

Baseball Origins Newsletter

Volume Three, Number 1

January 2023

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The baseball origins newsletter is put out by members of SABR's Origins Committee, and the website for baseball's origins, www.protoball.org, It is intended to foster research and discussion of the origins of the game of baseball, baseball's predecessor bat-ball games, and the growth of baseball prior to 1871 (when professional, league baseball was founded).

Comments, suggestions and articles should be submitted to Bruce Allardice, editor, at bsa1861@att.net or Larry McCray at lmccray@mit.edu.

Protoball Interview with Jon Popovich



Jon Popovich (at the Fred)

Larry McCray Note: Jonathan Popovich has been a SABR member for a decade, and has contributed important new findings on the role of Hoboken's Elysian Fields, where so many Manhattan clubs (and a few from Brooklyn) played in the 1840s and beyond. If you are unclear about what Elysian Fields ballplaying was all about, you'll profit from seeing his new findings at <https://youtu.be/cwJGWeWDHPA> (about 50 minutes). He has agreed to serve as the Luncheon Speaker at this year's 'Fred' Conference at Cooperstown. He and Irwin Chusid are at work on a major project on the history of Elysian Fields.

Q: As a welcome new digger on base ball's pre-professional days, what factors drew you to wanting to start looking at the actions of club two decades prior to the first professional league? And what steps led you to focus in on the Elysian Fields as a key location for early base ball?

From a young age I had always been interested in "the firsts" of anything and everything. When my general curiosities merged with my new found love of collecting baseball artifacts...balls, bats, images, etc...it wasn't long until I found my way to 19th century baseball.

My collecting efforts were absolutely the basis for any and all research I'd ultimately conduct, and it was usually a ball, bat, or image that served as the conduit to exploration. In the case of the Elysian Fields, my springboard was a circa 1865 CDV image with an annotation on the back that read, "A Game of Base Ball...Hoboken, NJ".

That image, still part of my collection, launched over 3 years of research into the Elysian Fields that culminated with presentations at the 2022 'Fred' [Ivor Frederick-Campbell] conference at Cooperstown, an interview for the Elysian Fields Chapter of SABR, and a talk at the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Q: A number of us Origins and 19C diggers have been toiling away for years, when Fred Ivor-Campbell, John Thorn, and David Block shifted our attention to 18th and early 19th Centuries sources. What were your initial impressions of

**that shift, as seen at the terrific Fred Conferences and in new publications?
Are there ways that SABR make it easier for new members to participate?**

I joined SABR in 2013 as a way to expand my base of knowledge and gain access to resources that I figured I'd need to involve myself in any real sort of research. Both the Origins and 19th Century Research Committees caught my eye upon joining, but I just sort of lurked in the background of each until deciding to get more engaged in 2014.

While I had not yet conducted any research into a 19th C. topic. . .and had none in mind. . .I did sign up to attend that year's Fred. I was star-struck by the membership of the committees and the level of scholarship and authorship I was exposed to. Quite honestly, I wanted to be more like those I'd come to admire by way of their many books, journal articles, and blogs I'd been reading and learning from. I realized I had a LONG WAY to go before that could happen, but getting involved and throwing my hat into the ring with a research presentation in 2016 was the start of it all for me.

To this day...and this is the ground truth...I remain humbled by the intellectual company I keep thru the Committees. Be it at the 'Fred' or during the year by way of research projects and working groups, I am always struck by the in which curiosity amongst our membership drives such rich exploration and new understandings of 19th C. baseball.

I find myself excited and enthusiastic about so many aspects of early baseball history that I do want to find ways to share it with more of the SABR community, particularly a younger audience who may not yet be aware of what John Thorn calls "our favorite century".

While first to admit that I don't have the one singular answer on how to go about doing this, I am going to be addressing it during my Keynote speech at the 2023 Fred in Cooperstown. I am excited and honored to have been offered this platform and, in part, will use it to talk about expanding our reach and piquing the curiosity of those just waiting to fall in love with 19th C. baseball.

Q: You and Irwin Chusid recently participated in an email exchange that included SABR members who had written about Elysian Fields as a base ball venue. Do you have new perspectives on the Hoboken facility and its imprint on the modern game? Are there any past myths that have been thrown into some doubt?

New York clubs migrated to the Elysian Fields, meaning, they were already in existence, established to some degree, and already playing/practicing baseball somewhere in NY prior to their arrival in NJ in the early/mid 1840s.

But the Elysian Fields did figure prominently as a main stage for the early game...

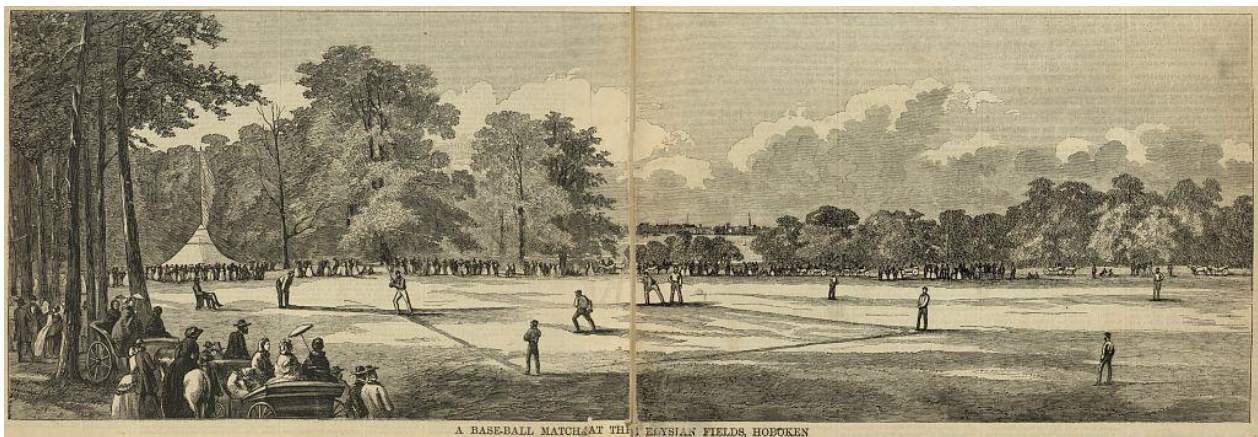
I don't know that I can make a scientific argument for the Elysian Fields as having specific or significant contributions to the growth and evolution of the game. They were a place that encouraged and sponsored the early amateur clubs, but I think that the game and its rule formations would have ultimately come about in urban New York NY right around the same time.

