

Civil War Era Baseball

By Midge Holmes

As we commemorate the 150 anniversary of the start of the Civil War, we also need to note that baseball was played back then. The Civil War was America's most deadly war with over 620,000 lives lost. But baseball was baptized during this bloody conflict, and blue and grey soldiers propelled the sport into the game we know and love today. It provided common ground in a country torn apart by conflict. For during this conflict, baseball blossomed across our nation and became "America's Pastime." Even in D.C. the President's Park, now the Ellipse, contained a baseball field back then.

It all started with the northerners, who, when they went to war, grabbed bats and balls, or sometimes even fence posts and a round object resembling a ball one could throw, hit or catch easily. The game moved south. Soon both the north and the south shared the common interest of playing ball, although not with each other. Although in some prison camps where guards opposed inmates, some abusive guards were accused of "laming opponents" before a game.

Soldiers from both sides treasured playing time between battles, when they could forget their foes and enjoy the camaraderie of a ball game. Some letters to families at home contained more stories of ball games than war stories as games undoubtedly helped to keep their minds off the wounding and the dying. Even now baseball has provided escape of a sort.

During those years, people from all backgrounds played. Interestingly, athletic talent trumped military rank, and the participation of so many every day soldiers help to spread the popularity of the game throughout the nation after the war.

In addition to being fun, the game enhanced morale, built team spirit, and contributed to physical conditioning. Team play “united soldiers like nothing else could.” But baseball uniforms were discouraged at first because players did not want to resemble a “flock of birds in a field.”

Sometimes contests were attended by as many as a 1,000 spectators, then called “cranks,” and made front page news almost equal to journalistic reports of battles, especially if a game was interrupted by a call to battle.

There were real rules codified in 1860, which were first devised by Alexander Cartwright. Union General Abner Doubleday later popularized the game and is usually given credit for founding it. But it was Cartwright who decided foul lines, 9 players per side, diamond shaped fields, 3 strikes and you’re out, and three outs per inning. And surprisingly, the differences in the games during the Civil War from today’s games are mainly in terminology. But then as now, sportsmanship, gentlemanly behavior and respect for others were standard. No rudeness, scowling, spitting, swearing, scratching, consumption of alcohol, chewing of tobacco, or “wagering” were allowed. Gentlemen players were to refrain from commenting on the umpire’s judgment, thus receiving it in “cold silence.” And pitchers (hurlers) and batters (strickers) were not really adversaries. Strickers liked to point out particularly sweet targets for the hurler’s aim to the plate. Home plates were round, flat and made of iron back then.

Umpiring rules in those days:

You call only foul balls, as today.

You can ask players or spectators for assistance in making close calls.

Advise a batter when he lets good pitches pass by.

You may levy a fine on the spot for unsportsmanlike conduct.
You may call “no plugging” of a runner (throwing a ball with the purpose of hitting a running opponent).

Playing rules back then (note those which resemble softball today):

The batter was called a striker.
No protective equipment was permitted.
Balls were caught bare handed.
Balls were pitched only underhand.
Runners could not take a lead off a base.
No base stealing.
A batter is out if a batted ball is caught either from one hop off the ground,
or on the fly.
Foul balls are not considered strikes.
Bunting was held in low esteem.
No overrunning of bases was permitted.
The first team to score 21 runs (runs) wins.
A runner is out if he does not return to a base before a foul ball is returned to
the pitcher.

Terminology then and now:

<u>Vintage terms</u>	<u>Modern equivalent term</u>
baste ball	baseball
club nine	team
match	game
muff	error
home base	home plate
pitcher’s point	mound
playground	field
cranks	fans
hand lost	player out
adversary	opponent
batsman/striker	batter
game keeper	score keeper

ace	run
leg it	run to base
scout	outfielder
behind	catcher
hurler	pitcher
dew drop	slow pitch
foul tick	foul ball
tally	score

So if an NVSS game were played back then, an announcer might be heard saying, “The baste ball club nine match was in session on the playground. The hurler threw his best dew drop from the pitcher’s point which was hit by the striker and subsequently caught on one hop by a scout. The cranks yelled approvingly and the adversary was hand lost. There was no major muff in the play. But one of the runners was able to leg it to home base to score an ace without the behind catching the throw. The whole match was tallied accurately by the attending game keeper.”

And, should you want more particulars, try Googling the terms ‘Civil War and baseball’ to find accounts of individual ball games at several well-known battlefields. Many of these vintage games are being reenacted this year, such as the recent tournament in Manassas (Bull Run) this past July 2011. Read Pauline Berkovich’s recent account of Bull Run games in the Washington Times.

Bibliography:

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Paula Berkovich, Washington Times, Thursday July 21, 2011.