

NATAL DAY OF BASEBALL

Day on Which the First Game Was Played.

FIFTY-THREE YEARS AGO

How the Game Has Grown Into a National Pastime and the Different Forms It Has Taken in Its Evolution. Large Crowds Attended.

June 19 is properly celebrated as the anniversary of the natal day of baseball—the day on which our national game was given birth more than half a century ago, for on the 19th of June, 1846, at Hoboken, N. J., was played the first match game of baseball that ever took place, the contestants being the Knickerbocker and New York baseball clubs.

The sport had begun to take form nearly nine months before. Like man, according to the Darwinian theory, baseball is the result of evolution. It grew gradually out of the old English game of "rounders," which gradually "evolved" into "town ball," in the latter sport instead of bases there were "corners." These were unattended, and the runners were put out by being hit with tenn ball, which was thrown directly at them by the fielders. The ball used was necessarily therefore much softer and smaller than the baseball of to-day. Unlike the rubber, yarn and leather spheres now in vogue, it was composed wholly of rubber.

In the days of which I write a number of New York gentlemen were in the habit of assembling on a vacant lot, then a long way out of town and now covered by the Madison Square Garden, every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon to play town ball. At length some of them began to think that certain modifications would greatly improve the sport. Numerous informal discussions took place, and it was finally decided to adopt the changes proposed. Among these was the substitution of bases for corners, the adoption of a hard ball with a rubber center wound with yarn and covered with leather, the placing of men to guard the bases and having the ball thrown to them instead of directly at the base runners. It was also decided to change the name of the sport from town ball to baseball, on account of the bases forming so important a part of it. On September 23, 1846, the gentlemen who had decided upon these changes formed themselves into an association, to which they gave the name of Knickerbocker Baseball club, at the same time adopting the changes above named in the game of town ball, and voting that their new game should thereafter be known by the name of baseball. Thus our national game was born, and it has undergone innumerable changes and modifications during the long period that has elapsed since its birth, but it is doubtful if it has thereby been made any more enjoyable as a sport, pure and simple. Like weddings, one baseball club brings many, and soon there were a number of these organizations in and around New York, and the first match game above mentioned consisted of only four innings, the rule then being that the club first making 21 runs in even innings was the winner. The gradual growth of baseball from New York to other parts of the country was very slow, though to their credit be it said that one or two of the metropolitan newspapers did all in their power to foster the sport.

Town ball continued to be played in other parts of the country, and its votaries seemed reluctant to substitute baseball for it. It is remarkable that baseball was not introduced in Philadelphia, a city only 90 miles from New York until 1860 15 years after its birth. In that year the Olympic club of the Quaker City, which had been organized in 1833 to play town ball, and had done so ever since, decided to thereafter to play baseball instead. The first match game of baseball in Philadelphia did not take place till June 11, 1860 and was between the Equity and Winona clubs.

A striking proof that westward the star of baseball, as well as that of empire, wends its way, is found in the fact that the first match game of the national sport in San Francisco took place on Feb. 22, 1860, three months prior to the match in Philadelphia. Baseball was not played in the New England states until some five or six years after its origination, and then only in such a modified form that it was known as the "New England Game," to distinguish it from the game played in New York.

The originators of our national game were gentlemen who played baseball for recreation only, and would have held in low esteem any man who sought to transform it into a business means of gaining a livelihood. It was their intention, as well as that of other generation of enthusiastic ball players who followed them, that baseball should be purely a gentleman's game. As clubs multiplied throughout the country it became necessary to establish some general organization having authority to control and regulate the interests of the sport, to make such changes in the playing rules as might from time to time seem necessary, and in every possible way protect and improve our national sport. To meet this necessity there was formed the National Association of Baseball players, in which any club was entitled to membership with the privilege of sending delegates to the annual meeting. The playing rules adopted by this organization were the standard ones for the game, and were respected and adopted by all clubs, whether members of the association or not. Almost the first rule adopted by this National association was one most positively debarring from membership and rendering liable to expulsion any club in which there was a man who played baseball for hire or emolument of any kind, the object being to make and keep the sport a gentleman's game.