While we can debate the if's and why's of the Elysian Fields as having some sort of contributing force behind growth and development, what's not debatable is the fact that things important to the game *did* happen there in Hoboken.

Baseball would surely have grown and developed without the Elysian Fields but, we can only speculate as to just how, when, or where *because baseball did, in fact*, grow and develop right there in the Elysian Fields...the right place at the right time.

Elysian Fields' Impact (or not) on Early New Jersey Baseball

By John Zinn



Baseball match at Elysian Fields, From Harper's Weekly, Oct. 15, 1859

Baseball has been played in New Jersey since at least 1843 when the Magnolia Club gathered for ball and chowder at Elysian Fields in Hoboken.¹ Baseball's New Jersey beachhead offered convenient access not just to the teams from across the Hudson, but also to the New York media which spread word of the organized game far beyond the metropolitan area. For this reason alone, there is no question that the Stevens' pleasure ground played an important part in baseball's early growth and development. Yet while a lot of baseball was played in the Garden State, until 1855, none of it was played by New Jersey teams. The purpose of this brief essay is to explore to what degree Elysian Fields contributed to the beginning of organized baseball in New Jersey.

To explore the question more effectively, the state will be divided into two parts – Hudson County (home to Hoboken and Elysian Fields) and New Jersey's remaining 20 counties. Surprisingly, for a baseball history topic, the answer for the Hudson County is well documented. No such clarity, however, exists in the second case, so the question becomes how did young men in New Jersey learn about baseball? When the first New Jersey teams were formed in 1854-55, there was little newspaper coverage of baseball so the primary, and perhaps only, means of introduction to the game was direct personal contact. Young men from New Jersey had to play baseball, watch baseball being played and/or speak with someone who had played or watched it. Looked at in this way, it's possible to get a sense of Elysian Field's impact on baseball's growth throughout the rest of the state.

Of the 14 baseball clubs formed in New Jersey in 1855, more than one-third (5) were located in communities bordering on Hoboken. Even before the first Hudson County clubs were organized, the *Jersey City Daily Sentinel* used the example of baseball at Elysian Fields, to urge that a club "be formed in our city."² The most important of the initial Hudson County teams were the Pioneer and Excelsior clubs of Jersey City which quickly began competing against teams outside of their home city. Not long after the founding of these first Hudson County teams, the New York clubs playing at Elysian Fields offered them support. An account of a Pioneer-Excelsior game in the August 16, 1855 edition of the *Jersey City Daily Telegraph* reported that among the spectators were Louis Wadsworth of the Knickerbocker Club, D. Goodwin of the Putnam Club of Brooklyn and "several members" of the Gotham and Eagle Clubs.³

Just a week or so later what may have initially been just moral support, took more tangible form when N.D. McLaughlin of the Knickerbockers served as referee for a rematch between the two Jersey City teams.⁴ Such support continued when the Pioneer Club hosted the Columbia Club of Brooklyn. Not only did Judge Van Cott of the Gothams serve as referee, he spoke at a post-match dinner, offering sage advice including the suggestion to call for judgment more frequently on foul ball calls. Other clubs were also reportedly present at the dinner.⁵ Regardless of whether the New York

teams playing at Elysian Fields helped start the Jersey City clubs, at the very least, they offered support and advice during the Pioneer and Excelsior clubs first season.

The proximity to Elysian Fields proved to be a two-edged sword however. Although the Pioneer and Excelsior clubs enjoyed successful 1855 seasons, neither club was able to field a team the following year. And the New York clubs playing at Elysian Fields contributed both directly and indirectly to the demise of the two Jersey City clubs. In previewing a September 1856 match between two New York teams at Elysian Fields, the *Daily Sentinel* noted that two-thirds of the Eagle Club of New York's first nine had previously been members of the two Jersey City clubs (three per team).⁶ Since the Eagle Club practiced and played its home games in neighboring Hoboken, it was easy for Jersey City ball players to succumb to the temptation to play for a more prestigious New York team. Another factor in the failure of the two Jersey City teams was their inability to find an adequate place to play.⁷ Hindering that effort was the presence of the New York clubs at Elysian Fields where in early 1855, at least one of three clubs played every afternoon.⁸ Two years later, the number had increased to five clubs, making it even less likely a local club could meet its space needs in Hoboken.⁹ Fortunately, the local baseball playing population proved resilient and beginning in 1857, baseball growth and expansion resumed in Hudson County.

Unlike Hudson County, no evidence has been uncovered of a relationship between baseball at Elysian Fields and the game's 1855 growth elsewhere in New Jersey. Nine clubs were formed in the rest of the state that first season, all but one of which (Paterson) were either in Newark or a neighboring community.¹⁰ As the state's largest population center, it's not surprising Newark led the way with five teams, but the game's broad reach there is impressive. In addition to three "typical" teams, Newark was also home to the first club with "Junior" in its name as well as the earliest known African-American club in the United States.¹¹ How then did young men in Newark, both black and white come in direct contact with baseball? It most likely happened where there was a high level of interaction with communities where baseball was played or at least known.

