a writer has rhapsodized about baseball and how it has helped shape a nation. Perhaps American poet Walt Whitman summed it up best when he said, "Well—it's our game... America's game; it has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere; it belongs as

much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly as our Constitution's laws; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life."

TALKING BASEBALL

ball – a pitch that does not enter the strike zone and is not struck at by the batter

base hit – a play in which the batter hits the ball into fair territory and reaches at least first base safely

bullpen – enclosed area where pitchers warm up before entering the game

double play – a fielding play in which two base runners are put out

dugout – enclosed seating area for players, substitutes, and coaches



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home run – a ball hit out of the playing field in fair territory; the batter and any players already on base score runs

on deck – a term that describes the player who will come up to bat next; the player on deck stands in a designated circle to warm up before batting.

stolen base – situation in which a player successfully advances to the next base between pitches without the batter hitting the ball or getting a walk

strike – a swing and miss at a pitch or a pitch that passes through the strike zone between the batter's armpits and knees

walk – a batter's automatic advance to first base after the pitcher throws four balls outside the strike zone

Websites of Interest

Baseball Almanac

www.baseball-almanac.com

The ultimate guide to baseball statistics, this site highlights players who hold a long list of batting, pitching, and fielding records, calling attention to "Fabulous Feats" and "Famous Firsts." The

website also has information on the history of baseball and the ballparks where it is played.

Little League Online

www.littleleague.org

This website of the worldwide baseball program for pre-teens provides information about the history, organization, and activities of Little League, including baseball camps and tournaments.

Major League Baseball

www.mlb.com

This official site of Major League Baseball features news, statistics, and photos of baseball teams and players and has links to the websites of all the professional baseball teams.

National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

www.baseballhall.org

Official site of the Cooperstown, New York, shrine to baseball, this website describes the museum's exhibits, lists all members of the Hall of Fame, and features several online exhibits.

The player in red is attempting to steal second base.

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NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum opened in 1939 in Cooperstown, New York, the town where, according to legend, Abner Doubleday invented baseball. Now that the Doubleday myth has been debunked, Cooperstown no longer refers to itself as the birthplace of baseball, but the Hall of Fame and Museum continues to honor the game and its heroes. The museum houses three floors of exhibits chronicling the history of baseball and a gallery featuring the 292 baseball greats who have been inducted into the Hall of Fame over the years. Only about one percent of those who ever played in the major leagues have been so honored.

As the Hall of Fame attests, baseball has a long list of heroes. The players described below are among the best of the best.



Top: Babe Ruth (far left) is one of many baseball heroes whose photos are displayed in the Great Hall of the new Yankee Stadium, opened in April 2009.

Babe Ruth (1895–1948)

Still considered by many as the best baseball player who ever lived, George Herman Ruth, known as Babe or the Bambino, was a power hitter with the New York Yankees who set records for the most home runs in a season (60) and the most career home runs (714); these records lasted for decades. His accomplishments on the field and his wild lifestyle off the field made Ruth the personification of the Roaring Twenties, the heyday of his playing career. He started his career as a pitcher with the Boston Red Sox, but in 1919 he was sold to the Yankees. For the next 86 years, the Red Sox failed to win a World Series, a drought often referred to as the Curse of the Bambino.

Cy Young (1867–1955)

As a pitcher with five different major league teams between 1890 and 1911, Young logged 511 career wins, a record unlikely ever to be broken. He also holds records for most innings pitched (7,356), most games started (815), and most games completed (749). The Cy Young Award is given each year to the two best pitchers in baseball, one from the National League and one from the American League.

Ty Cobb (1886–1961)

An outfielder with the Detroit Tigers and the Philadelphia Athletics from 1905 to 1928, Cobb set 90 major league records, many of which lasted for a half century or more. He still holds records for the highest career batting average (.366) and the most times with the highest batting average in a season (11). Not well liked because of his surly temperament, Cobb nevertheless received more votes than any other player for the first year's induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936.

Hank Aaron (1934–)

An outfielder who started his career in the Negro Leagues, Henry “Hank” Aaron is best known for breaking Babe Ruth’s career home run record with a total of 755 during his 23 seasons in the major leagues. Aaron still holds a number of baseball’s most significant records, including most runs batted in (2,297), most extra base hits (1,477), and most seasons with 30 or more home runs (15).