

# *This Diamond Isle*

An anthology of new writing on baseball and its links to Britain | **Volume 1** (2014)



Baseball fields of Britain: A historical review – by *Josh Chetwynd* | Pages **2–11**

Batting next... Jane Austen! – by *David Block* | Pages **12–19**

The joys of day-time baseball: Watching MLB games at a convenient hour in the UK – by *Matt Smith* | Pages **20–26**

In search of the best league system for British baseball – by *Aspi Dimitrov* | Pages **27–30**

A tedious and uninteresting game – by *Chris Jones* | Pages **31–36**

Thwack! Slap! Thwack! Slap! – by *Ryan Ferguson* | Pages **37–38**

Diamond dreams at The Oval: The 1988 national championship – by *Harvey Sahker* | Pages **39–41**

Acknowledgements and call for papers – by *Joe Gray* | Page **42**

**Edited by Joe Gray for Project COBB**

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# Baseball fields of Britain: A historical review



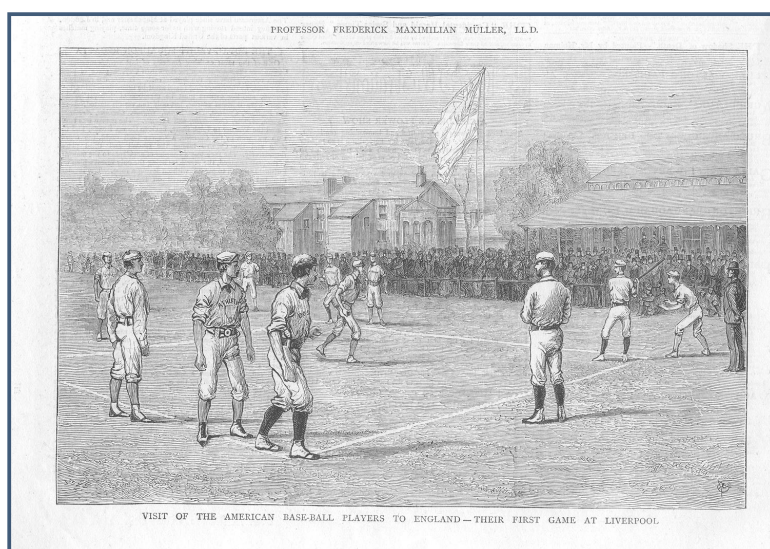
Award-winning  
entry (2013)

Josh Chetwynd

There is a general belief that one of the most alluring aspects of watching – or playing – baseball is a beautifully manicured field. Finely cut grass combined with vibrant brown clay and white chalk lines have led many to laud the design and structure of a well-conceived ball field. The greatest baseball stadia (think Wrigley Field or Fenway Park) are national treasures in the United States and a special baseball diamond, it seems, can even have metaphysical values. In the 1989 baseball movie *Field of Dreams*, the film's main character cuts down his crops to erect a baseball field because a disembodied voice promises that "if you build it, he will come."

In Great Britain, where baseball has been played since the 1870s, the sport's small but devoted following has yearned for the same type of ballpark magnetism as that fictitious Iowa cornfield provided. While baseball games have been contested on some of the most meaningful sporting pitches in Britain (along with many an uneven cow pasture), the question has always been: if you truly build an exquisite purpose-built baseball field in Britain, will players and fans alike come?

One of the earliest known images of a baseball field in Great Britain is an illustration from 1874 (*Figure 1*). The picture depicts the first game, played in Liverpool, of an exhibition tour



**Figure 1.** The first game, played in Liverpool, of an 1874 exhibition tour between the Boston Red Stockings and Philadelphia Athletics.

between the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics. The venue looks the part – complete with a white-lined infield. The grass surface appears smooth and, while it probably had little to do with the makeshift baseball field, there was a huge crowd on hand (likely because of the spectacle of watching the young American sport of baseball).

The Liverpool set-up was temporary, so the first

opportunity to really see what Britons could produce as baseball infrastructure took place in 1890. Following a tour of American players in 1889, a professional circuit called the National Base Ball League of Great Britain was established. Franchises were set up in Preston, Stoke, Derby, and Birmingham, and each club was charged with assembling its own playing facilities.

The results varied greatly and served, in some cases, as a harbinger of the limitations of existing British stadiums for baseball purposes. In many instances, local football (aka soccer) stadia were modified for baseball. This led to numerous problems. The most notable was shoe-horning baseball dimensions into a rectangular football pitch. Preston played at Deepdale Football Ground where centre-field was clearly too short at approximately 210 feet from home plate, according to Joe Gray's indispensable book about baseball in that era, *What about the Villa?*. The set up for Birmingham's Aston Villa team at Perry Barr, which was also the home of the club's football team, wasn't much better. Gray estimated the distances from home plate were about 265 feet to the right-field fence, 280 feet to left, and just 220 feet to centre.

Another problem: the requirements for turf in a baseball environment were vastly different from those in a football setting. While a football match could be comfortably played on a field that wasn't totally flat, this posed an obstacle for baseball games. Moreover, a soggy pitch wouldn't deter footballers, but would be a huge impediment for a baseball contest. These issues certainly popped up at Perry Barr, where the pitch wasn't level and where on wet days it could be, according to one 19th Century account, a "perfect quagmire of treacherous bog-like mud."

Not surprisingly, a better fit for baseball could be found in Stoke as the team's handlers set up shop at the county's cricket ground. Though different sports, baseball's and cricket's similarities meant many of the field's key elements would suit the American game. The field was level and the grass was nicely cut. As one league organizer put it, the field was "as smooth as possible."

The final field, Derby's stadium, which would later be known as the Baseball Ground, was the first great opportunity to build a British baseball field to exacting detail. Unlike with the other parks, Derby's owner, Sir Francis Ley, had a blank slate to work with – a four-acre parcel adjacent to his malleable casting works. In many ways, the result was a true baseball facility. Derby's American-born manager would marvel that it was "the finest, most complete and best accommodated ground" he'd ever witnessed. Its seating could hold nearly 10 000 spectators (when necessary) and its locker room, which at the time was more genteelly called a "dressing pavilion", had all the amenities of the time, including showers, marble toilets and equipment for "vapor baths".

As for the field itself, there was excellent drainage and a perfectly flat playing surface. The one gripe from modern standards was the odd outfield dimensions. It was 262 to right-field and 480 to left-field. But in the context of baseball stadia of the time, which often had strange



distances on account of being squeezed into unaccommodating city blocks, Derby's ground would have likely been impressive even in the United States. Of course it costs money to construct a purpose-built baseball stadium and, according to Gray, Ley's baseball field had a £400 000 price tag (adjusted to modern currency).

It's unclear whether the majesty of the stadium was a direct draw for fans. We do know that Derby typically attracted between 1000 and 4000 spectators, which was below its capacity and, according to Ley, insufficient to put the team in a financial positive. Still, they were robust totals for a nascent sport. The other issue was Derby's withdrawal from the league owing to controversy over its roster. Perhaps, if the season had continued, more would have been lured to the magnificence of the ballpark. Derby did continue to play baseball at the location until 1898, winning three amateur national titles in the 1890s. But when baseball died out, the site became the home of Derby County Football Club and a great opportunity for baseball was lost.

In the early 20th Century no known similar efforts were made to erect a field primarily for baseball. Instead, the sport found footing both at local parks and famous venues – albeit ones not naturally suited for ballplayers.

London had already become a baseball hotbed before 1900 with both popular green spaces like Battersea Park and Clapham Common having contests and proper stadia such as the Crystal Palace in Sydenham hosting regular games. In the open locations, space for baseball was not well delineated. In fact, the nature of the fields at Battersea Park led to local officials breaking up games out of fear that balls would hit bystanders enjoying natural beauty. The Crystal Palace, which also hosted every Football Association Cup Final between 1895 and 1914, was considered a strong venue in the 1890s. As one baseball expert put it, the spot was "a great natural amphitheatre" and stood out for its grandstand, refreshment bar and musical band that played during games.

While the use of Crystal Palace would cease within the first decade of the 1900s, other prominent football grounds drew respectable crowds for baseball matchups. During this era, a number of football clubs fielded teams because they regarded baseball as a good cross-training sport. White Hart Lane, the football stadium for Tottenham Hotspur, drew 4000 fans to the 1906 British Baseball Association championship.

Other high-profile stadia would follow. In February 1914, Stamford Bridge, home of Chelsea Football Club, hosted an exhibition between the Chicago White Sox and the New York Giants. Some 20 000 saw the stadium transformed with wire netting around the grandstands to avoid fans being hit and "tenantless" goals being pushed aside. During World War I, Stamford Bridge, along with Arsenal Stadium (Highbury), became popular baseball venues for American and Canadian soldiers. In 1918, a circuit dubbed the Anglo-American League drew 10 000 for opening day at Arsenal's home and an impressive 38 000 at Stamford Bridge on 4 July to watch a clash between the US Navy and US Army. (During World War II, Wembley Stadium would also be commandeered for Allied baseball contests.)

The question is how did these fields play? Like the football stadia in 1890, they likely had strange baseball dimensions to fit into the football pitches' shapes. But from photos and circumstantial evidence they probably performed better than their 1890 predecessors. Pictures over the years of baseball at Stamford Bridge, which would continue to be a sporadic site for baseball into the 1980s, show well-trimmed (all-grass) diamonds. In addition, numerous articles have been written about those games at Chelsea's home and none suggest that bad field conditions factored in the results – with the exception of an outfielder losing a ball in the lights in a 1982 tilt.

Still, the truth is that football stadia like Stamford Bridge and Highbury were never going to be mainstay baseball options as football became too big a sport in Britain to allow the country's most hallowed grounds to experience the wear and tear of baseball.

Instead, when baseball got its best shot at sustained interest in Britain, another type of stadium was the predominant choice for venues. Led by businessman Sir John Moores, a series of new professional leagues were created in the mid- to late-1930s. In terms of stadia, organizers wanted the games to be a spectacle, but they didn't have the cash to create purpose-built venues. Instead, for the most part, dog racing tracks were chosen.

This ended up being a huge mistake. As you can see in *Figure 2*, which is an aerial shot of Romford Stadium (home to the London Major Baseball League's Romford Wasps), these baseball fields appeared to be simply slapped onto the center of these stadia. This often led to strange ground rules like the ones used at Catford Stadium (see *Figure 3*).

Whether organizers would have eventually transitioned to better-suited stadia, we'll never know because World War II put an end to domestic baseball frivolities (Allied personnel still



Figure 2. Romford Stadium in 1938.

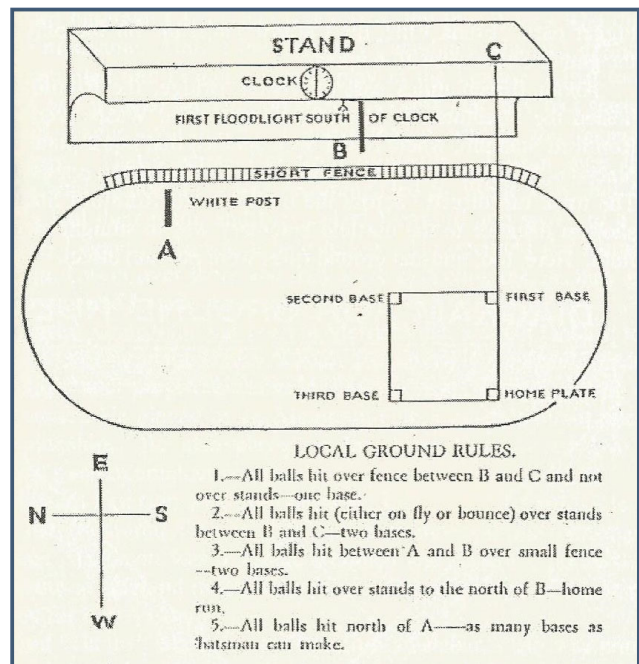


Figure 3. Baseball ground rules for Catford Stadium.