Although baseball had been played at Elysian Fields for years, the opportunities for interaction with young men in Newark were limited. There was no direct railroad connection between Newark and Hoboken until 1862, an indication of how little reason Newark residents had to visit Hoboken on business. This appears to be equally true of recreational trips to Elysian Fields. A search of Newark's leading newspaper, the *Daily Advertiser* revealed almost no mention of the Stevens' pleasure ground on the Hudson. Notices in the paper around July 4, 1854 include the Jersey shore and the mountains as possible holiday destinations, but say nothing about Elysian Fields.¹² David Gavitt's 1854-55 *Directory of Jersey City, Hoboken and Hudson* called Elysian Fields the

destination “for pleasure seekers from the great city on the other side of the river,” without mentioning Newark or any other New Jersey location.¹³

The potential for direct personal contact with those knowledgeable about baseball was far greater in the interaction between Newark and New York City. Beginning in the 1830s, Newark grew into an industrial center dependent on New York for capital, labor and markets. Newark’s growth was a driving force in the opening of a railroad and ferry connection between the two cities which “reduced the travel time . . . to approximately one hour.”¹⁴ By 1855, some 52 trains a day ran between Newark and the Jersey City ferry and passengers took full advantage purchasing 1.1 million tickets.¹⁵ Nor was the service important only to businessmen. In ads in the *Newark Daily Advertiser*, the New Jersey Railroad emphasized the low-cost service that would “enable” “mechanics and others residing in Newark” to commute to and from Manhattan.¹⁶ The sheer volume of travel was the most likely source of the personal contact that introduced Newark and, ultimately, the rest of New Jersey, to organized baseball. Elysian Fields was, without question, vital to the game’s early growth, but not in its home state.

¹ John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden: The Secret History of the Early Game* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 89-90.

² *Jersey City Daily Sentinel*, May 26, 1855.

³ *Jersey City Daily Telegraph*, August 16, 1855, 2.

⁴ *Jersey City Daily Telegraph*, August 22, 1855, 2.

⁵ *New York Herald*, September 22, 1855, 3.

⁶ *Jersey City Daily Sentinel*, September 9, 1856, 2.

⁷ *Jersey City Daily Sentinel*, September 9, 1856, 2.

⁸ *Jersey City Daily Sentinel*, May 25, 1855, 26.

⁹ *New York Clipper*, June 27, 1857, 75.

¹⁰ The Proball website shows five clubs in Newark plus one each in Orange, Bloomfield and East Newark.

¹¹ *Newark Daily Advertiser*, September 6, 1855, 2, *Newark Daily Mercury*, October 24, 1855.

¹² *Newark Daily Advertiser*, July 3, 1854, 1.

¹³ *Combined Directories of Jersey City, Hoboken and Hudson, 1854-1855*, David E. Gavitt, 252.

¹⁴ Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800-1860*, (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 17.

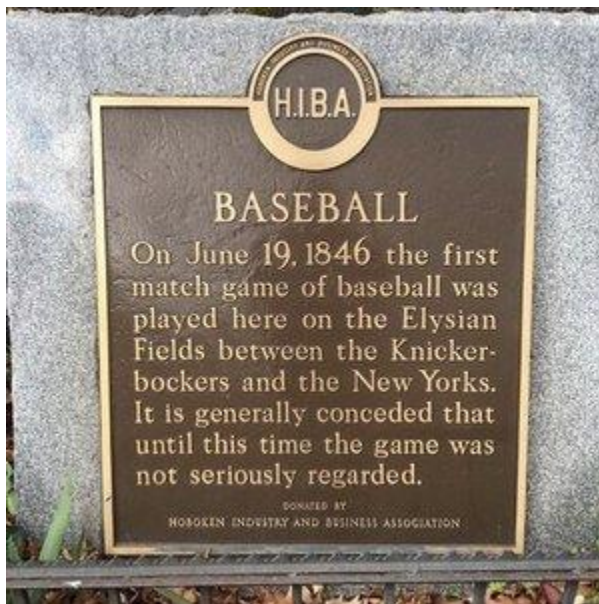
¹⁵ *Report of the Directors of the New Jersey Railroad and Trans. Company*, 1856, 9, 15.

¹⁶ *Newark Daily Advertiser*, September 1, 1854, 4.

How Central was the Elysian Fields to Early Baseball?

By Bruce Allardice

As can be seen by the historical marker pictured below, the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey was the site of what was long believed to be the earliest baseball game under the New York rules. Certainly, most of the pre-1850 games were played on these grounds, a recreation park for New York City's finest (and not so finest). But how impactful was the ballplaying at Elysian Fields to the development of the game? John Zinn's article in this newsletter focuses on the New Jersey aspect (and finds it didn't have a huge impact). With the help of Larry McCray, this article will use available data (mostly from Protoball) to quantify, or attempt to quantify, that impact on baseball nationally.



Historical marker at Elysian Fields

For purposes of statistical analysis, we will use the two best datasets of early baseball: the Protoball listing of games, and the Tholkes RIM (Registry of Interclub Matches) database available on Protoball

at [https://protoball.org/Bob_Tholkes%27_RIM_\(Registry_of_Interclub_Matches\)_Tabulation](https://protoball.org/Bob_Tholkes%27_RIM_(Registry_of_Interclub_Matches)_Tabulation). RIM covers ballgames reported in the NYC newspapers from 1845 through 1865. The datasets differ slightly. The Protoball pre-pro ballgames data is heavily NYC oriented, and draws on the Knickerbocker Club archives as well as newspaper reports in the major NYC newspapers. The RIM is also heavily NYC oriented, and mostly lists match games between different clubs, rather than *intramural* games (notably, those of the Knickerbockers). The Protoball listing is pretty complete through 1860, but scanty thereafter, whereas the RIM reports all newspaper mentions of match games through 1865. For the period 1866-70, a survey of Elysian Fields (EF) mentions in the nation's premier baseball-reporting newspaper, the *New York Clipper*, will primarily be used.

We have reason to believe that matches entered in Protoball and RIM are a representative sample of the matches actually played. The datasets contain many thousands of games, and while the numbers might reflect reported rather than actual games, there's no reason to suppose the reported games differ greatly from the actual.

As of October 2022, Protoball's PrePro Database includes about 200 accounts of games (mostly intramural) at New Jersey's Elysian Fields—less than 10% of the over 3,000 such games. The RIM database contains 2,506 games with listed venues. Of these, only 279 (11%) were played at Elysian Fields.

It should be noted that newspaper reports of games often listed the city the game was played in (Hoboken in the case of EF) rather than the specific venue.

Broken down further:

Period 1—1845 to 1857

From late 1845 to 1853, most games in Protoball were *intramural* contests among the Knickerbockers; over 100 such games are entered. There were only six games involving other clubs before 1853, two of which were intermural games for other clubs (Gothams in 1845, New York Base Ball Club in 1845). For this period, there were only 4 *interclub* games at EF, three in 1845-6 and one in 1851 (Knickerbockers v. Gothams).