The result of this was that baseball flourished between the years 1860 and 1871 to an extent that has never been known before or since. The number of clubs was literally legion, and in every large city the number of matches that were played daily was almost incredible. The grounds were usually upon some vacant lot or common and were free to all, no admission being charged. As a consequence the crowds at these contests were very great, from 10,000 to 30,000 being by no means an unusual attendance. In the city of New York, for example, there were five different baseball grounds within a stone's throw of each other, and scarcely a day passed during the baseball season that there was not a match in progress upon each and every one of these grounds, and the same is true of other large cities. It is no exaggeration to say that 30 years ago 200 games were played for every one that is played now. Baseball is unquestionably in its decadence and has been ever since professional baseball players were first openly recognized and professional playing permitted. The sport received its death-blow as a pure, healthful recreation and invigorating muscular exercise and welcome relief from the toils and cares

of the daily avocations of men and boys of all classes when it ceased to be a gentleman's game. Amateur games, the only kind then known, such as 30 years ago drew immense crowds of the friends and neighbors of the participants, are seldom or never played now. The only way our young men take part in baseball now is to pay 50 cents or \$1 for the privilege of seeing others play. Thirty years ago a baseball club was an organization of gentlemen for recreation and exercise simply. Now it is a corporation—soulless, like all corporations—with no object save to make as much money as possible out of the hired players, who perform their parts like a company of hired actors.

The encroachment of the professional player was gradual. The rivalry between clubs became so great that in order to strengthen itself and win victory over some rival each would leave nothing undone to secure the best players. Thus inducements were held out to men who had shown unusual aptitude for the game to influence them to play only with a particular club. A wealthy gentleman, for instance, desiring to see his club in the front rank, would offer some young man of rare baseball playing ability a position in his business or counting house, with a private understanding that his commercial duties were purely nominal, while his real ones were to play baseball. Thus there were numerous clubs in the country which were virtually professional ones long before professional playing was openly permitted, and while the stringent law against it was still in force in the code of the American Association of Baseball Players. This was notably the case with those famous old-time opponents, the Atlantic club of New York, the Athletics of Philadelphia. By 1871 the number and influence of professional clubs was such that their representatives met in New York on March 17 of that year, avowed themselves such and cut loose from the National Association of Baseball Players, and adopted rules for championship contests, the most important being that the club winning the largest number of games in a series of five with every one of the other professional clubs should be declared the champion, championship games having been previously unregulated.

The baseball championship originated about 1858. At the Elysian Fields, in Hoboken, N. J., the Athletics of Brooklyn had beaten the crack New York clubs, the Empires, Knickerbocker, Gotham and Eagle, and were generally regarded champions. From time to time till the establishment of the above named championship rules by the professionals, whatever club won two games out of three from the then champion club became champion in turn. From the organization of the professional clubs in 1871 amateur playing steadily declined. Gentlemen no longer cared to engage personally in a sport which had been made a business. The game came to be looked upon as a money-making scheme instead of an amusing recreation. Then, too, the steady increase of population and consequent demand for new building sites and ornamental parks did away largely with the vacant lots and commons upon which the amateur games had been played.

The recognition of professional players is not solely responsible for baseball's decadence, for the fact that 4,000 people are now considered immense attendance at a game where 30 years ago 10,000 or 20,000 were not uncommon, and for its abandonment as a recreation by those most needing its stimulating exercise. The changes and so-called "improvements" in the game are also to blame. Take pitching, for example. The old rule required the pitcher to actually pitch the ball and the moment of delivery his hand must be below his waist. The word pitcher is now wholly a misnomer, for the ball is no longer pitched, but thrown to the bat. In the "good old days" the pitcher was required to pitch the ball just where the batsman wanted it. The latter could call for a ball shoulder high, "hip high," "knee high," or "a low ball," the last named being a ball between the knee and the ankle. Now he must strike at any ball that goes over the plate. Curtailing the rights of the batsman and giving more license to the pitcher was done solely with the intention of reducing the scores to a minimum. This has tended to greatly diminish the popularity of baseball. Good batting and base running are the most attractive features of the sport, and games where man after man retires at the home plate on strikes and short flies, or at first on feeble tips to the infielders, resulting in scores of 1 to 0, or 2 to 4, are simply wearisome.

To have the bases kept filled with runners, and to see run after run scored—not by fielding errors but by good batting and base running—would draw 20 people to every one now attending baseball games.

Some idea of the old-time interest and attendance may be gained from the fact that at a game between the Atlantic club of New York and the Athletic club of Philadelphia, in the latter city on Oct. 1, 1866, the attendance inside and outside the ground—the house tops being covered with spectators—was estimated at 40,000, and, though the price of admission to this game was \$1 for general admission, even to the bleaching boards, the crowd inside the gates was so enormous that in order to find room to stand it had to spread itself over the field to such an extent that it was impossible for the players to move about, and the game had to be postponed after the first inning—Philadelphia Times.