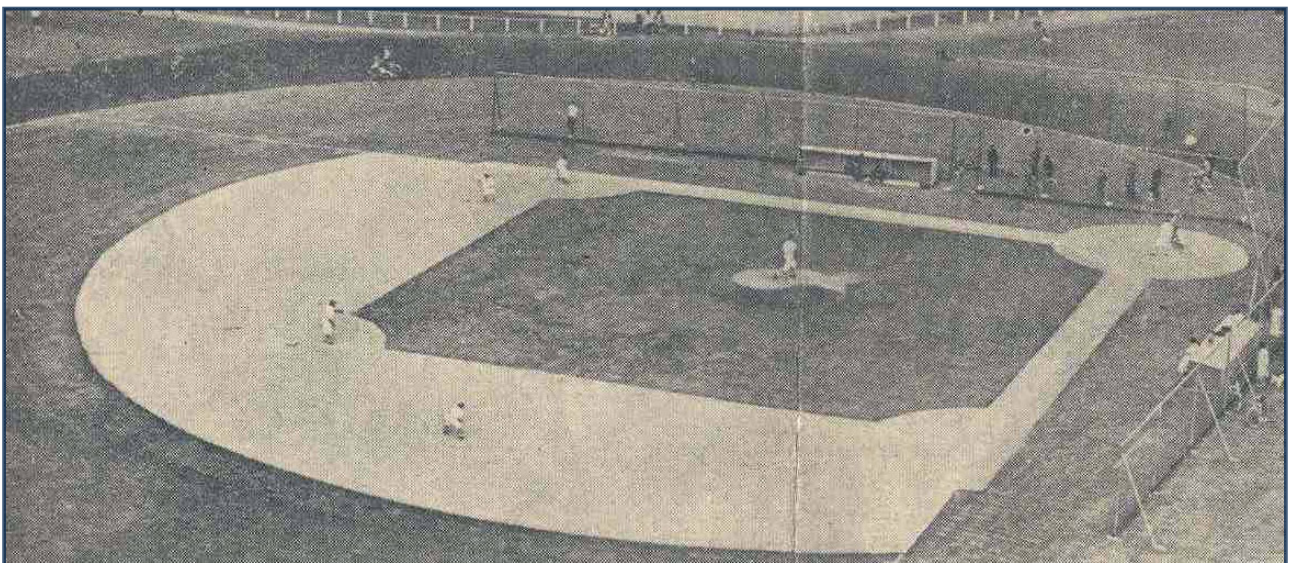


played on British soil for recreation). The post-war era did lead to the development of some purpose-built diamonds, but those fields were built on US and Canadian military facilities. Most of the best in Britain – with full cut-out infields and proper outfield fences and dimensions – were erected on bases in Alconbury, Burtonwood, Chicksands, Lakenheath, Mildenhall, and Upper Heyford. If you weren't a soldier, your opportunities to play on those fields were limited, diminishing the venues' value in cultivating native British players and attracting fans out to games.

Still, there were some valiant efforts to develop bona fide baseball fields for British players. One of the most notable was the home of the Hull Aces constructed in the 1960s at Alderman Kneeshaw Park in the east part of the Yorkshire city (see *Figure 4*). The site's infield had the same specifications as the New York Mets' Shea Stadium. "The playing surface – shale – was regularly praised by whoever was lucky enough to play on it," said Frank Parker, Jr, whose father, Frank, Sr, was a key member of the team in those years. "This included teams from [European powerhouses] Italy [and] Holland." Yet even with all the effort put into the field, there were limitations. It was built on an old cycling track so the dimensions allowed for only eight to ten feet from the backstop to home plate. Also, space constraints meant that in right-field, at about 190 feet from home plate, there was a gently sloping upward hill that ultimately got to 50 to 80 feet above playing level. Sadly, the field, which was prone to drainage problems, eventually fell into disrepair and by the 1990s was no longer being used.

## Obstacles to dedicated baseball fields in Britain in the past 50 years

For the most part, baseball enthusiasts over the past half-century haven't had the opportunity to enjoy such a nicely dedicated space for a number of reasons.



**Figure 4.** An aerial photo of Alderman Kneeshaw Park, Hull, taken in 1967.

### Space sharing

Often baseball clubs are given small bits of real estate near other sports, leading to severe restraints. For instance, the Tonbridge Bobcats, a famed youth program, had an archery range just 50 feet behind its backstop. "They practiced on Sundays, when we played," said Alex Malihoudis, a GB standout who started in Tonbridge. "Not too many people went chasing foul balls." Anyone who has played at Richmond's Connare Field has heard the neighbouring gun range and the London Mets' Finsbury Park location often has footballs flying onto the baseball field from locals playing nearby.

### Bad field conditions

Not only are spaces small, but the quality of the fields provided are also often lacking. An example: Rose Hill Playing Fields, which was the home of the Croydon Bluejays and the Sutton Braves in the 1970s and 1980s. The diamond was situated on a former city dump. "The buried rubbish slowly settled [and] the field developed rolling contours that could not be flattened," said longtime player and organizer Alan Smith. "So a fielder chasing a ball could find himself running first downhill then uphill in a matter of a few yards." On the plus side, less than optimal conditions could lead to some smart field design. In the 1990s, the Basildon Mariners were given an uneven plot to work with. When they noticed their field had a natural bump in one location, they built the diamond around it, using the hill as the pitcher's mound.

### Dodgy locales

Even if you can get a field, sometimes the problem is that it's placed in a rough area. Manchester Baseball Club's field has had some issues. In the early 2000s, a GB Juniors game was scheduled for the Manchester field. When the players showed up, they found a burned out car abandoned in the outfield, according to former GB coach Tom Gillespie. Because team members had travelled from throughout the country to get there, they played anyway. The Croydon Pirates' facility at Roundshaw Playing Grounds is located near a tough estate. There have been instances when young boys have walked onto the club's second field and urinated while a game was occurring.

### Concluding thoughts: Reason for optimism?

While most diehard British players today must deal with these issues – along with erecting temporary fences and playing with just small dirt areas around home plate and the bases – there is hope for something more. In July last year, a new facility opened at Farnham Park (see *Figures 5 and 6*), which includes a purpose-built adult field. With proper dimensions (330 feet down the lines and 400 feet to centre-field), a full dirt infield, pristine grass, permanent fencing around the whole field, and sunken dugouts, it could very well be a venue for major European events in the future (something that hasn't happened in Britain since 1996).



More than anything, the hope is that it will attract players who are thrilled at the idea of competing on a field that compares with respectable American facilities. At the least, maybe it'll be the first step toward responding to singer Jimmy Buffett, who once said: "[Our] old ballparks are like cathedrals in America. We don't have big old Gothic cathedrals like they do in Europe. But we got baseball parks." Perhaps, Britain is finally on the path to both. [TDI](#)

## Acknowledgements

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## About the author

Josh Chetwynd has written extensively on the history of baseball in Great Britain. He co-authored the book *British Baseball and the West Ham Club: History of a 1930s Professional Team in East London* and wrote *Baseball in Europe: A Country by Country History*. On the field, Josh represented Great Britain in international competition from 1996 to 2006 and played in



Figure 5. Photos of Farnham Park taken in 2013.



Britain's top domestic league between 2002 and 2009, winning two national championships as player/manager for the London Mets (2007–2008) and one as a player with the Bracknell Blazers (2009). He was also a baseball analyst in Great Britain on Five (TV)



Figure 6. First pitch in the first Farnham Park national final (2013).

between 2002 and 2008, and from 2010 to 2013 he served as baseball expert (and sometimes host) of a baseball programme on BBC Radio 5 live sports extra.

## Appendix 1.

### British sporting landmarks hosting baseball.

*With a history as long as British baseball's, the sport has found its way onto the pitches of many of the country's most hallowed grounds. Here's a sampling (with a little background on some of the baseball events that have occurred at these locations).*

#### Arsenal Stadium (Highbury)

Arsenal Football Club's home for 93 years, Highbury was a hub for baseball during World War I. It hosted opening day of the Anglo-American League in 1918, bringing in a number of dignitaries, including Princess Patricia of Connaught, along with approximately 10 000 other onlookers.

#### Boothferry Park

Home of Hull City Football Club from 1946 to 2002, Boothferry welcomed a baseball match in 1980 as part of a festival celebrating the opening of the Humber Bridge. The GB national team squared off against France with poor results for the home team. The French squad won 13–1.

#### County Ground, Taunton

The home of Somerset County Cricket Club since 1882, it was transformed into a baseball

pitch for a benefit contest on behalf of Marcus Trescothick in 2008. The English international led a group of cricketers against the GB national team, losing 21–1 in an exhibition. The field, which featured a clay mound and cut-outs at the bases for the event, played well, according to the baseball players involved.

#### Goodison Park

Everton Football Club's stadium since 1892 was the site for an exhibition game between the New York Giants and the Chicago White Sox in 1924. Unconfirmed stories suggest a hitter in the game smacked a ball clear over the Goodison Park stands.

#### Kennington Oval

A popular site for baseball over the years, it was a stop on both the 1874 American baseball tour between the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics and AG Spalding's world baseball tour in 1889. (At the 1889 game, the Prince of Wales was a spectator.) In 1987 and 1988, the British Baseball National Championships were played there (as well as a home run derby between Ernie Banks and cricketer Graham Gooch in 1988). In 1993, the venue hosted a game between minor leaguers from the New York Mets and Boston Red Sox.

### Lord's Cricket Ground

On 3 August 1874, the Boston Red Stockings smashed the Philadelphia Athletics 24–7 at the birthplace of cricket. Approximately 5000 were there to watch. (The following day, a second game was played at Lord's, with Boston prevailing again, 14–11. Some 7000 spectators showed up on 12 March 1889 to see players from AG Spalding's world tour compete. A team dubbed All-America defeated the Chicago White Stockings 7–6.

### Old Trafford Cricket Ground

On 24 September 1989, the GB national squad took on "The Legends of Baseball", a traveling all-star team of ex-Major League Baseball players. The all-star team included Hall of Famers Bob Feller, Willie Stargell and Billy Williams, as well as such greats as George Foster, Bert Campaneris, Graig Nettles, Tug McGraw, Luis Tiant and Bobby Bonds. GB jumped out to a 1–0 lead, but the former pros won easily, 16–3. The stadium was also a stop on both the American baseball tour in 1874 between the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics and AG Spalding's world tour in 1889.

