

Bringing baseball to Britain

Steps leading to the formation of a pro league in 1890

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This article is an adapted version of a chapter taken from a book by the author titled *What about the Villa?: Forgotten figures from Britain's pro baseball league of 1890*. The book, which provides a full history of the 1890 season in Britain, was published in 2010 by Fineleaf Editions (www.fineleaf.co.uk).

Baseball was the subject of significant coverage in British newspapers on two occasions prior to 1890. In both instances the press's interest resulted from visits to Britain by pro baseball teams from the United States, whose tours were sponsored with the purpose of globalizing the sport. The first of the two visits occurred in 1874, but it failed to ignite an enduring passion for the game. In contrast, the second visit, which took place in 1889, was swiftly followed up with the formation of a domestic professional league. The relative triumph of the latter effort was not purely through the success of the tour itself, however, as is explained later in this article.

Before describing the details of the tours, it is important to consider the societal context in which the attempts to introduce baseball took place. Bloyce and Murphy concisely describe this in a paper published in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*:

The first two tours occurred at a time when the British establishment no doubt felt themselves to be omnipotent. The deeply entrenched collective belief was that Britain really did "rule the waves". They viewed the USA disdainfully as an upstart nation and were impervious to any potential threat it might constitute for Britain's future international dominance. In 1874 they were quite willing to play host to the tourists because they were secure in the belief that baseball offered not the slightest threat to the intrinsically superior game of cricket.¹

PROFESSIONAL TOURS

Summer of 1874: The Tour of the Boston Red Stockings and Philadelphia Athletics

In 1874, a tour of the British Isles was undertaken by two of the United States' premier baseball outfits:² the Boston Red Stockings, who today play as the Atlanta Braves,³ and the Philadelphia Athletics, who competed in the National Association between 1871 and 1875,⁴ and who should not be confused with a forerunner to today's Oakland Athletics who played under the same name at a later time.⁵ The trip had been devised by the Englishman Harry Wright, who was Boston's owner and a leading pioneer of the game,⁶ and his party contained other famous figures from the sport, including Adrian "Cap" Anson, George Wright (Harry's younger brother), and Albert Spalding.⁷ The last of these individuals, Spalding, was Boston's hurler on the tour, but his involvement extended beyond his actions in the pitcher's box, for he had visited England some months earlier charged with the duties of securing venues and gaining support from the press.⁸ One of Spalding's major activities in the preliminary trip to England was a meeting with the "great Marylebone Cricket Club," since he felt that "there would be no use to come without [their] favor and patronage." Spalding later recollected that with his "ardor to win out" in the meeting, he had mentioned that the touring party

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would contain a number of players with experience of cricket and that they “might be able to do something in the national games of both countries.”⁹ The outcome of Spalding’s meeting was that the MCC were willing to arrange cricket grounds as venues for baseball games, but that the baseball players would need to play a series of exhibitions of the English summer game in parallel. Turning to the task of gaining press support, Spalding again relied on the cricket connection, with his primary target being Charles W Alcock. He was described by Spalding as “the recognized cricket authority of England.”¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, when the tourists arrived in England they “found the British public thoroughly advised of the forthcoming cricket matches and only slightly informed about the exhibition ball games.”¹⁰ For instance, readers of *The Graphic* were alerted to an upcoming tour of sports teams from the United States in the cricket section of the newspaper, and the plans for baseball games were mentioned only as an afterthought to the announcement of the proposed exhibitions of the English game.¹¹ Nevertheless, in spite of this hindrance the baseball matches were generally well attended.¹²

Spalding proudly recalled in his 1910 book titled *America’s National Game* that his Boston team finished 8–6 victors in the series.¹³ The tour’s opening game was played at Liverpool Cricket Club in Edge Hill,¹⁴ and the 13 other games comprised seven in the London area, two in Dublin, two in Manchester, one in Sheffield, and an additional contest in Liverpool.¹⁵ In the cricket games, the Red Stockings and Athletics combined their numbers, so they played with at least 18 men to their opponents’ 11. Aided by their numerical superiority, the tourists went unbeaten in the contests.¹⁶