Data from RIM: 3 EF *interclub* matches games are listed -- one for 1845, one for 1851, and one for 1853. Only two other match games are listed in RIM: an 1845 contest in Brooklyn and the 1851 game at Red House in Manhattan

Starting in 1853, the majority (roughly 90%) of 80 reported games) are *interclub* games.

Data for the period 1854-57 comes from the RIM database.

RIM lists 28 interclub matches from 1854 through 1857.

In 1854, 7 games are listed: 4 at EF and 3 at Red House in Manhattan.

In 1855, EF hosted 7 interclub games, about one-fifth of the games listed for that year

In 1856, EF hosted 10 of the 62 match games for that year (most of them in the Greater NYC area)

In 1857, EF hosted 8 of over 130 games listed, all but one of them in Greater NYC.

Overall, for match games between clubs 1845-57, Tholkes RIM has 247 such games reported in the NYC newspapers. Of these, 151 listed game sites (venues). 32 of these at EF—a little over 21%. During this period, more games were played in Brooklyn than in Hoboken (EF).

Period 2—1858 to 1865

For the years 1858-65, the RIM newspaper compilation has 2,355 games with known venues (about half of all the reported games). Of the 2,355, only 247 (10.5%) were played at EF. EF was the largest single reported venue, but as can be seen, only a small percentage of reported games were played there. And since the database is of NYC newspapers, with little reporting of non-NYC games, the nationwide percentage for EF would be much less than that 10.5%.

Period 3 -- After the Civil War

For 1866-70, EF had even less impact. Just looking at the reports in the *New York Clipper*, of nearly 5,000 games played in that timeframe, only 17 (less than 1%) can be definitely shown to have been played at EF.

Clubs

In addition to game totals, Protoball also has data on baseball clubs. The data shows that about 30 clubs playing at EF between 1845 and 1865. This is a small fraction of the over 1,000 clubs that existed in the New York City metropolitan area during this period. From this data alone, it appears that most baseball clubs in metropolitan New York City (let alone the nation) did not play at EF.

Conclusions

From this data, it is hard to conclude that play at EF strongly affected baseball's trajectory after the 1857 rules changes. There simply weren't enough games being played there, and the founding club of EF baseball, the Knickerbockers, was no longer recognized as on the cutting edge of baseball.

As for impact on playing rules, there isn't much direct evidence of specific changes stemming from EF. However, a case can be made that the '57 rule changes were affected by defects in the 1845 rules¹ as experienced by intraclub and intramural play at EF (and elsewhere) from 1845 into the 1850s.

One article on the 1857 Rules Convention² makes clear that while the Knickerbocker Club presented a draft of the rules to the convention, the convention modified the draft, changing some suggestions and deleting others. The committee that reviewed the draft was headed by a member of the Gotham Club, and 15 other clubs participated in the

convention. While it is evident that the experience of actual play led to some of the 1857 rules changes, it is by no means evident that the changes were brought about solely by play at EF.

One could rightly label EF one of early baseball's primary "proving grounds." But perhaps late-50s Brooklyn ballplayers and grounds better deserve that distinction, seeing as how by 1857 many more baseball games were being played in Brooklyn than either EF or the various Manhattan venues.³

¹ Richard Hershberger's book *Strike Four* has interesting discussions of shortcomings in the skeletal 1845 Knick rules, including:

- 1) the evolution of the force rule
- 2) baserunning and the balk rule
- 3) problems with the 21-run rule
- 4) the movement toward called pitches
- 5) the one-bound rule

² Richard Hershberger, "1857 Winter Meetings; The First Baseball Convention," online at <https://sabr.org/journal/article/1857-winter-meetings-the-first-baseball-convention/#:~:text=The%201857%20rules%2C%20however%2C%20stated,ailure%20to%20deliver%20the%20ball.&text=The%20ball%20was%20standardized%20at,to%2010%C2%BC%20inches%20in%20circumference>. See also the Our Game blog (<https://ourgame.mlblogs.com/>), March 31, April 3, 2016.

³ For the numbers on ball-play in Brooklyn, see my "Escape from New York"--How Baseball's Center Moved from Brooklyn to Philadelphia," SABR Origins of Baseball Committee Newsletter, October 2022, pp 18-19.

Early Baseball Grounds--The Boston Common

By Bruce Allardice



Established in 1634 (only four years after the city was founded), Boston Common has been celebrated as “the outdoor stage on which many characteristic dramas of local life have been enacted.”¹ Situated in the center of historic Boston, across from the State House, the now 50-acre Common is said to be the oldest public recreation area in the United States. It is today a park, bounded by Beacon, Park, Tremont, Boylston and Charles Streets.

The term "commons" derives from the traditional English legal term for common land, which are also known as "commons". This concept of land which all members of a community could use in common (usually for livestock grazing or public events) transplanted itself to the 13 Colonies, and especially to early settlements in Massachusetts. The Boston Common was so popular for grazing that the land quickly became overgrazed, and by 1646 the town was forced to place restrictions on the

animals pastured there. However, limited numbers of cattle and sheep continued to roam the Common until the 1830s.

In 1910 one author recalled how the Common was the playground for Boston's youth:

"At a time when there was little of Boston except "Boston Proper," when the present outlying parks, avenues and water-fronts were unknown, the Common provided the inevitable outlet for the energies of the young. It is safe to say, moreover, that just because it was the playground of so many generations of the older generation, it has taken hold upon their affections and imaginations which time has not relaxed."²

Being open, public space, these commons were quickly used for athletic events. Protoball suggests that cricket was played on Boston Common as early as 1700. In his 1726 diary, Bostonian Samuel Sewall grumbled that his grandson skipped morning prayers "to play at Wicket on the Common."

At a later date, the various town Commons were a natural venue for baseball. The Commons in such Massachusetts cities as Cambridge, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford and Worcester doubled as those city's first venues for baseball playing. The Boston Common was no exception. As an 1856 baseball enthusiast wrote, "Boston Common is covered with amateur parties of men and boys playing base."³



Map of Boston Common, 1814. From wiki

One of the first, if not THE first, games of base ball outside New York City, was played in Boston on July 4, 1853, by members of the Olympic Ball Club. This was not, evidently, their first game—just the first game that made it to the newspapers. It was 10 players on each side, and likely was played under the Massachusetts rules that allowed “soaking.” In September of the same year, this Olympic Club played the Aurora Club best three games out of five, the prize for the winners being “10 boxes of Havana cigars.”