### Stamford Bridge

Stamford Bridge was a mainstay for baseball games during World War I. Before that, Chelsea Football Club's home attracted around 20 000 spectators for an exhibition contest between the Chicago White Sox and the New York Giants in February 1914. Since then, the grounds have hosted baseball on many occasions, including: a 1924 contest between the New York Giants and the Chicago White Sox (with King George V in attendance); a 1927 match-up between "British-born" and "American-born" teams; and, more recently, a 1982 night game between the Great Britain national team and a US Forces All-Star club that brought 5000 through the turnstiles.

### The Baseball Ground (Derby)

The first British purpose-built baseball stadium, it earned the name as the Baseball Ground when it opened in 1890. Sadly, it stopped hosting baseball before the start of the 20th Century. As a football

venue, it lasted for 108 years before being demolished in 2003.

### The Crystal Palace

Relocated from Hyde Park to Sydenham Hill in 1854, the Crystal Palace was a popular London attraction for a number of decades in the 19th Century. It also hosted two games on the 1874 tour between the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics as well as baseball games in the last decade of the 1800s. Ultimately, it was destroyed by fire in 1936.

### Wembley Stadium

England's national stadium (the old version; not the renovated one which opened in 2007), was the site for a number of baseball games – particularly during World War II. On 7 August 1943, 21500 came to see a twin bill of baseball. The second contest pitted the US Air Force against US Ground Forces in what was billed as an All-Professional Game. A player named Bill Brech threw a no-hitter in the main event, striking out six.

### White City Stadium

The main stadium for the 1908 London Olympics was also the home of baseball's White City Citizens, a top team in the 1936 London Major Baseball League. In their one season of existence, the White City club won Britain's national title. In 1949 (among other occasions), White City reprised its role as a baseball stadium, serving as the location for the British Baseball national championship between the Hornsey Red Sox and the Liverpool Cubs. The game, won by the Red Sox, drew 10 000 spectators. The stadium, which also hosted a match in the 1966 World Cup, among many other events, was torn down in 1985.

### White Hart Lane

The long-time home of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club was a regular site for baseball at the dawn of the 20th Century. In 1906, Tottenham's baseball team was the best in the country. They also hosted the national championship that year, winning the title in front of 4000 in attendance.



## Appendix 2.

### A little oral history.

*Anyone who has played baseball in Great Britain has a story about some field they've experienced. The following are just a few reminiscences from six former Great Britain National players.*

**Frank Parker, Jr, on playing baseball for GB in 1980 at Boothferry Park, home of Hull City football club, in what was billed as the first baseball international in Britain under the lights**

Like most of the football grounds used at this time the diamond was put in the left-hand corner of the stadium so you had a decent left and centre-field, but a very small right-field with a ground-rule double for anything hit into it (which was just a pop fly on a regulation field). A portable mound was used and the floodlights were very good.

**Alex Malihoudis, on playing at Barnes Elms (former home of the Barnes Stormers and London Warriors)**

To get to the field you had to walk through a wooded area that was actually a graveyard! There were some pretty old gravestones in there too.

**Liam Carroll, on playing at Castle Vale in Birmingham**

I recall a GB Juniors practice in Castle Vale, a rough part of Birmingham. A car sped through the outfield, followed a few seconds later by a police car.

**Nick Carter, on the Tonbridge Bobcats' home field and its proximity to an archery range (Tonbridge was responsible for developing such future internationals as Carter, Malihoudis and George and Will Lintern)**

I remember once [British Baseball Hall of Famer Margaret] Borley went to walk over [to the range] when there was a solo archer, thinking it would be ok. But she was met with an angry archer who shook his bow violently toward her and screamed "THIS IS A WEAPON." She replied... "alright, alright" as she staggered backwards.

**Alan Smith, on the British Baseball national finals at the Kennington Oval in 1987 and 1988**

I recall that the overall cricket field was so large that with the diamond set in one corner centerfield barely reached the middle of the ground. I also recall that we were allowed to build a full backstop and a mound, but were only allowed to use temporary fencing in the outfield and had to tailor it around the central wicket table area as we were strictly forbidden from straying on to that part of the field. The whole playing surface was immaculate.

**Alan Smith, on the London Warriors playing at Regent's Park**

When the Warriors formed in 1980 we played on an unmarked field in a corner of Regent's Park close to the American Ambassador's residence. There was no mound or outfield fence, only a backstop that we put up and took down before and after each game. Apart from the ever-present threat of nailing passers-by with stray hits we occasionally had to deal with an old gent who, hell bent on exercising his right to use the royal park, would set up his deckchair in the outfield and remain there throughout the game, complaining vociferously when a fielder or ball came anywhere near him.

**Mark Vickers, on the Humberside Mets' field**

The Mets' field was probably the best field I've played on in the UK besides the US bases we played at. We had to get down to the home games pretty early because all but the back net had to be put up... The back net was a pipe frame with steel mesh in between. But the dugouts, the home run fence, the side fences and the canteen all had to be put up and then taken down at the end of the game. I remember coming down one day and a large L-shaped piece had been cut out of our back net mesh. I asked what was going on here, and I was informed that someone in the neighborhood must have wanted to fix their pigeon coup or chook pen or something and our back net did the job.

# Batting next... Jane Austen!

David Block

Janesanity still rules! I'm probably the only one who didn't realize it (clearly a case of not paying attention to the important things), but looking around I now see that the craze celebrating everything pertaining to Jane Austen is still raging unabated. She's everywhere! Case in point is the latest film about her, *Austenland*. It tells the story of an Austen zealot who visits a theme park devoted to Jane. True, the reviewers have not been kind to the film, but who cares? Jane's devoted fans will love it, and they're the ones who'll pack the theaters to see it (until they realize it makes fun of them).

And no end is in sight. Jane's passionate followers seem to have an unquenchable thirst for notabilia about her. *Austenland* is only one small drop amid a torrent of new Jane phenomena to appear in both Britain and North America in the past year, an assemblage of goodies that includes books, festivals, and celebrations of the 200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*. She has become so hot that even the Bank of England decided to join in on Austenmania by announcing a new £10 note bearing her likeness (a decision, incidentally, that provoked a silly and sexist outburst of controversy).

So, I'm thinking: "If the Bank of England wants a piece of the Austen action, why shouldn't I?" After all, Jane wrote about baseball in the early 19th Century, didn't she? And since early English baseball is my cup of tea (so to speak), I see no reason why I shouldn't exploit her popularity for all it's worth in my work, too. So, without further preamble, here is my new, Jane-centric view of early English baseball.

But before I get ahead of myself, some of you may now be wondering, "early English baseball? What in the world is he talking about?" Fair questions, for which a little bit of explanation is in order.

Beginning in the 18th Century, decades before an American form of baseball ensnared the hearts of common folk in the former colonies, and well before the rise of the popular British game of rounders, an elementary form of baseball was practised in rural areas of southern England. Little has been known about this game; in fact, practically zilch: most people in Britain and America have no clue that it even existed. But, ever drawn to historical minutiae about things that other people don't know they want to know about, it has been my singular obsession for the past decade to dig up as much information as I can about this obscure and forgotten pastime.



What I've put together so far is this: a game bearing the name "baseball" (but more commonly appearing hyphenated as "base-ball") emerged in the southern counties of England sometime in the beginning decades of the 1700s. More of a friendly game you'd play with your chums on a social occasion than a strenuous sport, it was virtually unknown in the big cities and more at home on croquet pitches or village greens than on formal ball fields. Rules for its play undoubtedly varied from place to place, although its general form appears to have included the same familiar elements adopted by later forms of baseball, such as pitching, batting, fielding and base-running. In other ways, however, it would have seemed quite different. The bases were placed much closer together than in rounders or American-style baseball, and the ball used was very soft. When a player on the hitting team struck the ball and began running, the opposing fielders, if unable to catch the ball on the fly, would need to catch it up and try to hit the runner with it between the bases.

One striking difference about this original form of baseball is that it did not use a bat. The evidence I've unearthed about it suggests strongly that players struck the pitched ball with their bare hands. And another startling distinction about it, as compared to the modern form of baseball which has always been dominated by the masculine persuasion, is that it appears to have been played more widely by girls and young women than by males. This brings us back to Jane Austen, who was among the first to alert us to English baseball's feminine side, and certainly the most famous. Near the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, published in 1818, Jane offers a mild reproof of her heroine Catherine Morland. "It was not very wonderful that Catherine ... should prefer cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books."<sup>1</sup>

This is old news, of course. Baseball historians as far back as the 19th Century have noted Jane's mention of the game, although the wider Austen community seems to have paid it little heed until very recently. Occasionally, some have speculated that Jane herself may have played baseball, reasoning that only an intimate familiarity with the game would have led her to mention it in *Northanger Abbey*. This is a reasonable guess. Jane's social class and the whereabouts of her upbringing stamp her as someone likely to have been exposed to the pastime. (The 2007 film *Becoming Jane*, starring Anne Hathaway, includes a scene showing Jane playing baseball with some friends, but the filmmakers struck out by picturing her with a bat in hand.)

"A girl growing up in a boys' school is likely to take up boys' games," wrote Claire Tomalin in her acclaimed 1997 biography *Jane Austen: A Life*. "This is the best reason," she added, "for believing Jane made Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* partly in her own image, 'fond of all boys' plays,' and preferring cricket and baseball to playing with dolls or keeping a pet dormouse or canary."<sup>2</sup> This refers to the fact that Jane's father, the Reverend George Austen, maintained a small school for boys at his vicarage in Steventon, the small village in Hampshire where Jane was born and raised. Ms Tomalin aptly describes how Jane and her

siblings mixed freely in both work and play with the resident schoolboys, although the biographer makes the common but mistaken assumption that baseball was strictly a "boys' play." Whether or not she actually played the game, baseball was clearly a part of Jane's environment, and, as we shall see, she can now be identified as the curious centre of a circle of friends and relatives who had direct and indirect associations with the pastime.

The pool of information about early English baseball is a tiny one. We don't know much about the game because most writers of newspapers, books and magazines in the 18th and early 19th Centuries apparently placed little value on describing what people in rural communities were doing to entertain themselves, especially when it came to the pastimes of women and children. That may explain why the gazillion hours I've spent combing through old books, reels of microfilm and digital databases have generally yielded little more than eye strain. But, once in a great while, serendipity strikes, and I stumble across a new and previously unknown reference to early baseball. Such rare finds are like precious gems to me, and in some special cases, I experience the sensation Howard Carter must have felt when he first opened Tut's tomb. That happened most recently for me when I found a brief mention in a 1749 newspaper announcing the rather preposterous news that the Prince of Wales played a game of baseball in the town of Walton-on-Thames in Surrey. More on this a bit later.

Because these mentions of early English baseball are rarer than ethical politicians, it came as quite a surprise to me that several of them seemed to hold a slim connection to one another, their common linking element being our dear Miss Austen. One such reference appears in a historical novel entitled *Battleridge* that was published in 1799. In it, one of the characters, a lawyer, quotes a conversation he had with a friend years earlier: "'Ah!' says he, 'no more cricket, no more base-ball, they are sending me to Geneva.'"<sup>3</sup> What is remarkable about this little scrap of dialogue is that the novel was set in the 1650s in the aftermath of the English Civil War, and the quoted line was recalled by the character as something spoken to him by his friend 20 years earlier than that. So, if we are to believe the author, it would be entirely reasonable for the word "baseball" to have appeared in a 1630s conversation.