The 1874 baseball tour left no lasting peaks on the landscape of British sports, such that when the second push to establish baseball in Britain occurred nearly 15 years later, the tourists were climbing from sea level once more. One of the major reasons for this was later described by Newton Crane, who served as American Consul in Manchester for many years before becoming a barrister in London,¹⁷ and who was heavily involved in efforts to gain a foothold for baseball in Britain after the 1889 tour. On the subject of the 1874 tour, Crane wrote:

[I]n the short hour or two devoted to the exhibition matches but little idea of it could be acquired by the bewildered spectators. [...] When lacrosse was first played the spectators could readily comprehend, from their knowledge of football, polo, and hockey, what the players were trying to accomplish, and were therefore able to appreciate the skill required in running and throwing the ball as the combatants endeavoured to get it through their opponents’ goal. But in baseball [...] [t]here were no stumps to defend as in cricket, and there were no goals; and while there were bases as in rounders, there was an apparent confusion in the restriction upon the direction a batted ball might take, in the variety of ways a player might be put out, and in the quick changes of the sides that made it impossible for even a rounders player to follow the game.¹⁸

The thrust of Crane’s complaint was that the tour failed as an educational device, but his observation that knowledge of rounders was insufficient as a springboard for the British public is also of interest since it offers a counterpoint to a sentiment commonly held by the British press. This sentiment was perhaps most politely expressed in the branding of baseball as “only a refinement on the ‘rounders’ of our schoolboy days.”¹⁹ Other journalists were less restrained in their mockery of the sport. For instance, one critic wrote the following: “In America it may remain the national game. Here base-ball takes its rightful rank as the popular boys’ games of rounders.”²⁰ As Bloyce and Murphy have noted from surveying newspapers’ coverage of the tour, these ridicule-laden comparisons to rounders accompanied unfavorable comparisons with cricket as punctuation of an otherwise general indifference to baseball in the press.²¹

Winter/Spring of 1889: The Tour of the Chicago White Stockings and an "All America" Team

The second wave of baseball diplomats crashed against the British shore in March 1889, led by Albert Spalding.²² It would be difficult to quantify the relative contribution of Spalding—in his role as advance agent—to the 1874 trip, but he was indisputably the principal organizer of the second tour. The ex-pitcher was now a sports equipment mogul and the owner of a major team,²³ the Chicago White Stockings (today, the Chicago Cubs).²⁴ Spalding was joined by two other participants from the first tour: George Wright, a team-mate in 1874, was recruited as an umpire (but also filled in as a player on the tour);²⁵ and Cap Anson, an opponent in 1874, now played for Spalding's Chicago team.²⁶

The White Stockings and an "All America" team sailed through San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge on 18 November 1888 and by 5 January 1889 had completed their Australasian leg of the trip. According to Spalding's account in *America's National Game*, it had originally been planned for the tourists to turn around after completing their games in Australasia and travel home by retracing their outward route. However, soon after the expedition had hit the waves of the Pacific, Spalding put forward a suggestion for the party to sail westward after Australia to complete the voyage in New York. This was met with a unanimously positive response from the players, according to Spalding's recollections. On their westward route, the teams played exhibitions in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), in Egypt (on "the desert's sands in front of the Great Pyramids"), and in continental Europe (including a game "within the shadow of the Eiffel Tower," but not one among the ruins of Rome's Coliseum, as Spalding's offer of \$5000 to secure that venue was rejected).²⁷ Finally, they reached the British Isles for the last stop before the tour's concluding games in the United States.²⁸

Spalding's organizational concessions had enabled cricket to become the focus of the 1874 tour, and this had almost certainly hindered the attempt to spread baseball to the Old World. Even though Spalding again drew on the services of Alcock, still a leading figure in the country's cricket scene (and also its association football scene),²⁹ the approach used for the visit in 1889 differed substantially, suggesting a realization on the part of the Chicago owner that attempting to gain a strong foothold among a cricket-aligned segment of the British populace was overambitious. Bloyce and Murphy have succinctly described the dissimilarity:

