

A Brief History of Baseball

By Robert L. Harrison

Baseball is nearly as old as America. A version of the game was played in the early 1800s. Not only has baseball grown up with the country, in many ways, it mimics many of the positive features of American culture. The game was adopted by newly arrived immigrants and offered them great opportunity to succeed. The useful and ubiquitous baseball cap is worn around the world for sporting events and causes of all description. Baseball has been celebrated in music, poetry and the movies.

The object of Baseball is winning but not by doing unnecessary physical harm to your opponent. Its name is from its marquee feature: the “base”, where a player is safe from the perils of a route to “home”. It includes plays known as the “sacrifice” and the “bunt”. Baseball’s most aggressive play, the “homerun”, occurs when the batter hits the ball as far as possible and scores a run by sprinting around the bases and returning safely to home.

Abner Doubleday is often given credit for dreaming up the game of baseball in 1839 while at West Point. He went on to become a Civil War hero and was said to encourage the game to his troops. It is now clear though that baseball in some form was being played long before Doubleday’s dreams as a cadet.

The first documented references to a game of baseball are thought to have been on April 23, 1823 in *The National Advocate* and the rival *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser*. The articles referred to the Saturday games of “base ball” being played at the corner of Broadway and 8th Street in lower Manhattan. In 1823 this corner would have been pasture land.

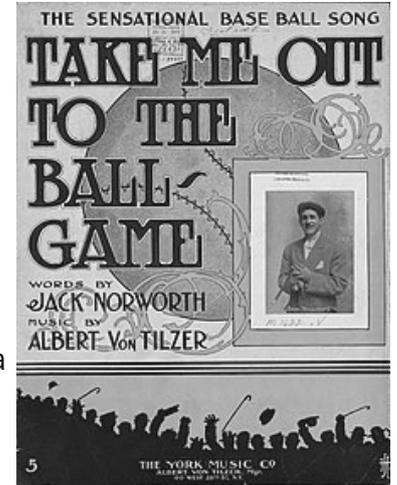
Rules for a game somewhat akin to modern baseball were first developed by the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club in 1845. These rules included a field with a diamond, foul lines, three strikes and you’re out and making outs by tagging rather than hitting the runner with a thrown ball.

In 1851, the first references to baseball in the Bay Area appeared in the February 4th issue of the *California Courier*. The *Courier* opined, “The plaza [Portsmouth Square] has at last been turned to some account by our citizens. Yesterday quite a crowd collected upon it, to take part in and witness a game of ball, many taking a hand. We are better pleased at it than to witness the crowds in the gambling saloons which surround the square.”

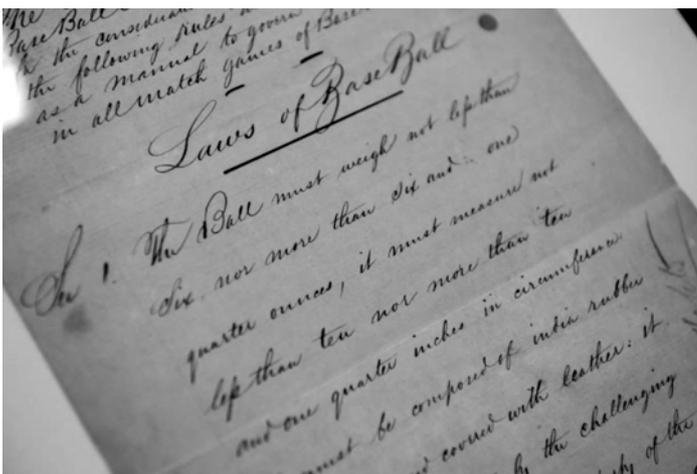
Two days later the *Daily Alta California* reported, “Base Ball – This is becoming quite popular among our sporting gentry, who have an exercise upon the plaza nearly every day. This is certainly better amusement than ‘bucking’ and if no windows or heads are broken will prove much more profitable.”