Don't believe the author! She, by the way, was Cassandra Cooke, a first cousin of Jane Austen's mother and someone who Jane was very close to throughout her life. Mrs Cooke's husband, the Reverend Samuel Cooke, was Jane's godfather and, according to a book co-written by Jane's nephew and great nephew, the Cooke and Austen families often socialized.<sup>4</sup> The author of a new Austen biography, Paula Byrne, has speculated that Jane's nascent interest in writing was stimulated when her cousin, Mrs Cooke, became a published author.<sup>5</sup> Jane's reading of *Battleridge*, however, would have been more likely to depress than arouse her, as it is obvious that the blood relationship between her and her cousin did not extend to the writing gene. *Battleridge* received only one contemporary review, in a journal called *Critical Review*, which observed "the work is not very amusing; and in point of composition, it is despicable."<sup>6</sup> And as evidenced by Mrs Cooke's implication that baseball was being



discussed in the 1630s, she appears to have been just as wanting as a historian as she was a writer. Even so, biographer Byrne suggests that Catherine Morland's "tomboyish taste for baseball and cricket" in *Northanger Abbey* was a "playful echo" of the "no more cricket, no more base-ball" line from *Battleridge*.<sup>7</sup> More probably, the cousins' common mention of baseball had more to do with their family connection and mutual familiarity with the game. As authors, they could not have been less alike, although Casandra Cooke at least had the good sense to know when to leave well enough alone. *Battleridge* was her one and only literary effort.

Jane Austen died on 18 July 1817 at the age of 41. Her novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously in December of that same year, and on 7 July 1818, 11 days short of the first anniversary of Jane's death, the wife of her younger brother Francis gave birth to a baby girl (Francis, by the way, was an officer in the Royal Navy who would eventually ascend to the rank of Admiral of the Fleet). Arriving when she did, the newly born member of the Austen family could not help but be stamped with the legacy of her famous aunt, and was christened Catherine Anne, the names of the heroines, respectively, of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. After young Catherine's mother died in 1823, other family members stepped forward to help with her education, most notably her Aunt Cassandra, Jane's sister, who spent hours reading to her from Jane's works. No surprise, then, when years later as an adult Catherine decided to emulate her celebrated aunt and become a writer herself. She had become very familiar with an unfinished manuscript of Jane's that was in the family's possession, and took it upon herself to finish it. The final product was a three-volume novel entitled *The Younger Sister*, which she saw published in 1850 under her married name of Catherine Anne Hubback. The book's dedication reads "to the memory of her aunt, the late Jane Austen," which by my reckoning makes it the very first of an endless stream of exploitive homages to the famous author that extends to the *Austenland* era of today.

OK, back to baseball. On page 166 of the first volume of *The Younger Sister* appears the following phrase: "... Emma, drawing little Charles towards her, began a confidential conversation with him on the subject of his garden and companions at school, and the comparative merits of base-ball and cricket."<sup>8</sup> Use of the word baseball, by 1850, was not quite as unusual as it had been in the days of Catherine's Aunt Jane, or of her first cousin (twice removed) Casandra Cooke, but it was still far from commonplace. As with her two relatives, Catherine paired baseball with cricket, a linking that has been made throughout the history of the games. Upon first discovering Catherine Hubback's mention of baseball in *The Younger Sister*, I immediately wondered where it had come from. Had Jane used the word in her unfinished manuscript, or was it something Catherine added later? As it happens, the original copy of Jane's manuscript, now bearing the title *The Watsons*, was purchased at a Sotheby's auction in 2011 by the Bodleian Library for nearly £1 million. Professor Kathryn Sutherland, the University of Oxford's expert on the work, informed me that the word

baseball is nowhere to be found in the original manuscript. This means that Catherine Hubback introduced it on her own, apparently being as familiar with the pastime as were her familial literary forebears.

One footnote about Catherine Hubback: In 1870 she traveled to the United States and spent six years in Oakland, California. Much to my disappointment, none of her letters back to England mention her witnessing any baseball there. As a passionate Oakland A's fan, I had hoped to discover a connection, however remote and tenuous, between the baseball-writing Austen family and me. Tragically, it was not to be.

During her early years in the village of Steventon, Jane Austen and her family were neighbours of another clerical family, the Russells, who were situated in the nearby Hampshire village of Ashe. Dr Richard Russell was rector of the Ashe parish church, and, according to one writer, the two families were "intimately acquainted."<sup>9</sup> Years later, Dr Russell's daughter Mary married a man named Mitford and gave birth to a daughter herself, also named Mary. This latter Mary would grow up to become the well-known story writer Mary Russell Mitford. Miss Mitford has the distinction of referencing the game of baseball in her works more often than any other author of the 18th or early 19th Centuries. All told, she mentioned baseball in four separate stories between the years 1825 and 1835, a stat for the record books in an era when the game was seldom named in literature.<sup>10</sup>

It is not implausible that Miss Mitford learned about the game from her mother, who herself may have played it during social gatherings with the Austen family in the Hampshire countryside. Whatever the nature of those interactions, the elder Mary Mitford apparently came away with a decidedly unfavorable opinion of the young Jane Austen, an attitude evidently passed on to her daughter, who wrote years later:

À propos to novels, I have discovered that our great favourite, Miss Austen, is my countrywoman; that mamma knew all her family very intimately; and that she herself is an old maid (I beg her pardon – I mean a young lady) with whom mamma before her marriage was acquainted. Mamma says that she was then the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers; A friend of mine, who visits her now, says that she has stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of a 'single blessedness' that ever existed, and that till 'Pride and Prejudice' showed what a precious gem was hidden in the unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire-screen, or any other thin upright piece of wood or iron that fills its corner in peace and quietness.<sup>11</sup>

It looks like a big league case of envy was at play here, but it didn't stop the younger Mary Russell Mitford from trying to emulate the style and success of Jane Austen, nor of replicating her more famous contemporary's placement of baseball in the text of her writings.

I mentioned earlier that Cassandra Cooke's husband was Jane Austen's godfather. Who then, you might ask, was her godmother? Actually, she had two, one of whom, curiously, was

also named Jane Austen. This second Jane Austen was the second wife of a second Francis Austen. (Confused yet?) This second Francis Austen was a great uncle of the famous Jane, a successful lawyer in Kent, and easily the wealthiest and most prominent member of the Austen family in the 18th Century. He always regarded his nephew George Austen, Jane's father, with great fondness, and provided support for him and his growing family. In 1788, 12-year-old Jane, along with her parents and her sister Cassandra, visited 90-year-old Uncle Francis at his home in Sevenoaks, during which time he commissioned the artist Ozias Humphry to paint portraits of the two girls.<sup>12</sup>

What's this got to do with baseball? Be patient. Jane is said to have gained information about legal matters from her Uncle Francis, knowledge that she later applied in her novels. According to Pat Rogers, editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of *Pride and Prejudice*:

[Jane] would have known that Francis served as clerk of the peace for Kent, that is the chief administrative officer overseeing the Quarter Sessions and other legal business in the county. This brought him into official contact with Charles Sackville, second Duke of Dorset... (who) served as lord lieutenant... Indeed, it is virtually certain that he gained his post as clerk of the peace because he had already served as the duke's agent. Evidence exists that he had long had extensive dealings with the Sackvilles, for generations the most dominant clan in west Kent from their base at Knole. Francis operated at least in part as their man of business, and corresponded with the duke's steward on estate matters... Moreover, Francis helped to manage the election of the second duke, (then Lord Middlesex) in a number of parliamentary elections.<sup>13</sup>

OK, remember when earlier I alluded to a eureka discovery I made involving the Prince of Wales and baseball? That happened when I came across a brief newspaper notice from 1749 that reads as follows:

On Tuesday last his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and Lord Middlesex, played at Bass-Ball [sic], at Walton in Surry [sic]; and notwithstanding the Weather was extreme [sic] bad, they continued playing several Hours.<sup>14</sup>

Charles Sackville, aka Lord Middlesex, the future second Duke of Dorset, was at that time Master of the Horse in the court of Frederick, Prince of Wales. The two were political allies and long-time sports buddies, having competed with and against each other at cricket on numerous occasions.<sup>15</sup> While the two of them were off playing baseball in Surrey on that day in 1749, industrious Francis Austen, Jane Austen's great-uncle-to-be and the Sackville family *consigliere*, was probably off somewhere working his tail off as Lord Middlesex's campaign manager, trying to get him reelected to his parliament seat representing Old Sarum.



Hmm, have I carried this a bit too far? I concede that connecting Jane Austen to baseball because her great uncle did the dirty work for an aristocrat who played the game 27 years before she was born is something of a stretch. But, let's face it, this entire article is a stretch! While it is curious that Jane had ties to several others associated with early English baseball, I freely admit it is silly to cast her as the centrepiece of an early baseball conspiracy. But, really, is that notion any more ridiculous than all the sequels, prequels, time-travels and other innumerable re-imaginings of her novels, the Jane Austen full-dress balls and tea parties, the takeoff movies (including a Bollywood version), and, of course, *Austenland*? Well, maybe a tad more ridiculous, but nonetheless, ladies and gentlemen, I think you get my point. [TDI](#)

## About the author

David Block is a baseball historian and antiquarian whose research and writings have shed new light on the distant origins of the game. After a professional career as a computer systems analyst, David took an early retirement to pursue his interest in the one area of baseball history that had never been closely examined: the shrouded beginnings of the game. This ultimately led him to write his landmark book on the subject, *Baseball before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game*, which was named to the New York Times Reading List of sports books for 2005 and was the recipient of the 2006 Seymour Medal. David serves as a member of the Major League Baseball special committee on baseball's origins. He lives with his family in San Francisco, USA.

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- 10 Miss Mitford mentioned baseball in her works *A Village Sketch* (1825); *The Tenants of Beechgrove* (1826), the introduction to vol 3 of *Our Village* (1828), and *The Carpenter's Daughter* (1835).

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- 12 There remains some dispute as to whether it is indeed a portrait of Jane. See "The Rice Portrait Provenance" at <http://www.janeaustenriceportrait.com/#/provenance/4552919947> (accessed February 2014).
- 13 Rogers P, ed (2006) *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, appendix 2, p 442.
- 14 *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer*, 19–21 September 1749, p 3.
- 15 It is axiomatic among many cricket historians that Frederick's death in 1851 was the consequence of a cricket injury. There is no evidence of this from the time of his demise; however, a brief article entitled "Cricket Anecdote" that appeared in the 13 August 1789 issue of the newspaper *Oracle Bell's New World* reads as follows: "FREDERICK, the Father of the present King, when PRINCE of WALES, was so attached to the Game of Cricket, as to be engaged in matches even during the time and uproar of the Rebellion in 1745 ... Indeed, his own Royal life was shortened by an accident which happened while he was engaged in the diversion."

# The joys of day-time baseball: Watching MLB games at a convenient hour in the UK

Matt Smith

If asked to picture the perfect baseball scene, most would call to mind visions of a field of vivid green grass, off-set by a light brown infield diamond, all glistening under a cloudless sky with the sun beating down.

Professional sporting events witnessed "under the lights" on an evening do produce a special atmosphere, but baseball is synonymous with the day-time: the "boys of summer" wearing short-sleeved uniforms and using a glove to shield their eyes whilst settling under a lazy fly-ball in the outfield.