Again, most of the matches were played on county cricket grounds, but this time there were no associated cricket matches. Some exhibition games were held on football grounds at Bramall Lane (Sheffield) and Goodison Park (Liverpool). It seems that the aim here was to attract crowds of a different social composition. Association Football was extremely popular amongst the urban working classes, whereas cricket still had more appeal for the middle- and upper classes.³⁰

This fit with the urban working classes would prove to be a neat one when a domestic league was established in Britain the following year, not least because many of the association footballers they rooted for during the winter months were available to play the sport of baseball in the summer. The potential dovetailing of association football and baseball is considered in more detail later in this article.

The blossoming of Spalding the businessman during the decade-and-a-half between the visits of pro baseball players to Britain is explored in *Spalding's Word Tour*, written by Mark Lamster and published in 2006. In this book, Lamster provides an engaging account of the world tour, detailing events both on and off the diamond. He devotes a wonderful chapter to the tourists' visit to the British Isles, marred only by a couple of factual errors (the Sheffield venue is mistakenly referred to as Bramball Lane, with an erroneous second "b", while the final game of the tour's London section is described as having been played in Leighton rather than Leyton, an inaccuracy compounded by the

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tour map having the dot for that game appearing to mark Leighton Buzzard in Buckinghamshire rather than the Leyton in Essex where the game actually took place).³¹ The difference between the Spalding of 1874 and the Spalding of 1889 is described by Lamster as follows.

The small-town naïf of twenty-four traveling abroad for the first time had in the intervening years transformed himself, through skill and bluster, into an honest-to-goodness titan of American business. [...] To be sure, Spalding had learned how to conduct an international publicity campaign, but in that decade-and-a-half hiatus he had also become a far more savvy political operator.³²

The first match of the 1889 visit was played in London, at the Oval cricket ground. According to an account by Newton Crane, who was one of 7000 to 8000 spectators at the game, inclement weather conditions were detrimental to the enjoyment of those present: "The atmosphere was saturated with moisture, and the fine turf upon which the diagram was laid out was soft and sodden. A fog veiled the outfield, and when a ball was batted in that direction it was immediately lost to sight."³³

Among those struggling to follow the flight of the ball was Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, who would later be crowned Edward VII. A bold reporter for the *New York Herald*, an Anglo-American newspaper, asked the Prince for his opinion on the new sport, to which he responded by writing a sharp, diplomatically considerate note for the journalist that was reproduced in the paper the next day. The often-cited pronouncement of the future king read: "The Prince of Wales has witnessed the game of Base Ball with great interest and though he considers it an excellent game he considers Cricket as superior."³⁴ Inclement weather was a feature of the visit as a whole. In an issue of *The Graphic* from the end of March, it was commented that the tourists "have been singularly unfortunate in the weather they have encountered here, which has unquestionably prevented them from showing their best form."³⁵

Spalding's recollections of the tour in *America's National Game* included an estimation that at least 60,000 people witnessed the exhibition games, which were played in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Sheffield, Bradford, Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, Belfast, and Dublin.³⁶ In conjunction with the exhibition series, the tourists did in one location make acquaintance with natives on the field itself. On 23 March, during the Merseyside segment of the tour, the baseball players were defeated at rounders by a group of Liverpool-based players from the National Rounders Association, but the result, unsurprisingly, was reversed when the locals attempted baseball.³⁷ The visitors' triumph under baseball rules was of the most emphatic fashion imaginable: the rounders players went into bat first and Chicago's Mark Baldwin struck them out in order, before the baseball players put on 18 runs in the bottom of the first, which was enough for the game to be called in their favour.³⁸ Spalding's willingness to expand the visit's itinerary beyond the exhibition series was congruent with a comment he made while in Britain that "he would be greatly pleased if some Englishmen would take up the game of baseball, and visit America, and he could promise such a team an enthusiastic welcome and a successful tour."³⁹ It is easy to question the motives of the baseball equipment mogul in this regard because, as has been noted elsewhere,⁴⁰ the Old World represented a virgin market. Regardless of the reasons underlying the overarching objective for expanding the geographical spread of baseball, there was at least one other motivation behind Spalding letting his men play against a rounders side. The taunting of baseball as being akin to a childish game pervaded the press in 1889, as it had done 15 years earlier, and Spalding saw that playing the sports one after the other could dispel the unfavorable comparison, while showcasing the prowess of athletes from the United States.⁴¹