GAMES AT BASS BALL.—The "Olympic Ball Club" have another of their exciting games on Boston Common, on Monday morning, July 4th, at half past 4 o'clock. A division of members consisting of 10 on each side, play "Bass Ball" best 3 in 5 for breakfast at the Revere House. A band of music, engaged for the occasion, will perform at the end of each game. Prof Kingman, of the St George's Cricket Club, London, has kindly offered his services, and will conduct the exercises. The pleasure loving public are invited to be present.

Boston *Daily Bee*, July 2, 1853

The Common was also the site of the first game in Boston played according to the New York rules; the Sept. 9, 1858 ballgame in the Common.



Cricket play on Boston Common. From *Ballou's Pictorial*, Jan. 4, 1859

For more on early ball-play at Boston Common, see Brian Turner, “Item 1726.2, Ballplaying and Boston Common: A Town Playground for Boys and Men” in *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game* (vol. 5, no. 1 Spring 2011). For more on Boston Common, see Howe, *Boston Common: Scenes from Four Centuries* (1910), and Weesner, *Boston Common* (2005).

¹ Mark Howe, *Boston Common: Scenes from Four Centuries* (1910), p. 7.

² Howe, *Boston Common*, p. 59.

³ Cited in George Kirsch, *Baseball in Blue & Gray* (2007), p. 3.

William Wheaton, “Soaking,” and the Birth of Baseball

In 1887, baseball pioneer William Wheaton laid out how he and his friends began playing baseball in 1837—eight years prior to the first known game of the famous Knickerbocker Club. The interview is important to baseball history for many reasons, such as Wheaton’s claim that he set down the baseball rules that were later publicized by the Knickerbockers (Wheaton also had a hand in drawing up those rules).

This excerpt shows that, for Wheaton and his confreres, the most important change they made from predecessor bat-ball games was not so much the concept of foul territory, but rather the abolition of “soaking”—getting a runner out by hitting him with a thrown ball. “Soaking” (or “Plugging”) had been a feature of most early bat-ball games, and remained a feature of bat-ball games through the 1860s.

“Myself and intimates, young merchants, lawyers and physicians, found cricket to[o] slow and lazy a game. We couldn’t get enough exercise out of it. Only the bowler and the batter had anything to do, and the rest of the players might stand around all the afternoon without getting a chance to stretch their legs. Racket was lively enough, but it was expensive and not in an open field where we could have full swing and plenty of fresh air with a chance to roll on the grass. Three-cornered cat was a boy’s game, and did well enough for slight youngsters, but it was a dangerous game for powerful men, because the ball was thrown to put out a man between bases, and it had to hit the runner to put him out. The ball was made of a hard rubber center, tightly wrapped with yarn, and in the hands of a strong-armed man it was a terrible missile, and sometimes had fatal results when it came in contact with a delicate part of the player’s anatomy. ...



From "Our Game" blog, July 3, 2012

[“]The first step we took in making baseball was to abolish the rule of throwing the ball at the runner and order that it should be thrown to the baseman instead, who had to touch the runner with it before he reached the base. During the regime of three-cornered cat there were no regular bases, but only such permanent objects as a bedded boulder or an old stump, and often the diamond looked strangely like an irregular polygon. We laid out the ground at Madison square in the form of an accurate diamond, with home-plate and sand-bags for bases. You must remember that what is now called Madison square, opposite the Fifth Avenue Hotel, in the thirties was out in the country, far from the city limits. We had no short-stop, and often played with only six or seven men on a side. The scorer kept the game in a book we had made for that purpose, and it was he who decided all disputed points. The modern umpire and his tribulations were unknown to us.”

(from the San Francisco *Examiner*, Nov. 27, 1887; see full text at <https://medium.com/our-game/how-baseball-began-william-r-wheaton-tells-his-story-4b278edc172>)

Towards a Definition of Baseball? (Part II)

By Bruce Allardice

The September 2021 *Origins of Baseball Newsletter* tried to define “What is Baseball” in relation to other bat-ball games.¹ After a lengthy and sometimes heated panel discussion among experts, nine criteria were identified as the essential elements of baseball.

1. A game played by two teams, with;
2. “Fair” and “foul” territory; and
3. A pitcher who tosses or throws a ball to a batter, and;
4. A batter who tries to hit that ball;
5. With a bat;
6. To score runs, which runs are created by the batter circling multiple bases to the “Home” plate;
7. In a game whose length is measured by a defined number of outs or runs, where;
8. The winning team scores the most runs, and;
9. The game has known rules (hopefully, written rules).

The next step in this analysis is determining how other common bat-ball games stack up to these criteria. This article will attempt to quantify how these other games resemble baseball—or at least, the identified essential elements that make up modern baseball.

The Chart below compares baseball to other common bat-ball games which have, at one time or another, been offered as predecessors of baseball.

Game	Criteria 1	Criteria 2	Criteria 3-8	Criteria 9*	Score
Baseball	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9.0
Single Wicket Cricket	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9.0
MA Baseball**	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	8.5
Cricket	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	8.0
Canadian Baseball***	Yes	No	Yes	No?	7.5
Phil. Town Ball	Yes	No	Yes	No?	7.0
Rounders	Yes	No?	Yes	No	7.0
Stoolball	Yes	No	Yes	No	7.0
4 Old Cat	Yes	No	Yes	No	7.0
Wicket	Yes	No	Yes	No	7.0
1-2-3 Old Cat	No	No	Yes	No	6.0

*Rules developed and written down prior to New York baseball rules.

**I’m arbitrarily assigning an extra half point to games that have “baseball” in their names.

*** Per Bill Humber’s description of the 1838-54 game in Protoball. The 1838 game doesn’t appear to have foul lines.

All of these predecessor games contain elements of criterion 3-8.

As to Criterion 1 (Teams)—Single wicket cricket can be played one on one, or more usually, any number up to five a side. For purposes of the chart, I'm assuming more than one a side—i.e., a team.

