SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN BASEBALL RESEARCH
NINETEENTH CENTURY COMMITTEE

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BASEBALL TURNS 150 ON SEPTEMBER 23, 1995

Saturday, September 23, 1995, marks the 150th anniversary of the date the first baseball club was organized and its trailblazing rules adopted.

Baseball traces its history in a direct line from the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York and the rules it established at its founding in 1845.

Charles A. Peverelly described the origins of the club in *The Book of American Pastimes* (1866). For three years, from 1842, "a number of gentlemen, fond of the game" had played a version of baseball in Manhattan. "It was customary for two or three players, occasionally during the season, to go around in the forenoon of a pleasant day and muster up players enough to make a match." Perhaps the job of rounding up players for every game became onerous after a time. Peverelly doesn't speculate, but simply reports that "In the spring of 1845 Mr. Alex[ander] J. Cartwright, who had become an enthusiast in the game, one day upon the field proposed a regular organization, promising to obtain several recruits. His proposal was acceded to, and Messrs. W. R. Wheaton, Cartwright, D. F. Curry, E. R. Dupignac, Jr., and W. H. Tucker, formed themselves into a board of recruiting officers, and soon obtained names enough to make a respectable show."

Up to that time the ballplaying friends had played on fields in Manhattan. But the "march of improvement" had already caused them to move once, and as it was clear "they would soon be driven from Murray Hill," their current grounds, they decided in a preliminary meeting that "some suitable place should be obtained in New Jersey, where their stay could be permanent; accordingly, a day or two afterward, enough to make a game assembled at Barclay street ferry, crossed over [the Hudson River to Hoboken, N.J.], marched up the road, prospecting for ground on each side, until they reached the Elysian Fields [a recreation area owned by railroad magnate John Stevens], where they 'settled.' Thus it occurred," Peverelly exults, "that a party of gentlemen formed an organization, combining together health, recreation, and social enjoyment, which was the nucleus of the now great American game of Base Ball, so popular in all parts of the United States, than which there is none more manly or more health-giving."

The Knickerbockers organized to play among themselves, dividing club members into two evenly matched teams on their regularly scheduled game days. But over time, as outsiders were attracted to their game, other clubs formed to play by the Knickerbocker rules. In 1854 the Knickerbockers and two other clubs modified the Knickerbocker rules to govern inter-club play.

What was it about their rules that set the Knickerbocker game apart from other versions of bat-and-ball games popular throughout the United States and Canada?

First of all, the fact that the rules were written down and printed by an organized club gave them an authority similar to that found in the rules of an established sport like cricket. Further, the rules themselves differed from related versions of the game in ways that made it more a "manly" exercise for adults and less a mere entertainment for children.

1. The base paths were considerably longer than those in related games like town ball, where the distance between bases was typically 60 feet or less. The original Knickerbocker rules calculated the basepaths in "paces," which would differ with the length of the pacer's legs and stride, but which would range between about 75 and the present-day 90 feet. (Scholars differ on the question of what distance between bases the Knickerbockers *intended* to create with their paces, but when in 1857 the first baseball convention changed the measurement from paces to yards, the 30-yard—90-foot—figure recommended by the Knickerbockers was accepted.)

2. The practice of putting out a baserunner by hitting him with a thrown ball, typical of other versions of the game, was outlawed, thus eliminating a childish practice, and (incidentally) permitting the development of a harder, faster ball which permitted and encouraged more skilled—more adult—play.

3. Town ball and its relatives were played with rectangular basepaths, generally with no foul territory. The Knickerbockers turned their square basepaths on end with points like a diamond (as in the game's ancestor, rounders) and created foul lines which narrowed the field of play. This brought a mature orderliness to the game that was lacking in town ball.

(An unplanned but important side effect of foul lines was that, in limiting the field of play, the Knickerbockers created a place for spectators to gather close to but outside the field of action. Spectators would prove a major factor in turning baseball into the overwhelming favorite it became.)

Late in 1856 the Knickerbockers issued a call for baseball's first convention. Nearly 20 clubs from metropolitan New York sent delegates to sessions in January and March, 1857. The Knickerbocker rules were revised, clarified and expanded—following, for the most part, Knickerbocker recommendations—to accomodate the burgeoning interest in inter-club play and the need of the new clubs for a clear understanding of the game.

Despite their leadership role in the 1857 convention, the Knickerbockers, retaining their original view of the game as an opportunity for friends to gather for healthy adult exercise, seldom played against other clubs. In resisting the competitive trend—which increasingly saw members of baseball clubs divided between the few who played (especially the "first nine," who defended the club's honor) and the many who simply observed—the Knickerbocker club drifted out of the spotlight, and in the early 1880s faded away.

Knickerbockers' memories remained strong, however. Alexander Cartwright, at whose suggestion the club was organized, carried his ball and rules on a wagon train to San Francisco, then to Honolulu, where he introduced the Knickerbocker game in 1852; up to the end of his life in 1892 he enjoyed watching the game played by Hawaiian ball clubs he had organized. In an interview a half century after the Knickerbockers' founding, Dr. Daniel L. Adams—their second president and the moving force behind the 1857 convention—vividly recalled the club's heyday and his creation of the shortstop position. And James Whyte Davis, club secretary and perhaps its most devoted member, gave instructions that his Knickerbocker flag be buried with him.

—Frederick Ivor-Campbell

August 1995