The diversion from the exhibition series notwithstanding, Spalding's anticipation for the British to take up the game of their own volition was an example of persisting overambition on his part. Two

years later, Crane wrote that had nothing been done to supplement Spalding's tour, "the whole venture would have been as barren of results as the previous visit of the Boston and Athletic Clubs in 1874." But there was something done, as Crane went on to explain:

Fortunately, however, a number of young college men from the leading universities of America, enthusiasts in baseball, decided to follow up the visit of the professional players, and to spend their midsummer holidays of 1889 in England, to teach the game wherever opportunity offered.⁴²

THE VISIT OF COLLEGIANS FROM THE UNITED STATES IN THE SUMMER OF 1889

The need for an educational element in plans to establish baseball in Britain had been observed even before Spalding's second party sailed out of San Francisco. In October 1888, the *New York Times* published a short article noting that John Barnes, manager of the St Paul baseball club in the Western League, had proposed to found "a syndicate, including London, Birmingham, and other principal cities in England, which shall establish baseball franchises similar to those in America," and that "he will at first employ lecturers to elucidate the fine points of the American national game."⁴³ The syndicate proposed by Barnes was never formed, and although news of his plans for baseball "lecturers" did make their way into the British press,⁴⁴ a search of the British Library's online archive of 49 local and national newspapers from the 19th Century reveals no stories on any educational sessions taking place.⁴⁵

Therefore, it seems that the first structured attempt to tutor the British on baseball—as opposed to merely offering demonstrations of the game—was that carried out by the group of collegians from the United States that visited England in the summer of 1889. The instructors actively engaged local sportsmen in games of baseball, starting in the London area, where Richmond was one of their chosen locations. They then headed northwards to spend several weeks in Birmingham and its surrounding towns,⁴⁶ before moving on to Liverpool. Finally, the tourists returned southwards to finish with a game at Leyton, in which they defeated an Essex County nine (the locals were granted six outs to play with in each inning instead of three, a handicapping system that probably was not unique to this contest). According to one reporter, wherever the college men "could find grounds disengaged they announced their intention of playing, and forthwith sent out invitations to athletes, football-men and others to meet them."⁴⁷

In Birmingham, the collegians undertook a varied itinerary to effect their objective of introducing baseball to the Midlands. They began with a series of baseball exhibitions, putting on demonstrations at three different grounds, all of which were free for spectators.⁴⁸ Then, with the district's appetite aroused, the collegians mixed locals into their teams (this was a format employed on a number of occasions, with the collegians sometimes dropping out of a contest as it progressed until they occupied only the position of catcher on either side).⁴⁹ A contest of this nature was played on 17 August at Perry Barr, Birmingham, and witnessed by a "very fair attendance of spectators."⁵⁰ Included in the line-ups were several individuals associated with Aston Villa Football Club, a rising giant of the soccer world. These figures included George Ramsay, who was a colossus of the club's formative years, in the role of captain and then secretary-manager.⁵¹

Building on the mixed-squad format, the baseball educators finished by playing a number of matches against association football teams from the area. For instance, on 23 August the guests comfortably defeated a team labeled "Aston Villa" at Perry Barr,⁵² which again featured several prominent figures linked with the football club of that name.⁵³ The difficult position of catcher was filled for the Villa by Cressey, one of the collegians. He played for the collegians' English opponents on a number of occasions during their visit, since a weakness at the position of catcher could have