As to Criterion 2 (Foul Ground)---As can be seen, the concept of “foul” territory is a (the?) main point of difference between New York Rules baseball and other bat-ball games. The Massachusetts baseball variant, for example, had no rules on fair or foul ground.² An 1829 book (Clarke's) suggests a sort of concept of foul ground in Rounders, but this is not repeated in subsequent descriptions of the game.³

As to Criterion 9 (Rules)---Asking for evidence of rules (written or otherwise) threatens to turn our hunt into a hunt for the *recording* of rules, rather than the rules itself. Richard Hersberger's article on Philadelphia Town Ball⁴ makes the point that rules can (mostly) be reconstructed if one has enough game reports and such. For Philadelphia Town Ball, most of the rules could be deduced. And they make no mention of foul territory.

Same with Rounders. Clarke's *Boys Own Book*⁵ describes how rounders was played, from which we can at least deduce the rules at the time. But no formal rules were written down (so far as we know) until 1884. Similarly, no formal/written Stoolball rules can be detected until the late 1800s.⁶

What's in a name?--Historian Richard Hersberger argues that “Looking at the pre-modern forms, the earliest commentators were clearly correct. Baseball and rounders were one and the same (as were town ball and round ball). The difference is merely one of dialect: no more (and no less) significant than an Englishman calling a “lorry” what an American would call a ‘truck.’”⁷

Plugging (aka Soaking)—Plugging is not listed in the above criteria, but baseball founder William Wheaton recalled that when, in 1837, he and his friends decided to play bat-ball games, the most notable change they made to the way they were used to playing bat-ball games was by banning plugging (getting a runner out by hitting him with a thrown baseball). A fuller description of Wheaton's recollections is in this newsletter.

Historian Peter Morris considered the move away from plugging a revolutionary change.⁸ Baseball founder William Wheaton would probably have agreed. If the move away from plugging is added to the nine criteria above, the resemblance “score” would look different.

Baseball Terminology--We can also go beyond the mechanical numbering of characteristics and look at what predecessor games most share the same terminology, equipment, etc. with baseball. Here Rounders starts looking better. If we think of New York Rules baseball as Rounders with the addition of foul lines and written rules, we may not be far off track, despite the lack of evidence the Rounders was played in the U.S. prior to 1845. Or (perhaps) more accurately, Rounders inspired various bat-ball games that in their turn inspired New York Rules baseball.

Arguably, the best way to summarize this discussion is a quote from baseball historian Bill Ryczek about figuring out origins: "If you are interested in the genealogy of ball games, you quickly learn that it is easy to find similarities, but hard to prove ancestry."⁹ The chart score above should be considered as the basis of further discussion on this topic, and not as a final answer.

¹ Bruce Allardice, "Towards a Definition of Baseball," SABR Origins of Baseball Committee Newsletter, Sept. 2021, pp. 12-15.

² See Our Game blog, July 3, 2012.

³ For more on the concept of "foul" ground, see Bruce Allardice, "Single Wicket Cricket and the Origins of Baseball's Foul Line," SABR Origins of Baseball Committee Newsletter, Oct. 2022, pp. 4-10.

⁴ Richard Hershberger article on Philadelphia Town Ball, in *Base Ball*, v. 1; see Our Game blog, May 29, 2013.

⁵ William Clarke, *The Boys Own Book* (1829).

⁶ See David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (2005).

⁷ Richard Hershberger, "Baseball and Rounders," *Base Ball* v. 3 (Spring 2009) 81-93 at 91.

⁸ Peter Morris, *But Didn't We Have Fun* (2010), p. 28.

⁹ William Ryczek, *Baseball's First Inning* (2009), p. 40.

Potpourri

Baseball on Horseback?

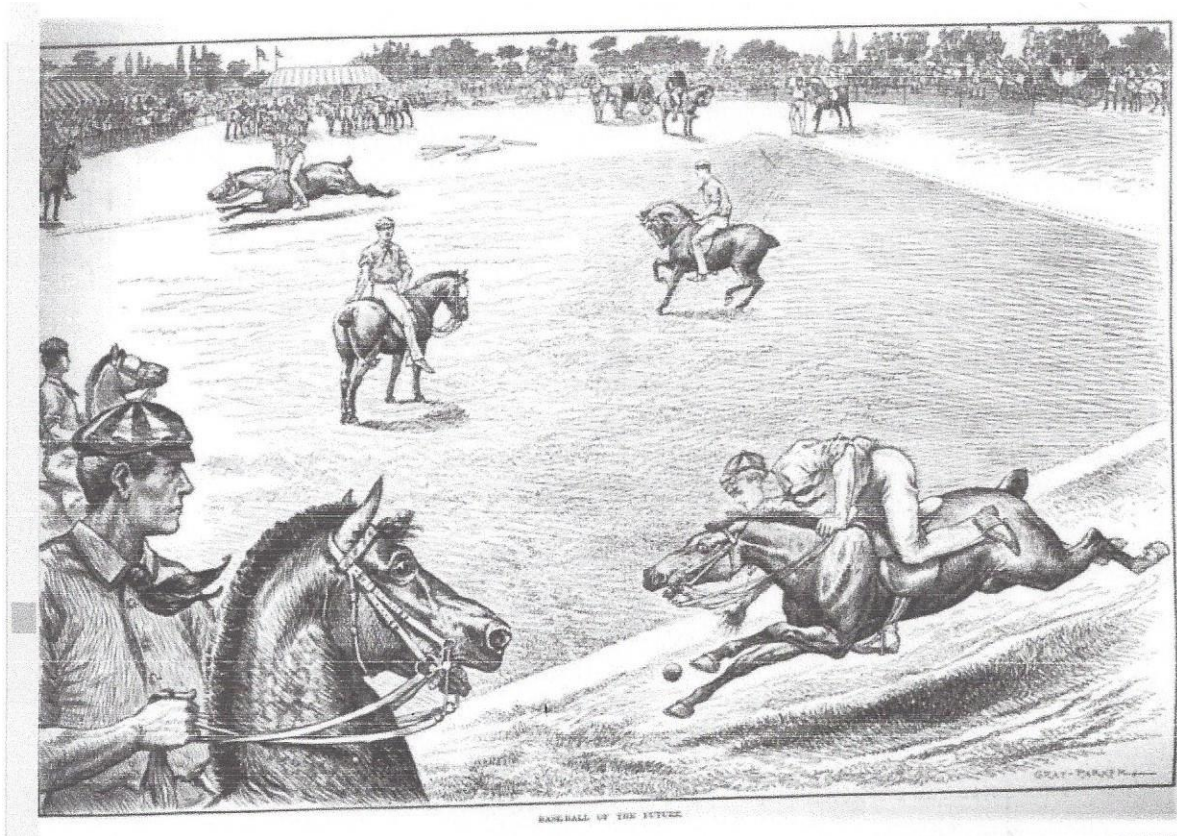
(from the New York *Evening Post*, July 26, 1867)

Base Ball on its Travels.