## British league games

Baseball played in the UK currently fits this mould. Floodlights have enabled baseball to be an evening attraction at times during the sport 's long history on these shores, predominantly as a result of borrowing stadia designed for other sports. The London Twilight Baseball League of 1976, the brainchild of the ever-innovative Jeff Archer, is one of the main examples of short-lived experiments in providing weekday evening baseball, in this case using the home of Rosslyn Park Rugby Club."<sup>1</sup>

However, baseball 's present amateur status here means the facilities needed for regular evening games generally are not readily available. Short of an upturn in funding or, perhaps, a shift to "double-summer time" to increase the hours of sunlight, it's likely that for the foreseeable future evenings mainly will be reserved for training sessions and most British baseball games will continue to be played in daylight at weekends.

## The "hardcore"

The British experience of baseball in its idyllic, sun-lit state stretches beyond the games played here to those played across the pond in the Major Leagues.

Most objects of enjoyment, fandom or obsession require a level of commitment, often sacrifice even. For British fans of baseball, the primary sacrifice is sleep and the consequences of organizing parts of your life around first pitches at 3AM. Such things are not seen as hardships but are instead a badge of honour, a sign of your dedication to the cause



and one of the common experiences that binds parts of the British baseball community together.

This was celebrated memorably in the *Baseball on 5* TV show, sadly now defunct but whose spirit is kept alive by the MLB team on BBC 5 Live Sports Extra. Those who viewed the games in the early hours, rather than on video, were celebrated as the "hardcore". Presenter Jonny Gould even once stated that research had apparently showed that most of the viewers were "students (no surprise there!), train drivers (hmmm!), night-shift workers, insomniacs and breast-feeding mothers."<sup>2</sup>

## When the day becomes the evening

This situation is the unavoidable consequence of the time difference between Britain and the main time zones in North America: Eastern (Britain being 5 hours ahead), Central (6 hours) and Pacific (8 hours). Staying up all hours to watch the World Series is part of the fun of the event for some of us, but to fully enjoy the marathon Major League season you need to keep up with the daily thrills, spills and storylines and for many it's simply not possible to combine a nightly viewing experience with normal working hours and other commitments.

This is where the importance of baseball's affinity with sunlight comes back into view. A 1.07PM. afternoon first pitch in New York makes for a very convenient 6.07PM. start for us in the UK. A similar afternoon start on the West Coast will normally see the British fan settling down in front of their TV, digital radio or internet-linked device at around 9.00PM, typically meaning the game will be finished not too far into the early hours of the next morning.

Day-time games in North America are therefore precious gifts to those of us on the other side of the Atlantic, a way to enjoy games at a more hospitable hour. With an MLB.TV online subscription allowing access to any game you may care to catch live – US-based blackout restrictions not applying – every game played under sunlight is an opportunity to watch some action, whether being an established long-time fan or a keen and inquisitive newcomer to the sport.

On a typical Sunday, all but the ESPN Sunday Night game will be played in the local afternoon, making for a perfect lazy Sunday evening for us in Britain to watch every out of your chosen team's contest or to dip into several games a few innings at a time. Saturday also brings a good number of day games and, in any case, the later night-games are not quite such an issue if you've had a work-free Saturday and need no excuse to have a restful Sunday morning lie-in.

## Monday to Friday

But what about the weekday games?

Games are played during the afternoon at the weekend because most people are free to watch them at that time; however, staging a game on a Wednesday afternoon, for example,

limits the number of people who can either pay money to attend in person (and then spend more money when at the ballpark) or fuel the advertising revenue by following TV or radio broadcasts.

With 81 home games in a regular season, teams naturally try to maximize revenue by staging as many weekday games at night as possible; however, the 30 teams do still combine to produce a healthy number of day-time games to watch.

Due to their importance to baseball fans based in Britain, over the past three seasons I've kept track of the MLB weekday games scheduled to take place with a start time before midnight UK time.<sup>3</sup>

## Wonderful Wednesday

The weekday distribution of the day-games has followed the same pattern in each of the three seasons.

Thursday is often referred to as the "get-away" day as it's traditionally when teams play a day game to end a series, giving one or both teams more time to fly to their next ballpark to start the weekend series on Friday night.

Unsurprisingly, Thursday is therefore a regular source of day-time baseball, but it's not the most popular day. Instead, that honour goes to Wednesday. In 2013, Wednesday hosted 102 day-games, compared with the 94 on Thursdays.

Planning your chores and shopping on either side of those two days certainly pays when it comes to improving your baseball viewing prospects.

Monday comes in next (51 games in 2013), boosted in part by one or two US public holidays. Friday follows with a steady 24 games in each of the last two seasons (and 23 in 2011), the majority of which take place at the Chicago Cubs' Wrigley Field (more on them in a moment), with the week's weakest link being Tuesday, which only offered up 12 day-time games over the course of each of the last two seasons (see *Figure 1*).

## Month by month

From a month-by-month perspective, the day-game pattern may work in the favour of efforts to get newcomers in Britain, and throughout Europe, hooked to the sport.

Providing more baseball at a convenient time can help to

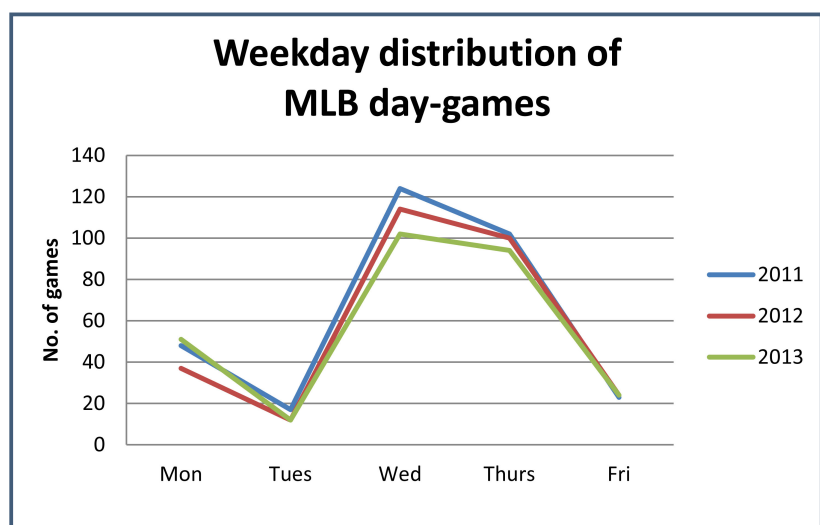
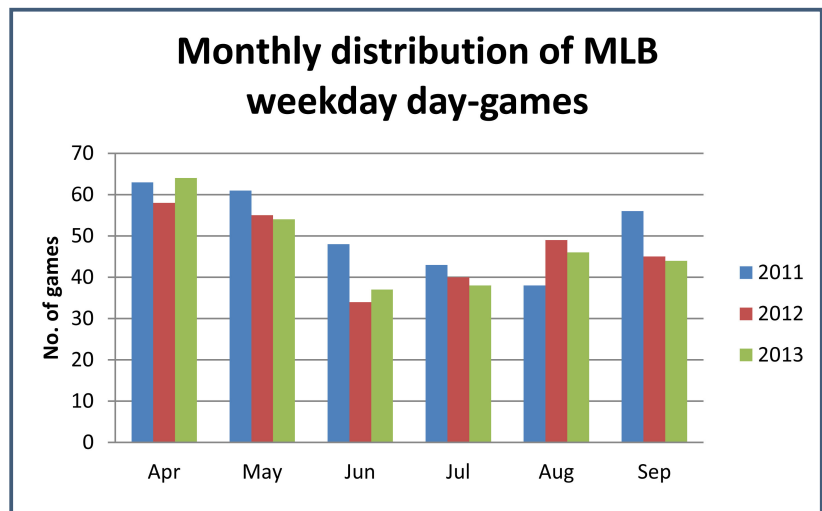


Figure 1. Distribution of weekday day- games in the Major Leagues.

remove one of the potential barriers and there's no better time to catch people than at the start of the season. Over the past three years, April and May have been consistently the best months for the most day-games to watch. In 2013, there were 64 day games in April and 54 in May (see *Figure 2*).



**Figure 2.** Month-by-month distribution of weekday day-games in the Major Leagues.

The high April total should come as no surprise as teams will often look to play their Opening Day game (whether their actual Opening Day or their home Opening Day if they started the season on the road) during the afternoon.

June (37 games in 2013) and July (38) tend to bring a reduction, partly due to the All-Star Break wiping out most of one week every July, before the games pick up again during August (46) and September (44) as the summer holidays come along and teams catch up on postponed games from earlier in the season.

As for October, we have to accept that the thrills of the postseason are designed to catch the prime-time North American audiences, so only a handful of games combined over the Division Series and Championship Series are played at a convenient time for us in the UK. Still, if you can't forgo some sleep for the biggest games of the season, well you're just not trying hard enough.<sup>4</sup>

## Watching your team

Knowing the weekdays and months where you can watch the most day-time baseball may be interesting, but what's most valuable to fans is knowing how often they can expect to catch *their* team at a convenient hour. In fact, this knowledge may even be a key factor in determining which team to call your own if, like many Brits, your team has to be chosen rather than being left to the fate of home-town or family tradition.

Based on the past three seasons, the two Los Angeles teams will not be scooping up too many new recruits, save for the insomniacs, breast-feeding mothers and their fellow *Baseball on 5* "hardcore" brethren. The Angels have been part of only 40 scheduled day-games in this period, with the Dodgers bettering that by just one.

A loyal LA fan may be quick to counter with the idea that the amount of day-games a team plays is not solely down to their own scheduling policy but also of the teams they play most regularly. However, there are two points to counter this view. The first is that if this is a



crucial factor, then it's still something for a potential fan to take into consideration for or against the team in question; whether your team is on the road or at home doesn't make a difference if you're not attending in person and if a team's day-games are boosted or reduced by their rivals' scheduling quirks then that's important to know.

The second point is that there doesn't appear to be strong evidence to support the claim, or, perhaps more accurately, the possible impact is not significant enough to make much of a difference. In the Dodgers' case, they have fellow NL West teams that play more day-games than most in the San Francisco Giants (joint-fourth over the three seasons with 71) and the San Diego Padres (joint-seventh with 68). Similarly, the Angels' low score comes despite them playing in the same division as the Oakland A's, who have been involved in the second most day-games (78).

The differing fortunes of those West Coast teams also show that the coast of the US the team is on – which impacts on the time difference – doesn't have an especially significant bearing either. On the East Coast, the Baltimore Orioles (28th most with 42), Atlanta Braves (27th with 44), and Philadelphia Phillies and Boston Red Sox (joint-24th with 47) all offer a more limited number of day-games to enjoy than many other teams.

So who are the best teams when it comes to day games? Well, alongside the A's, Giants and Padres, the Minnesota Twins (joint-seventh with 68 games), New York Mets (sixth with 69), Tampa Bay Rays (joint-fourth with 71), and Detroit Tigers (third with 76) all offer plenty of opportunity to catch them in action during the British evening. That selection of teams actually corresponds well with my own experience based on which team's TV broadcasting crews I have seen the most of. Dewayne Staats and Brian Anderson of the Rays' Sun Sports coverage, for example, regularly acknowledge the baseball fans watching their coverage in Europe on the ESPN channel (or the now defunct ESPN America channel).