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quickly led to the players and spectators losing interest. Another important task undertaken by the collegians was to provide explanations of preceding plays to the spectators when they were not needed on the field.⁵⁴

Beyond reporting the facts relating to the contests they saw, journalists on several Birmingham newspapers were eager to discuss the general merits and flaws of baseball, and what the balance of these meant for the game's chances of becoming a self-sustaining enterprise within the local sporting community. Several months later, a package of cuttings that were representative of the various viewpoints made its way across the Atlantic bearing the address of one Henry Chadwick, the great English-born baseball journalist. The cuttings became the subject of a lively article written by Chadwick for the *Sporting Life*.⁵⁵ There was a spectrum of descriptors applied by Chadwick to the various reports, ranging from "very sensible" to "thick-headed English prejudice." One of the "sensible" reports was published in *Saturday Night*:

Thanks to the visit of the Collegian base-ball players from America to this district, baseball is likely to play an important part in Midland athleticism in the near future. Already several of our local football clubs have taken the Yankee innovation under their wing. [...] The game is likely to prove a medium between cricket and football—not, at times, so tame as the former, not requiring so much exertion as leather-hunting. When it is better understood it will probably be much more appreciated by the public than at the present time.⁵⁶

The more "prejudiced" scribes were damning of baseball's chances. One reporter, who had "grave doubts of its ultimate success," used the collegians' presence in the district as an opportunity to reflect on the stop that Spalding's tourists had made several months earlier at Edgbaston, the ground of the Birmingham-based Warwickshire County Cricket Club:

My recollections of the afternoon at the County Ground early last spring are of the most gruesome kind, and if that is a specimen of how the game is to be played when it comes to perfection, I don't think it will ever be popular in England, and we shall want a considerable amount of "educating" before large crowds of excited people gather together to witness it.⁵⁷

Perhaps Birmingham's cold and overcast weather conditions that day had clouded not just the ground but the journalist's memory of the game too: Harry Palmer, one of the tour party's three journalists, labeled it the "most interesting and brilliant yet played on the trip," adding that a "prettier or more desperately contested game is rarely seen anywhere." The game, which featured "one of the grandest throws" to home plate that Palmer had ever seen, was tied 4-4 when it was called for darkness after 10 innings.⁵⁸

If a game of this caliber was unable to sow a seed in the sporting soil of the Midlands, then it is of little surprise that Newton Crane deemed the collegians' educational follow-up to have been essential to the game's chances of gaining a foothold. And he was not the only commentator to be drawn to this conclusion. For instance, a journalist writing under the name Viator penned the following thoughts on baseball for the *Sporting Life*:

Those of us who had learned to like it and who hoped this visit of Mr. Spalding to England might lead to its adoption here were greatly discouraged after he left. In public print and in private conversation we were wearied with the constant reiteration of the dogmatic statement that there was "absolutely nothing in the game," and that it "would never take in England." So abundant were these prophecies

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that I was in a fair way of becoming convinced myself of the utter uselessness of trying to run counter to a national prejudice. Fortunately the college boys came over last summer [...] and before they quitted us our hopes were revived and given a substantial basis. [...] As soon as the college boys struck Birmingham [...] it was apparent that there was a chance for base ball in England.⁵⁹

Not long after the collegians departed Britain, the first steps in the formation of a domestic league were being taken. It is worth noting that the idea of forming a baseball league in Britain had been discussed some time before Spalding's apostles had disembarked in Newhaven, on England's south coast, to demonstrate the case for baseball. No less a figure than Cap Anson had, back in September 1888, been quoted for his views on how a league composed of teams in England's six principal cities could be a financial success, with his confidence being such that he would not have hesitated to put capital into a venture of this nature.⁶⁰