The contagious character of the base-ball epidemic receives a new illustration in a report from a Honolulu Journal. It appears that this "national game" has been naturalized even in the Sandwich Islands, and a grand match is reported, which took place on the Esplanade at Honolulu last month, in the presence of nearly the whole population of the town. There was a novel episode on this occasion, which has not been introduced into the game elsewhere. "A runner, who was unable to reach one of the bases without being put out by being touched with the ball, 'put out' gallantly on a bee-line up-town, followed by his antagonists in full cry. It was a stern chase, and threatened to be a long one, but by a happy thought one of the antagonists mounted a saddled horse, standing near by, which soon settled the contest, and the crowd returned to first position, with the foot-ball player 'out,' according to rule."

A hint to American players: Have a horse ready saddled, and handily placed during the game, to overtake "skedaddlers!"

This report was of a game played May 25th, reported in the Honolulu *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* June 1, 1867



“Base ball in the Future” (from *Harper’s Weekly*, June 9, 1883)

Yet Another Old-Timer.... But this one Welcomes “Modern” Baseball

From the Concord (NH) *Statesman*, Oct. 5, 1866

The correspondent notes that the old games of base ball (presumably under the Massachusetts rules) had no foul lines, and allowed “soaking.” In his opinion, the modern New York rules game is faster-played and allows for more skill to be displayed. It’s an interesting contemporary take on early baseball.

BASE BALL. A brief paragraph in the last *Statesman* announced that a trial of skill at Base Ball took place on the preceding day, between the Dartmouth Club, of Hanover, and the Kearsarge Club, of this city. As these exhibitions are a novelty in this city, it is well to return to the subject, and make more particular mention of the affair than was practicable last week.

The day was in the highest degree favorable, and the place selected not merely well adapted for the game, but having very agreeable surroundings. The club ground was separated from territory appropriated to spectators, a dividing rope being stretched in semi-circular form, around which all gathered who came to see. On the western portion of the line were settees, appropriated for the occupancy of young ladies, who were out in considerable force.

The game of Base Ball, as now played, is radically different, both in its rules and its conduct, from that of *auld lang syne*. To play it well requires a degree of fleetness and skill then not brought into requisition. Under the old plan, a striker could, with much frequency, pass every bound (now called *bases*), and return home before the ball, because there were then none stationed over the ground to expedite its return, when heavily struck. Then, too, there was no range prescribed for the direction of the ball when struck. There were no *foul* balls, if we have the right term. The striker could send it

careering fifty feet into the air, and any distance in his power to propel it, even directly back of his stand-point, and it passed, although, perhaps, not regarded as just the thing. Then, four on a side was regarded a good complement, while now the required number is nine. These are so disposed upon the field that a ball, however far propelled by the striker, is returned with much expedition ; so that when a player is on his course along the bases he must be more swift of foot than was necessary for players in the old game. It was also the usage to throw the ball at a player when passing from one base to another, and not unfrequently there was a somewhat painful concussion between a ball and the head, back, belly, or ribs of a nice young man when making as good time as possible on the home stretch. Now it would be regarded as "flat burglary" to throw the ball: it must be employed only to touch the person of the player, when off the base. Formerly when one was out, all his companions were out; now it requires three to carry out the side.

The rigid rules and constant practice of the present mode cause the game to be played with far more skill than formerly. There were, under the old system, good specimens of catching, throwing, striking and running; but they were not half so frequent as now. Members of both clubs; indeed, it might be said that about all the members of the two clubs assembled on the 27th, were experts.

To catch a swiftly sent ball, heavy as those now used, without damaging the hand, requires much skill. Good catchers give the hands a receding motion, just as the ball reaches them. In this way the force of the concussion is lessened. This, however, seems to be practised only when the ball is sent upon a line nearly horizontal: When thrust high by the striker, and the catchers attempted to arrest it when descending, they appeared to suffer some.

The game of which we speak was commenced about

Latest Protoball Additions

Total numbers—As of Jan. 5, 2023, the Protoball **Pre-Pro (pre-1871) Database** contained 11,723 clubs and 3,941 ballgames, with a further 5,000 games in the searchable Tholkes RIM file but only partially entered into the Pre-Pro database. Since the last newsletter, 255 clubs and 22 ballgames have been added.

Of the 291 U.S. cities in 1870 with a population of 5,000 or more, pre-1871 baseball has been found in 289 of them. The fishing cities of Gloucester, MA and Calais, ME are the only exceptions.

For the so-called “**predecessor**” **games** such as townball and cricket, there are 616 U.S. entries. Since the last newsletter, 9 such games/clubs have been added. The “**Glossary of Games**” includes 323 predecessor and derivative bat-ball games. The “**Chronology**” has 2,027 entries.

289 early U.S. **baseball fields** are described, including baseball fields in all 50 states. Since the last newsletter, 22 fields have been added.

Recently the whole **New Jersey/Greater New York City** pre-pro list of clubs and games has been added to (h/t to John Zinn on this) and reorganized.

Protoball is in the process of adding specific links to the latest research on **Elysian Fields**, the site of the early games of the New York Knickerbockers. Visit Elysian Fields—Topics; Elysian Fields—Subtopics; and other categories, in Protoball.