Whilst those teams deserve plenty of credit, even *they* pale in comparison with the day-game kings. The Chicago Cubs lead the way with 113 day-games over the three seasons, a full 27% more than the second-placed A's and including almost as many games in 2013 (38) than both the Angels and Dodgers mustered in the past three season combined.

That is, of course, the least surprising conclusion you will find in this issue of the journal. The Cubs are well known for playing more day-games than any other team as their ballpark's proximity to neighbouring homes means they are limited to the number of night-games they are allowed to stage. If you want to pick a team based on the number of times you can watch them without staying up all night, the Cubs are far and away your best bet.

Although the Cubs will surely remain the MLB leaders in day-games for years to come, the exact number is going to decrease a few years down the line. In July 2013 an agreement was reached with the local authorities to commence with a \$500m redevelopment of Wrigley Field and the surrounding area. As part of this the Cubs are being allowed to increase the number of night games that they can play at home.<sup>5</sup>

The potential financial benefits of playing night-games during the week are obvious and it's worth noting that the number of weekday day-games across the Majors has decreased year on year, from 314 in 2011, to 287 in 2012 and then 283 in 2013. With regional networks paying increasingly eye-watering sums for the rights to broadcast games, it's possible that the incentive to schedule more night-games will see this trend continue.

Fans shouldn't be too concerned with this, though; the nature of the MLB schedule means that there will always be a healthy number of day-games to keep us entertained during the British evening.

Occasionally we even get to watch live baseball at another convenient part of the day. Several times in a season you will log on at breakfast to read about all of the games from the night before, only to find that one is still to be decided. Extra-inning games on the West Coast, or sometimes on the East Coast if including a rain delay, can provide some bonus baseball as the perfect way to start a day.

The 2013 season was only a few days old when the St Louis Cardinals and Arizona Diamondbacks played out a 16-inning game at the latter's Chase Field. The first pitch was delivered at 2.40AM UK time and the D-Backs' Cliff Pennington finally brought the contest to a close with a walk-off single five-and-a-half hours later at 8.10AM.<sup>6</sup>

Later that month, on 30 April, Pennington's former team, the Oakland A's, played the longest game in their history so far, defeating the LA Angels 10–8 with a 19th inning two-run, walk-off home run by Brandon Moss. The game had started at 3.05AM UK time and Moss's homer cracked off his bat at 9.35AM.<sup>7</sup>

Had you been a fan that woke up six-and-half-hours earlier to watch the game live from the start, it probably wouldn't have felt much like being "bonus baseball", more a test of endurance. Whatever time a game starts there will be plusses and minuses depending on the time zone difference and personal situation (a 9.35AM ending would come too late for most people heading off to work or school, for example).

However, in the main, day-games in the States are a treat for fans in Britain and it's clear that we get plenty of them to enjoy over the course of a Major League season. [TDI](#)

## About the author

Matt Smith, based in Cambridgeshire, UK, joined the ranks of British baseball fanatics in 1998. Since 2006 he has been the Editor and Chief Writer at BaseballGB.co.uk, writing extensively about baseball in MLB, the British baseball leagues and international competitions, as well as commenting and reflecting on life as a baseball fan in Blighty.

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# In search of the best league system for British baseball

Aspi Dimitrov

Various historical discoveries have indicated a significant role for the British Isles in baseball's early roots; however, today the world undoubtedly views it as an American sport. The British Baseball Federation (BBF) thus has the challenge of selling an American sport to the British public. It has an advantage from the fact that Major League Baseball (MLB) is among the most popular sports competitions in the world and provides a ready-made template of how to structure and run a baseball league. Millions of dollars are being invested into fine-tuning every aspect of the league to make it of as high a quality as it can be in any given year. Surely the BBF, with its tiny budget, should not waste its time trying to reinvent the game and is best advised to simply follow the MLB template?

However, there is one aspect which MLB may never be able to fine-tune, no matter how many millions of dollars are invested into perfecting the league. Ironically, the cash-strapped BBF is in a much better position to overcome this problem, which has handcuffed MLB with, seemingly, no way out. The specific aspect in question is MLB's league system and its interaction with baseball's minor leagues.

## The question of relegation

Currently MLB consists of 30 teams. At the end of every season all 30 teams are quite content in the knowledge that their place in the league is secure for next year regardless of where they finish in the standings. There is no promotion and relegation of teams in MLB. Minor league teams have no way of gaining entry into the lucrative top league regardless of how well they play (it is, of course, movement of players between the levels of an organization that allows the cream to rise). This is the preferred league system, too, for other major North American team sports, American football, basketball, and ice hockey.

By contrast, in much of the rest of the world, where football is the dominant sport, there is familiarity with the system of promotion and relegation. The different football league tiers in each country are interlinked. The teams which finish at or near the bottom of their league are relegated and in the following season will have to play in the lower league tier. Their place is taken by the top teams promoted from the lower league tier.

Which of the two systems is better and what criteria should be applied to answer this question? Whether it is football or baseball, one way to simplify this to a one-dimensional

problem is to consider this from the perspective of the fans who buy the tickets or pay for their TV subscription (including hypothetical "paying fans" for British baseball in its current state). On that basis the question becomes: "Which of these two league systems will make more fans come to the stadiums and watch the games on TV?"

There will be a number of baseball fans who may like the current system simply in the interest of tradition, and others who might prefer it on account of the safeguard it provides for their team if it has been struggling consistently. However, I am of the opinion that a substantial majority of baseball fans would find the relegation-promotion system significantly more exciting. And I believe that those who are undecided would be convinced as soon as they experience their first season with promotion and relegation. Currently, it seems that half of the 30 MLB teams find themselves out of the play-off picture (barring a miracle resurgence) after the first couple of months of the regular season. Attendances are liable to slide drastically. The large TV networks may stop broadcasting the games of the teams which are out of the race. Clubs start to lose revenue and may begin off-loading their players to reduce their payroll, being no longer interested in the outcome of this season's games and instead looking to restructure the team for next season.

With promotion and relegation, games may seem like a matter of life and death for fans of teams at the bottom of the standings. As such, these teams may have the potential to generate more revenue than teams who find themselves safe in the middle of the league table. The stadiums may be sold out as fans come out in force to support their team to avoid the dreaded prospect of relegation. TV networks select these games as the viewing figures can go up when there is drama. At the same time, the race for promotion in tiers below the top one is just as, if not more, dramatic. The English Championship (second-tier) playoffs are some of the most-watched games of the year and the play-off final is known as "the richest game in sport", with a prize of approximately £100 million in increased revenue for the winning team, which gains promotion to the top flight.<sup>1</sup>

I have had experience in both football and baseball and I am of the opinion that the two are equally attractive games, but I believe that the drama of the promotion and relegation system in football has made it the more popular sport over time. There is also an argument that this league system has opened the door to a greater number of clubs to enter at the very bottom of the league pyramid, with the aspiration of reaching the lucrative top leagues. And I am of the opinion that this open-door policy has enabled football to spread around the world at a much greater speed. In MLB that door is firmly shut, and it jars with me to watch such a marketable product like MLB restrict its ability to grow the game around the world.

## Could MLB change?

So how did MLB miss this trick? The answer is that, even if this article comes as a surprise to the body's administrators, they are, to a certain extent, in a "state of paralysis" in their

present structure, and it would take a monstrous overhaul for the system to be fundamentally changed. This stems, I feel, primarily from the fact that MLB has a highly centralized corporate structure with top-down control firmly in effect. The realist in me knows that it would take something truly remarkable to convince MLB to look at the enormous long-term gains on a global scale instead of the short-term risks.

## What about the positives of not having promotion and relegation?

The reader may be wondering if I have forgotten about the many potential points in the "positives column" for having a no-relegation system. For instance, is there not a financial advantage to ensuring that the stadiums can be developed safe in the knowledge that a top-tier berth is safeguarded for the future? And what about the benefits of having near-total control of the geographical distribution of top-tier teams? I would argue that professional football systems in England and elsewhere have been able to "overcome" these and other potential complications of promotion and relegation for decades.

In addition, it must be pointed out that in the last few years the English Premier League has considered adopting MLB's league system of no-relegation.<sup>2</sup> What could possibly be the reason to even consider moving away from what appears to be a winning formula? It is the same reason working against MLB adopting the promotion-and-relegation system. With the enormous financial disparity between the Premier League and the lower leagues, the threat of relegation from the Premier League represents a major financial risk and naturally top-tier owners would want to protect their top-tier income. This idea appears to have gained momentum after the arrival of American owners in the Premier League, who are often also owners of NFL and MLB clubs and are familiar with the benefits of a no-relegation system for the clubs in the top league. Thankfully, there appear to be sufficient barriers within the football regulatory system to block such a move, and even if there was no such protection the fans would surely come out onto the streets in protest to protect what they see as a sacred part of the game.

## What does this all mean for British baseball?

Barring a miracle, MLB's hands are tied, but British baseball actually finds itself better placed in this regard than MLB as there are no wealthy owners eager to protect their revenues. Currently, the BBF leagues operate the same system as MLB. There is movement between league tiers from time to time but this is decided not on the field of play but by applying to the league on paper in order to demonstrate compliance with the target tier's criteria. Submitting an application form is not much of a spectacle for fans and is unlikely to be shown on TV.

By adopting a promotion-and-relegation system, the BBF could bring more drama and excitement to its leagues, and clubs may have to start thinking about upgrading facilities for spectators because I genuinely believe this could create an upswing in attendance.

Some BBF clubs have more than one affiliated team (and in some cases as many as five). How can the BBF avoid the scenario of dominant clubs having all of their teams gaining promotion to the top league? The Spanish and German football leagues have placed a restriction where the second teams play in the lower leagues but they are not permitted to win promotion to the top league. Even if they finish top of the second league tier, promotion is awarded to the next team in the standings. This rule ensures that the integrity of the top league is protected and each club can be represented in the top flight by one team only. (Of course, such a restriction would bar any promotion into MLB at all under the current ownership structure; this is in part why such a large overhaul would be necessary.)

If the BBF was concerned that a team in a lower league might not deserve to gain promotion as the team to be relegated is markedly better, this risk can be reduced by staging promotion–relegation play-off games between the teams – leading to even more drama and potential column-inches.

## A final word for MLB team owners

MLB team owners will not want to hear this, but if in the future MLB decides to show ambition and increase its market share, not only in America but around the world, adopting the relegation–promotion system could be the answer. [TDI](#)

## About the author

Aspi is the President of Herts Baseball Club and has previously served on the Board of the British Baseball Federation. He is also a director of sports marketing and management company ETAR and has previously worked for The Football Association. He lives in London, UK.

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# A tedious and uninteresting game

Chris Jones



Award-winning entry (2013)

On 7 September 1859, 12 men boarded the *Nova Scotian* in Liverpool (*Figure 1*) and sailed for Canada. The voyage lasted over two weeks, and the 12 endured boredom, seasickness and a variety of injuries. Their torment was over on 22 September, and they were rushed by train to Montreal, in preparation for their first match. They had come to North America to play cricket.<sup>1</sup>

This, the first overseas cricket tour, was the idea of William Pickering, the co-founder of Surrey County Cricket Club, who had emigrated to Canada in 1852.<sup>2</sup> Pickering represented his adopted country against the United States on four occasions in the mid-1850s,<sup>3</sup> and in 1856 he suggested that the Montreal Cricket Club should invite a team from England to tour North America. After three years of negotiations, the visit was fixed for 1859; 12 of the best English cricketers (*Figure 2*) would play five matches in Canada and the United States. The players included John Wisden, who later created the *Wisden Cricketers' Almanac*, Fred Lillywhite, who established a sports outfitters near Leicester Square, in London, and the improbably named Julius Caesar.