The *Laws of Base Ball*, which some historians consider the “Magna Carta” of the game, were written in 1857. The rules were agreed to in a convention called by the Knickerbocker Club. Important rules which are still in use today include: nine players on a side; nine innings to game; and 90 feet between the bases.

In 1858, shortly following the “Laws”, the concept of a strike zone and called strikes was instituted. Prior to that change games could be unduly extended as there was no incentive for the batter to swing at a pitch, even if it was perfectly hittable.



Bing.com/images



Laws of Baseball

Source: Michael Robinson Chaves/the Washington Post

The game grew enormously through the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1858 the *Daily Alta* reprinted an article from the *New York Times*, “The readers of the Times must have noticed the extraordinary increase of attention lately on the part of the public to base ball and cricket playing.”

In 1860, the *Sacramento Daily Union* published a game box score quite similar to the modern version. The *Union’s* box score listed the players by batting order and field position, the same nine field positions of today’s game. The numbers of runs and outs were the only statistics shown for each player. The result of the game was San Francisco Eagles 31, Sacramento Club 17.

The first reference to a north bay baseball club was in the April 25, 1861 *Sonoma Democrat* report: “A base-ball club has been organized at Santa Rosa”. The *Marin Journal* reported on a game played in San Rafael on July 21, 1867 between two San Francisco teams. The *Journal* also reported on games played in San Jose. On April 20, 1867, the Santa Clara College Originals beat the San Jose Atlas 62 to 27.

The early games frequently resulted in a higher score and a longer game time than is typical today. This was due in part to the pitcher not being penalized for throwing countless unhittable balls to the batter. There was no “walk” rule in the early games. In 1863, a system of “called balls”, pitches not within the strike zone, was recognized to limit this pitching technique. Initially the new rule allowed the batter to walk to first base after nine pitches were called outside the strike zone. By 1889 the modern four ball walk rule was instituted.

Baseball was no doubt being played by Marin teams in the 1860s but there is no reference to a local team until October 23, 1869 when the *Marin Journal* reported, “Base Ball Club – A base ball club was organized in this place on Tuesday night last.” In the 1870s additional teams were organized in San Rafael and others soon appeared all over Marin including Tomales, Nicasio, Sausalito, Mill Valley, Novato and the Ross Valley.

With the growth of the game it was inevitable that paid professional teams would arise. The Cincinnati Red Stockings, the first “all-professional” team, emerged in 1869. The Red Stockings visited San Francisco and played local teams in September 1869, a major event in the Bay Area’s baseball history. By 1876 the professional National League was created with eight teams from Boston to St. Louis. The rival American League formed in 1900. Baseball’s “modern era” began in 1903 when the National Baseball Commission was created. The first major league “World Series” was played in October that year with Boston of the American League beating Pittsburgh of the National League.

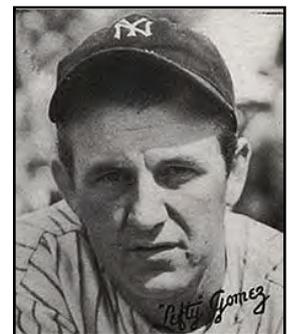


Novato Colts 1915 Source: Novato, Novato Historical Guild



Babe Ruth Source: Bing.com/images

Marin County had little contact with major league teams until 1958 with the arrival of the Giants in San Francisco. However, the county did enjoy play by some well-known major leaguers. Babe Ruth played in a game at Point Reyes Station in 1926. The team from Point Reyes featured Marin resident and Hall of Fame pitcher Lefty Gomez. Gomez lived in Fairfax, and later in Novato, died in Greenbrae and was buried in San Rafael in 1989.



Lefty Gomez Source: Wikipedia.com

There have been fifteen major league players born in Marin. The most notable among them was Sam Chapman of Tiburon

(see page 11).

Baseball, whether professional or amateur, continues today as it has for 200 years as a healthy form of summer-time exercise and/or entertainment for all ages. In 1856, there was good reason that the *New York Mercury* newspaper termed the game the “national pastime”.