Find of the Month

Six-Man Baseball

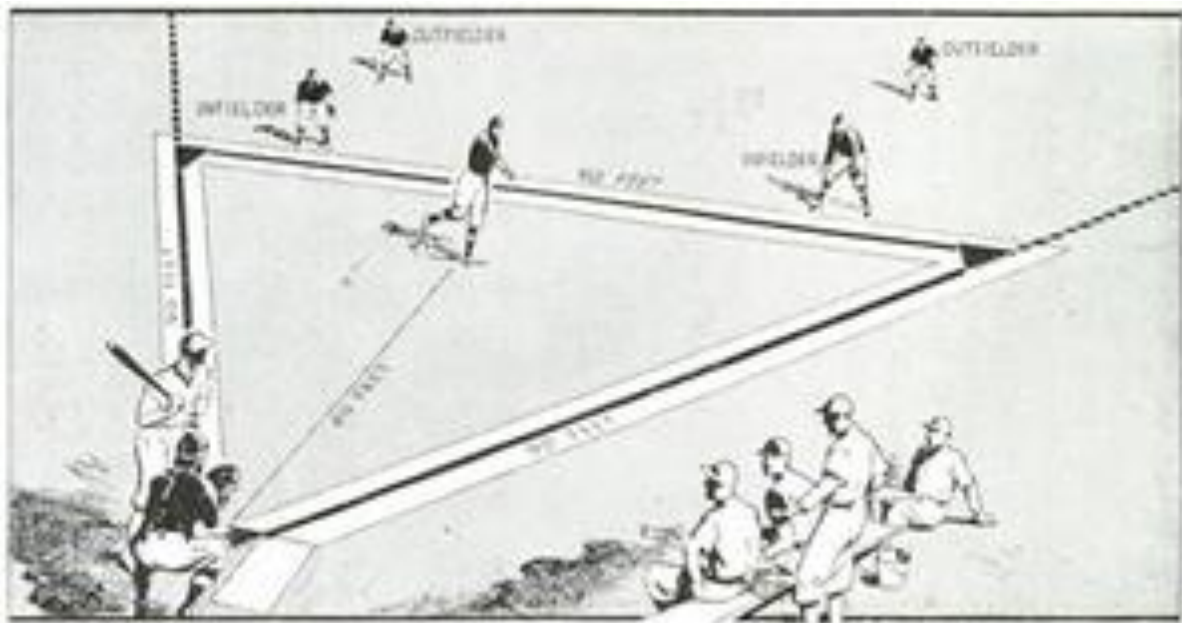
Not, technically, a new “find,” but new to Protoball. This game was featured in the December 1939 issue of *Popular Mechanics* and was invented by Stephen Epler to allow smaller groups of players to play games quicker. Five years previously, Epler had

invented a game called "six-man football" so, naturally, he also came up with "six-man baseball". From the magazine:

Each team is composed of six players – two infielders, two outfielders, a pitcher and a catcher. Instead of four bases, the "diamond" is composed of three, including home plate. Bases are equal distances apart – ninety feet when a hard ball is used – and they are located at the corners of an equilateral triangle. A full game is six innings, and two strikes, instead of three, retire the batter. Foul balls are counted as half-strikes, and the hitter is called out on four fouls. Three balls, instead of four, give a base on balls.

This variant game was played at a few schools in 1939-40, but disappeared after that.

The picture below is an artist's rendition of the sport, and, I have to admit, it looks intriguing. It got me wondering just how the game would play if baseball were really played this way.



From *Baseball Prospectus*

Research Requests

Elysian Fields Project: Protoball has opened a page on the state of knowledge about Elysian Fields and its influence on the evolution of baseball. Irwin Chusid and Jon Popovich have expressed strong interest in writing further about Elysian Fields, and will participate in this limited-term discussion. For a riveting presentation on Elysian Fields from a baseball researcher's point of view, see Irwin and Jonathan's recent Youtube presentation at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwJGWeWDHPA>.

Protoball has found and listed baseball in all but seven of the world's 200 countries. But we're still looking for baseball in the tiny countries of Andorra and Liechtenstein (Europe); Dominica (Caribbean); Maldives, Timor-Leste (Asia); Sao Tome, and Equatorial Guinea (Africa). Plus the UK dependency of Montserrat. Since the last newsletter, baseball has been found as early as 1934 in the UK Crown Dependency of the Isle of Man.



BULLETIN BOARD

Tom Gilbert's latest book project is a biography of baseball's first superstar, James Creighton. It's titled *Unhittable: The Mystery of James Creighton, Baseball's First Star* and will be published by Godine Publisher. We all look forward to reading it.

MLB's official "Our Game" blog, headed by **John Thorn**, is always a delight to read. One recent entry of interest to Origins aficionados is the Oct. 10, 2022 entry on the 1843 Magnolia Base Ball Club. Visit <https://ourgame.mlblogs.com/the-magnolia-the-knickerbocker-and-the-age-of-flash-77f45383f6e5> for more.

Registration is now open for the 14th annual **SABR Frederick Ivor-Campbell 19th Century Base Ball Conference**, which will be held on April 28-29, 2023, at the

Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. All baseball fans are welcome to register for this special event.

The 2023 conference will be highlighted by a keynote address from author (and origins guru) **Jonathan Popovich**, along with a panel discussion on baseball's 19th-century color line with Richard Hershberger, Peter Mancuso, Brian Sheehy, and moderator Bill Ryczek; a 19th-century artifact session with Robert Mayer, Greg Passamonte, and Popovich; a Member Spotlight interview of Robert Mayer by Bob Bailey; plus research presentations and a Sunday morning vintage baseball game at Doubleday Field.

The presenters include Origins friends like Bill Ryczek, Irwin Chusid, Bob Tholkes, Richard Hershberger, Peter Mancuso, Brian Sheehy. Tom Gilbert and Justin McKinney.

The next SABR national convention will be held July 5-9, 2023, at the Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL.

The SABR national convention is an annual gathering of writers, researchers, fans, players, executives, scouts and many others throughout the baseball community. Attendance is open to all, regardless of SABR membership. The convention includes five days of activities and excursions, including dozens of research presentations, panel discussions and group trips to major league and minor league ballgames.



The Boston Common, 1848. From Howe, *Boston Common*, p. 46.