In the mid-19th Century, cricket was popular both in Canada and in the United States. The game had been recorded in North America as early as 1709,<sup>4</sup> and it is estimated that 10 000 Americans were playing by 1850.<sup>5</sup> The first international match, between Canada and the United States, was

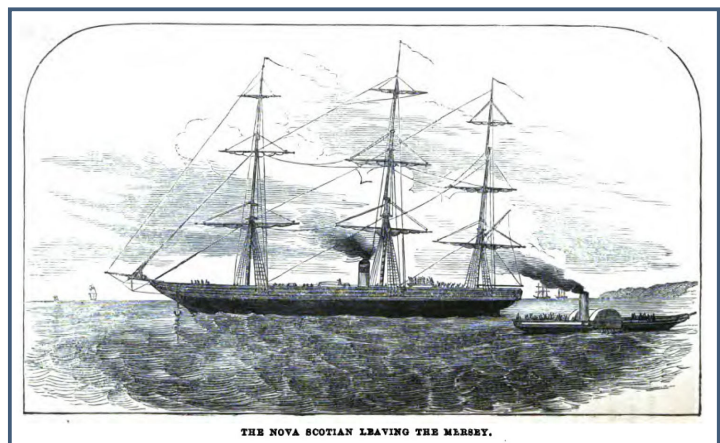


Figure 1. The *Nova Scotian*.



Figure 2. The English cricketing tourists of 1859.

held in 1844 in Manhattan and was watched by a crowd of 5000.<sup>6</sup> The English players started their schedule of matches in Montreal on 24 September 1859, moving on to New York in October (Figure 3). To nobody's surprise, the tourists were dominant.

The English XI faced 22 players on the opposing teams and won comfortably on each occasion. William Pickering himself played in two of the games. Large crowds turned up, at least until the last two matches in late October, when the fielders had to wear coats and gloves to keep warm.

Heavy snowfall in Rochester, NY, on 22 October meant that a planned cricket match had to be cancelled. Nearby, though, was an enclosed baseball ground,<sup>7</sup> and some of the English party took on the Americans at baseball. Lillywhite described the game as "somewhat similar to the English game of rounders, as played by school-boys" but noted that the English thought "catching the ball the first bound a very childish game."

The first bound? Baseball in 1859 was played under "Knickerbocker Rules".<sup>8</sup> Instead of a fixed number of innings, the winner was the first team to 21 runs. Overhand pitching was not allowed. There was no strike zone – batters could wait indefinitely for a pitch they liked. If a fielder caught the ball after one bounce, that was an out. And the players fielded bare-handed, as in cricket: gloves were not seen in baseball until 1875.<sup>9</sup>

Three days later, in similarly icy conditions, a second baseball game was held, including Lillywhite at third base and the English wicket-keeper Tom Lockyer as catcher.

After a successful tour, the party set sail for England on 29 October 1859, and it was generally agreed that the exercise should be repeated in future years.

Among the American players who had faced the English cricketers in 1859 were Samuel and Harry Wright (Figure 4). Sam, a professional cricketer from Sheffield, emigrated to America in around 1836 to take up a job as cricket professional at the St George's club in New York.<sup>10</sup> He took with him his family, including his two-year-old son Harry. Sam Wright played for the United States in the first international cricket match in 1844.

Harry grew up playing cricket, and he and his younger brother

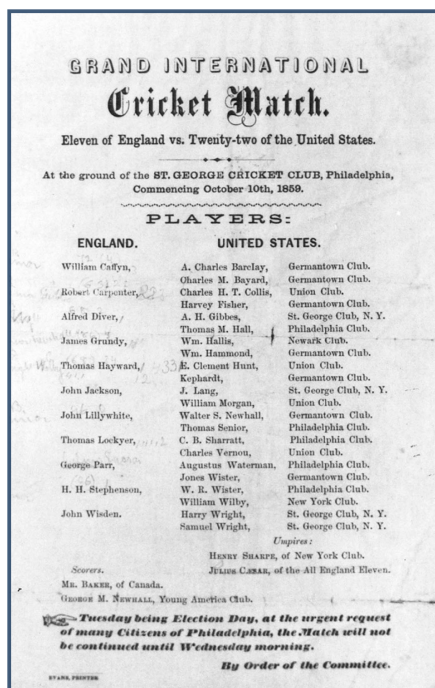


Figure 3. A cricket programme from 1859.

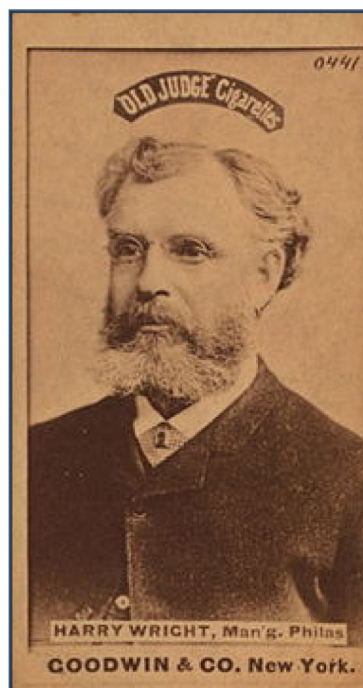


Figure 4. Harry Wright cigarette card.

George helped out their father at the club. While playing in 1857, Harry happened to look over at an adjoining field, and saw his first game of baseball. He joined the Knickerbocker Club that year.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president. His victory, and his opposition to the expansion of slavery, triggered South Carolina to secede from the Union; six more states followed in forming the Confederacy. The confederates seized government buildings, and both sides started to prepare for conflict. The first shot in the Civil War was fired in defence of Fort Sumter in South Carolina, by General Abner Doubleday, the man later (and wrongly) declared as the inventor of baseball.<sup>11</sup>

As the years went by, and as troops from around the country sat around waiting for the next battle, they needed something to do. Men from New York, where baseball had been widely played, taught the game to soldiers from other states. Unlike cricket, baseball didn't need a well-groomed pitch – just sacks for bases, a ball made of a walnut, horse hide and string, and a tree branch for a bat. Even prisoners of war from the South were able to play in their camps.<sup>12</sup> When the war ended, baseball was firmly established as an important national game. In 1865, the newly formed National Association of Base Ball Players had 100 teams; two years later there were 300.<sup>13</sup>

In 1868, an English cricket team led by Edgar Willsher returned to North America, playing games in Canada, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> Their opposition in 1868 again included Harry Wright, now 33, joined this time not by his father, but by his younger brother George.<sup>15</sup> Although Harry Wright always described cricket as his first love,<sup>16</sup> by now his career was in baseball. He became the manager of the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1866 and took them on a nationwide tour in 1869, visiting cities such as Omaha and San Francisco. In 1870 he moved to Boston to form and manage the Boston Red Stockings.

By the late 1860s, cricket was on the wane in the United States, and baseball was taking over. It seemed that Americans preferred the faster pace of baseball, and perhaps felt that cricket was too slow, too dull, or too English. Attendances on the 1868 tour were poor – only a tenth of the expected 25 000 spectators turned up for the match against the St George's club.<sup>17</sup> The *New York Times* was unimpressed:

Previous to the advent of the former [1859] 'eleven', considerable curiosity was manifested in this country to see the celebrated All England Eleven play. Then cricket, as a field sport, enjoyed a popularity it does not now by any means – one cause of this change being the fact that we now have what we did not then possess, viz.: a national game of ball; one, too, which in the quickly-played, lively and exciting contests it yields, and in the manly attributes of pluck, courage, endurance, activity and judgment required to play it skillfully, rivals any game or sport now in vogue – cricket, according to the opinion of the large majority of our citizens, appearing, by contrast, a tedious and uninteresting game.<sup>18</sup>



As their predecessors had done in 1859, the cricketers played baseball too. This time there were at least four organized games, rather than a couple of impromptu pick-up contests, and the English formed a complete team of their own. In the last baseball game, on 23 October 1868, the English took on a combined American side, which included George Wright,<sup>19</sup> and ran them close for five innings until the Americans scored nine in the last.<sup>20</sup>

So if the English were failing to arrest the decline in American cricket, could the Americans persuade the English to take up the new American national game? In the late 1860s, English readers were starting to become aware of American baseball; in 1868, for example, Edmund Routledge published the 6th edition of his *Every Boy's Book: A Complete Encyclopædia Of Sports And Amusements*.<sup>21</sup> This included, for the first time, the rules of the game, provided by Henry Chadwick, often called the "father of baseball", who had been influential in developing the rules in the 1860s.<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, Harry Wright had played in both the 1859 and 1868 English cricket tours, and had taken his own baseball team on a nationwide tour. Perhaps these experiences were in his mind when, in 1873, Harry asked his star pitcher Albert Spalding to visit England to set up a baseball tour of the British Isles.<sup>23</sup> In 1874, the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics visited Liverpool, Manchester, London, Richmond, Dublin, and Sam Wright's home town of Sheffield, attempting to foster the growth of baseball on this side of the Atlantic. Harry Wright was the centre-fielder; George was the shortstop.

This tour was not a great success; crowds were small and both teams lost money on the venture. It would take a second trip, in 1889, watched by, among others, the Prince of Wales,<sup>24</sup> to provide a little more encouragement to the growth of the game in the UK. The English press was as withering about baseball as the American press had been about cricket; the *Lancashire Evening Post* declared that:

Although American enthusiasts consider it [baseball] decidedly superior to the English game [cricket], it is not very likely that people in this country will share the opinion ... to compare it with cricket is a piece of audacity of which only an American can be guilty ... In cricket there is vastly more variety, a great deal more science, ever so much more of the picturesque; in short, language fails to describe its superiority.<sup>25</sup>

It seems that both nations felt their game to be superior, and none of the transatlantic tours really succeeded in changing these perceptions. Cricket was by no means defunct in America; it was to enjoy a renaissance centred in Philadelphia between 1870 and 1910. It would, though, be a minority sport, and the United States would play no part in the growth of cricket in the British Empire.<sup>26</sup> And baseball never caught on in England in the way that Wright and Spalding had hoped.



But the arrival in England in 1874 of two American baseball teams can be traced back to a day in October 1859, when snow stopped play, and a touring cricket team became perhaps the first group of Englishmen to play American baseball. [TDI](#)

## About the author

Chris Jones has two baseball-playing sons and helps out at Herts and London Mets Baseball Clubs, living in London, UK.

## Acknowledgement

To the best of the author and editor's knowledge, all pictures used are outside of copyright.

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# Thwack! Slap! Thwack! Slap!