THE FORMATION OF A LEAGUE

On the evening of Wednesday 9 October 1889, a group of England's principal sports administrators assembled in a private room at the Criterion restaurant in London's West End, with the purpose of forming a council to establish the National Base Ball League of Great Britain. Those provisionally elected were Morton P Betts (a leading figure for Essex County Cricket Club and the Football Association), Edwin Ash (an overseer of both aquatic and field sports in the Richmond area), TC Slaney (honorary secretary of Staffordshire's county cricket club and football association), WH Hivey (chief executive officer of the National Rounders Association), Major William Sudell (president of Preston North End Football Club), Francis Ley (a wealthy Derby industrialist and sports enthusiast), and, finally, George Ramsay and Newton Crane, both of whom are described earlier in the article.⁶¹ Despite "pleasantly and attractively fitted up" headquarters being swiftly sourced at 38 Holborn Viaduct in London,⁶² the "league" overseen by this auspicious group of men soon became the subject of playful mockery, as it did not yet contain any clubs.⁶³ But a valid counterargument presented by one commentator was that "it was better to shape and direct the movement at the start than to attempt to untangle the snarls that would follow if there was no central body to control the formation of the clubs."⁶⁴

In a choice of location portending a focus for the league away from the national capital, the Grand Hotel in Birmingham hosted the league council's second meeting, on the evening of Friday 8 November. The members of the provisional council formed at the Criterion had their number augmented by several men of prominence in the Midlands sporting scene. One of these was J Lathbury Ash, honorary secretary of Moseley Rugby Union Club. He was said to have spent many hours with the collegians back in the summer. During the gathering at the Grand Hotel, the provisional members received confirmation of their position in the council, as did two additional figures: Reverend F Marshall (honorary treasurer of the Yorkshire Rugby Union) and D Haigh (a Football Association executive). Morton Betts would serve as the league's honorary secretary. Beyond these matters, there were two pressing issues faced by the body now responsible for building baseball in Britain. The first was the need for league teams to be readied by the following spring. A description of the means for achieving this appeared in the *Sporting Life*:

Lists were obtained of all the foot ball, lacrosse, hockey and athletic clubs of England and Scotland, and to their secretaries was sent an illustrated circular, setting forth the attractive features of the game and its adaptability to English sport. To the newspapers were addressed the letters calling attention to the game, and promising detailed information to all who cared to

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apply for it. Wherever an opening could be found the thin edge of the wedge was inserted. Officials of clubs were interviewed; hostilities were removed, personal explanations were made and prejudices were softened down. Soon the seed began to sprout. It showed itself first in letters conveying expressions of good will from prominent sportsmen. Then came others from club secretaries asking how the game could best be taken up, and finally from still others announcing that certain club committees had decided to introduce it as soon as the season opened.⁶⁵

The approach described was a systematic means of getting baseball added to a gap in the summer calendar of existing sports clubs and it had the potential to attract a large number of teams—some to join a national league and others to form as amateur outfits, but all being primarily composed of native novices. Coaching would thus need to be offered in order to build on the work of the collegians, particularly in the national circuit, which would inevitably be viewed as a flagship for baseball's invasion of Britain.

The need to secure skilled coaches was the second of the league council's pressing issues. Details of the approach taken were again published in the *Sporting Life*:

[T]he Council took immediate steps to find players in England who could act as instructors. Advertisements were inserted in the "want columns" of several of the leading London dailies. A number of applicants answered, but unfortunately they were clerks or others engaged in business who could not go any distance from the city, and the clubs applying for instruction were hundreds of miles away in the North. The League then appealed to the *Sporting Life*, requesting those who desired to enter the work to apply to Messrs. A. G. Spalding & Bros., in New York, who kindly consented to act as the League agents in selecting the men.⁶⁶

After the screening of candidates' applications in New York, over 200 letters were forwarded to 38 Holborn Viaduct for the perusal of Betts and his council. Their headquarters were close to the equivalent premises of the Football Association.⁶⁷ This may have been a deliberate recognition of baseball's transition from a perceived threat to the nation's major summer pastime into a potential adjunct to its most popular winter sport. An example of this transition was seen in the jottings of a correspondent writing under the name of Banshee. In August 1889, this journalist had penned an ominous warning to the collegians:

