London Baseball Diary: When the New York Yankees Met the Boston Red Sox in the UK

Pac Pobric

A look at the field at London Stadium, where the New York Yankees met the Boston Red Sox for a two-game series in June 2019.

“We’re giving London a bad impression of baseball.”

Judging by his accent, the young man to my right at the trough at London Stadium was American. And based on his slight slur, he seemed to be about as drunk as I was, which obviously forced an immediate connection. I nodded, because he was right, goddamn it. Wasn’t it obvious to everyone? I had already told my friends exactly the same thing the day before, when the New York Yankees whipped the Boston Red Sox 17–13, a bizarre baseball score by any reasonable measure. That Saturday in late June, the three of us were at a cigar bar just outside Hyde Park Corner, where we sat drinking Laphroaig and Yamazaki, huddled around a phone tracking the score. Twelve runs in the very first inning? C’mon fellas, I told them. This isn’t baseball. This is like a cricket match or something else.

They nodded, yes, yes, but I seemed to be the only one *against* such a ridiculous display. I threw my hands in the air. Baseball, I reasoned, is a quiet, patient sport. A player is considered enormously successful if he gets on base fewer than four out of every ten tries.
So thirty runs in a single game between New York and Boston—wasn't that just ludicrous? Did I even have to convince anyone? Had my American friends ever *watched* baseball before? "It's Yankees–Red Sox," my friend John said with a wave of his hand. "It's always like this. Don't be an idiot."

Fine, fine. I had reason to believe him. A Brooklyn boy like me, John grew up following "the Rivalry," which is capitalized with good reason, because in the long legacy of North American sports, there is nothing else like it. It needs no modifiers, no adjectives; the history speaks for itself. And so do the crazy numbers.

Since 1901, when they first met, the Yankees and Red Sox have played nearly 2,300 games, with New York having won most (more than 1,200) of them. Boston fans hate to admit it, but New York—no matter what your perspective—has developed a deeper and longer culture of excellence, owing at least in part (so the myth says) to a blunder on the part of the Red Sox more than 100 years ago. The short version of the long story goes like this: in 1918, Boston, having won their fourth World Series championship in seven years, sold their emerging stud, Babe Ruth—baseball's greatest star—to the Yankees for $25,000. It was a stupid, greedy, short-sighted decision, one that inaugurated—for anyone with even a mild sense of superstition—a long tradition of misfortune. For the next 86 years, Boston languished without a championship. The Yankees won 27. Everyone called it the Curse of the Bambino (Ruth's nickname) and assumed it would last forever.

But in 2004, the Red Sox finally began to turn things around. Since that year, they've won four titles (including the most recent World Series in 2018) and the Yankees only one, which the loud man sitting in front of my friends and me on Sunday at London Stadium would not allow us to forget. He was a Boston baseball guy, pure and simple, proud not only of his ability to see the game and his former athletic accomplishments (he had played ball at Florida State University when the team was competitive around 25 years ago), but also of his deep New England roots. He was from New Hampshire, the backbone of the Puritan New World, a place where the Red Sox controlled the local imagination of a family like his, and here he was with his wife, three daughters, and parents making the rare trip abroad for a ballgame.

At that very moment on the field below, well past the halfway point of the second matchup of this two-game series, the Red Sox were still controlling the game. And although the score was only 4–2, Boston had quieted the New York offense for four full innings, which fed the simmering sense that a Red Sox win was inevitable. New York had its European holiday on Saturday, now it was Boston's turn. The stadium was loud. The Red Sox faithful were feverish and eager. And a sense of wicked anticipation filled the air. No, this wasn't what I had come all the way from the Bronx to see. New Yorkers always expect the Yankees to win. Anything less is a disaster, especially when playing a hated rival. But at the very least, considering Saturday's

laughable score (thirty runs, what a joke!), this felt to me like a real game of baseball, one that European audiences could walk away from with a genuine sense of the reality of this beautifully slow, aristocratic sport.

And just then, the Yankees started smacking the ball around. First, DJ LeMahieu got on base, followed by Aaron Judge. Next up, Aaron Hicks cracked a shot to bring in LeMahieu and the score was 4–3. I licked my lips and shouted. “Atta boy, Hicks!” Maybe New York could turn this around. Now it was Gary Sánchez’s turn, and on the fifth pitch of his at-bat, he whalloped a hit to left field to score two more runs, which gave me another reason to scream. I looked at the scoreboard: 5–4, New York, and the hits just kept on coming.

By the end of the inning, the Yankees had produced six more runs, definitively pulling away from Boston with an 11–4 score. By that point, I was completely hoarse and my new friend from Boston had become quite suddenly surly. “Just remember who the world champions are,” he snarled. “Don’t forget about last year.” John rolled his eyes. “That’s just like a Boston fan,” he said. “Always talking about last year.”

It was around that time that, pepped up and happy with myself and my team, I made it over to the trough, where I overheard the comment about the bad impression we had given London about baseball. I did some quick mental math: thus far, over the course of fewer than two full games, the Yankees and Red Sox had scored a combined 45 runs, giving any casual observer a completely unreasonable sense of how this sport actually worked. True, these teams have almost always been offensive powerhouses. No doubt that’s part of the reason why they were selected for the London series. But these were absurdly inflated figures. Last year, the Red Sox and Yankees were respectively the best and second-best offensive teams in Major League Baseball. And still Boston scored only an average of 5.4 runs per game; New York had 5.3.

By the time I made it back to my seat, I had other things on my mind: it was the eighth inning and my favorite Yankee, the Dutchman Didi Gregorius, had come up to the plate. He had already been successful that day, recording a hit and scoring with some nifty baserunning. But I wanted to see him pop a home run, in part because I had been insisting to John that it would happen. It was a slightly improbable proposition. Gregorius had been hurt most of the year and had yet to return to form. But would you believe it, here he was, swinging the bat hard at a soft pitch by Ryan Brasier to knock the ball over the right field wall. I jumped out of my seat. “What did I tell you! What did I tell you!”

Behind me, I noticed a group of Dutch fans screaming Didi’s name and waving the flag of Amsterdam in a frenzy. I turned at them and threw my arms in the air and a man shouted to me in an accent I don’t often hear at American ballparks: “Let’s go Yankees!” And suddenly the cold, hard numbers were moot. It was the feeling that mattered, and it seemed to translate perfectly well all the way across the big blue pond.

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