Ryan Ferguson



Award-winning  
entry (2013)

**T**hwack! Slap! Thwack! Slap! The sun was dying, threatening to call time on another ballgame. A late evening dew began to form under foot, making each fly ball an adventure. In heady unison, the scent of leather and impending twilight informed that it was late. *Thwack! Slap! Thwack! Slap!* Now, a lengthy shadow had formed, projecting a mammoth figure replete with cap, mitt and ball. In a haste descriptive of such late hours, the silhouette would lurch forward, launch the ball, then spring back so as to catch it again. *Thwack! Slap! Thwack! Slap!* You've seen this type of thing in movies or magazines, where some hero comes of age on the sandlots of modern America. Well, this English council estate may not have had the same dramatic potential, but it had an equal appreciation of baseball.

We had a sandlot of our own, unimpeded by the forces of probability. When more "formal" games would suddenly arise out of youthful spontaneity, our doormat would represent home plate. A row of characterless semi-detached houses formed a convenient batter's eye across the way. One house even had ivy growing along its facade, evoking Wrigley Field but some four thousand miles away from Chicago. At an angle out towards "left field", we had our own Green Monster: the overgrown hedge of an unoccupied bungalow. If you hit it over there on the fly, take a trot around those lopsided bases clumsily drawn with chalk earlier in the morning. *Home run! Dinger! Moonshot!*

At the mat, I'd stand like Manny Ramirez, all charisma and relaxed aggression. On my shoulder, a red bat chipped from hours of use, twirling in anticipation of the delivered ball. A rule of this rudimentary British ballgame: put it in the hitter's wheelhouse. We'd use a tennis ball so as not to break any windows. It would be flipped towards the mat by a pitcher diving for cover in its wake. If the pitch was "hittable", the batter would unleash a vicious swing with bulging eyes and excited concentration. *Thud!* The ball would fly its lazy parabola, soaring over obstructive telephone wires and parked cars. A long ball would get a flattering response early in the morning; late at night when pitchers became restless, it would earn only scorn.

If you were in the "outfield", it was a responsibility to locate that ball amongst long grass, under cars, or flying across main roads. An eye taken off the ball usually meant a ball lost and, ultimately, game over. However, there was glory to be found out there. If a ball wasn't hit with particular authority, you could make a spectacular play. In time, leaping catches into hedge became exclamation points to the game, highlight-reel plays in our imagined post-game

analysis. A kid could feel like Jim Edmonds, bumping into a wall but holding on for the out. It was bliss.

We even had hecklers. It felt like the burly gent next door had a sixth sense which detected ball on car, because he'd come flying outside whenever the ball came within a certain radius of his prized Vauxhall. It usually meant a foul strike, should the neighbour feel calm enough to eventually throw our ball back. If you hit that car twice in one game, sprawl for cover, run away, get as far out of reach as possible because hell hath no fury like a car-owner mocked. I learnt a lot of new profanities from those excursions.

When calmness was restored, inexorably dragging darkness along with it, the game of baseball became a solo pursuit. The hardcore enthusiasts would play catch with walls when everybody else had gone home. A streetlight, branded "Pesky's Pole" during earlier day games, would allow some more throwing, catching, and spitting until 10.30pm; then you were really pushing your luck. Nonetheless, you'd still try to carry on, caught up in the narrative of one's own imagination. When you did eventually go indoors, the day was one of fulfilment. The aches and pains made it all the more realistic, this overwhelming sense of *baseball!* In quiet times, you'd reflect and feel a small content. The big-city dreams of America were thriving in the council estates of Britain. [TDI](#)

## About the author

Ryan is author of the blog *Suicide Squeezin': A homage to the finer art of baseball* (<http://ryanfergusonbaseball.blogspot.co.uk> [accessed Januray 2014]). He lives in Merseyside, UK.



# Diamond dreams at The Oval: The 1988 national championship

Harvey Sahker

A quarter century ago, the British Baseball Federation championship game was played at The Oval. The date was Sunday 25 September 1988. The combatants were the Burtonwood Braves and Cobham Yankees, respective representatives of the north and south.

It was the second straight year in which the final was staged at The Oval. In 1987, Cobham had defeated the Southglade Hornets 6–0. That game was supposed to have been preceded by a home run derby between Hank Aaron and England cricketer Ian Botham. Aaron did not show up, but Botham took his hacks against a pitching machine while wearing a borrowed Croydon Blue Jays uniform. The spectacle was captured on film and made the front pages of several national newspapers the next day.

A home run derby was arranged in 1988 as well, and both contestants showed up for this one. Cricketer Graham Gooch, 35, competed against retired Hall of Famer Ernie Banks, then 57. Banks took some batting practice at The Oval for the press on the day before the final. Cobham outfielder Alan Smith, who was involved in the organization of the event, remembers it well. "I fielded balls at third base, and with the grass so smooth and the underlying ground so forgiving, the ball ran true, so even with Ernie's power, and the fact I only had a catcher's mitt available, I had no trouble handling the task."

Playing baseball at The Oval was a treat for the players. "It is always exciting to play in any championship game," said Smith, "but running out at The Oval was extra special because it was such a wonderful venue with an immaculate playing surface. I had, of course, played there in the 1987 final, so I knew how electric the atmosphere would be. However, some of the excitement was tempered by my having been involved in the planning and setting up of the field. That took away some of the pure joy of just being there and



Ian Botham in a one-man home run derby at The Oval in 1987.

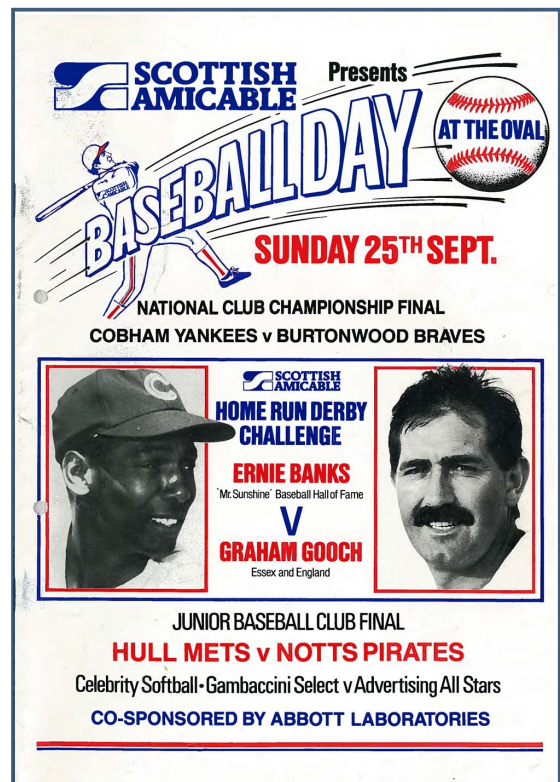
I found myself a little envious of the other players who could take the event at face value and just concentrate on enjoying the day."

Many of the Yankees were making their second appearance at The Oval in as many years, but the experience was something new for the Burtonwood Braves. "Playing at The Oval was meant to be the pinnacle of my playing days," recalled Burtonwood starting pitcher Rob Alger. "It had been set up in such a way as to provide the perfect setting and playing surface. There was a portable mound and backstop, and I felt like a true pro. I remember that, as the home team, we got changed in the main pavilion, probably the same changing room used by many cricket legends. I still look at the window every time I see cricket being played at The Oval."

The Cobham Yankees earned a place in the national play-offs long before the final by finishing in the top three in the First Division of the British Baseball Federation South. The Burtonwood Braves, however, qualified for the post-season at the midnight hour. "There was a fixture congestion at the end of the season," recalled Alger. "The Northwest League title was decided on a Saturday, with the quarter-final scheduled for the day after against the Hull Mets." Burtonwood and the Liverpool Tigers went into the regular season finale tied for first, with identical 12–2 records. "I pitched on the Saturday against the Tigers, beating them, and then went on to pitch the day after against Hull. The Braves had played the Mets at the same stage in the previous two seasons, but had lost on both occasions. So the win against the Mets that year meant a lot to the players and I felt particularly proud of my achievement."

Many players from the Braves and the Yankees had moonlighted in the Scottish Amicable National League on Saturdays during the regular season. Some of the Braves had suited up for the Lancashire Red Sox, who had won the NL pennant in 1987. Many of the Yankees spent their Saturdays with the London Warriors, who were NL champs in 1988. If Cobham won the championship then those players would "do the double" – win NL and BBF titles in the same season. This was an achievement that few would make, as the NL folded after the 1989 season.

One of the players who was hoping to "do the double" at The Oval was Japanese pitcher Tony Kuramitsu, a teenage sensation who had split the 1988 season between the Yankees and the Warriors. "Tony's parents would only let him play one day of a weekend as he had to attend school/tutoring on the other," explained Alan Smith. "Given this, we decided that he should play for the Warriors on



The programme cover for the 1988 British baseball national championship.

Saturdays during the National League season. However, once that was over, he switched to playing for the Yankees in the regular league on Sundays. We believed that, as he was 15 years old, Tony would only be allowed to pitch 5 innings in the Championship Game, and so decided to keep him on the bench and available for the later innings. Tony wasn't best pleased that he didn't start, although he was slightly mollified by the explanation that we would need him should the game be close and/or go to extra innings."

In the top of the first frame, the first three batters in the Cobham line-up got hits and the Yankees scored two runs. Cobham starter Paul Gonzales retired the Braves in order in the home half of the inning. The Yankees scored two more in the second and two more in the third. Burtonwood spoiled Gonzales' shut-out bid in the fourth when shortstop John Leeth doubled in a run to make it 6-1.

If the Yankees were running on cruise control in the early innings then they went into overdrive in the fifth inning. Cobham sent twelve batters to the plate and scored six runs. The game was effectively over.

Rob Alger soldiered on, even though his arm still hurt from having pitched complete games on consecutive days earlier in the month. There was nobody to relieve him at The Oval. "Because Burtonwood was a military base, some of the regular players were on duty that weekend and were unable to travel. Steve Atchley was the second pitcher that season, but he had returned home weeks earlier." Alger ended up throwing 162 pitches and going the distance on the mound.

Cobham designated hitter Dave Jensen hit a two-out, two-run triple in the sixth inning, extending the lead to 14-1. Kuramitsu came in from the bullpen and pitched the final four frames. He struck out seven batters, walked one and gave up no hits. The Yankees finished the scoring with a pair of runs in the eighth. The final score was 16-1 (a box score is available at: [http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/national\\_champions.html#1980-89](http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/national_champions.html#1980-89) [accessed January 2014]).

It was the third straight national title for the Cobham Yankees – and their last. In the following close season, the BBF invoked a rule that restricted the number of non-British players on the field to a maximum of four at a time. Cobham's roster consisted mostly of expats and, as such, they were forced to fold. [TDI](#)

## About the author

Harvey has been a freelance sportswriter since the late 1980s. His British baseball stories have been published in Britain, the USA, and Canada, and he has contributed to *Baseball America*. Harvey played baseball in England from 1988 to 2000, as an outfielder for the Croydon Blue Jays, Croydon Pirates, and Southern Tigers. During his years in England, he did extensive research into the history of British baseball. Harvey returned to his native city of Toronto, Canada, in late 2000, but his research continues. Most notably, his first British baseball book, *The Blokes of Summer*, was published in 2011.

# Acknowledgement and call for papers

Joe Gray

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## Call for papers

If you would like to submit an idea for a paper to include in the next volume of *This Diamond Isle*, please contact me at [joe@projectcobb.org.uk](mailto:joe@projectcobb.org.uk) to discuss this.