Baseball players in America must have conceived an erroneous impression of the opinion formed in England upon the game, or we should scarcely have received a visit from a number of enthusiasts fired with the—from their own point of view—laudable desire to take another step towards the introduction of the game among us. [...] The fact that baseball is played in the cricket season is deadly to its chance of success with us. [...] Another thing which militates greatly against baseball gathering favour in the English mind is the clowning. There can be no question that is a diverting sight to see a player dodging about at a base trying to get the better of the pitcher and his fielders; but it does not follow that one would be quite so pleased to see one's own relatives and friends playing the part of the clown. Cricket, Americans should be made to understand, is played by people of considerable position and dignity.⁶⁸

By November, however, the progress made had forced the correspondent to concede that baseball might at least have an appeal to one particular group: association footballers.⁶⁹

THE LINK WITH ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL

Even before the gathering at the Criterion in October, Newton Crane had observed baseball's promise to "fill an aching void." Using Birmingham as an illustration that could be extended to other cities in the Midlands or further north, he noted that with cricket keeping only a small portion of the great industrial centre's population occupied, either as players or as spectators, there were many people in need of a recreation during the summer months:

[E]fforts have been so strenuously made to find some occupation for the tens of thousands of idle young men on the Wednesday and Saturday half-holidays of summer that even the old-fashioned game of "rounders" has been resorted to, and an even sillier game called "scud" taken up. What scud is I cannot find out, beyond that the implements are a foot ball which is batted with a broomstick!⁷⁰

Owing to this dearth of activities, the summer months saw many enclosed sports fields left unused, with no voices to bounce off the dressing room walls nor rallying cries to rattle their grandstands.⁷¹ This could only reinforce the appeal of baseball to association football clubs. Elsewhere, the pairing of football and baseball was described as "a problem solved," since clubs previously lacked a form of physical recreation that they could pay their players to engage in during the summer, leaving little that could be done to ensure a good level of fitness at the start of the following season.⁷² Furthermore, it was possible that the benefits to be gained by footballers playing baseball extended beyond the maintenance of fitness levels. The view of Major Sudell, Preston North End's representative on the league council, was that: "It will make the men smarter. Almost every ball means a smart piece of fielding, and often more. It is sure to have the effect of brightening the men up. Swiftmess and accuracy ought to be improved wonderfully after a season of baseball."⁷³

This suggestion leads one to consider whether the converse was also true. Would the experience gained from their own game offer association footballers an advantage in baseball, relative to similarly talented practitioners of other sports? The answer is that the scope for benefiting from football experience was probably minimal. The most plausible transfer of skills was arguably in the loose similarity between the goalkeeper in football and the first baseman in baseball, both of whom would be regularly called on to make stretching catches. But one famous goalkeeper who would man first base in the summer of 1890—Preston's Jimmy Trainer—declared that his football experience was not directly useful to him on the baseball field.⁷⁴ A more humorous illustration that footballers would not necessarily make baseball naturals came from an observation by one of the coaching envoys that footballers "have a tendency when playing base ball to try and stop a hot ball with their feet instead of their hands, and the result is generally disastrous for that particular play."⁷⁵

In any case, three of the four teams that signed up to compete in Britain's pro baseball league of 1890 had close ties with leading association football clubs. These were Aston Villa, Preston North End, and Stoke and all three operated as franchises of the league. For this trio of outfits, the league council was successful in hiring coaches from the United States, one of whom—Leech Maskrey, at Preston—was a former major leaguer. The team completing the quartet was Derby, who competed as a works team of the wealthy industrialist Francis Ley and were run with financial independence from the league. This team also secured a former major leaguer to join their roster, catcher Sim Bullas.

With the teams fixed and coaches secured, the pieces were in place, and all that remained was for the league to begin. The first pitch in domestic pro baseball in Britain was thrown on 21 June 1890.

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