Baseball

Definition: baseball from Dictionary of Sports and Games Terminology

(sport) (1) a game played with bat, ball, and gloves between two teams of nine players, the object being for each batter to hit the ball delivered by the opponents’ pitcher then run around a diamond-shaped circuit of four bases to score a run; (2) the hard ball used in baseball

Summary Article: Baseball

From Encyclopedia of American Studies

Sports historians long ago discredited the legend that a Civil War general by the name of Abner Doubleday invented baseball as a boy in 1839 in rural upstate New York. Yet this story remains the game’s “official” history. Its endurance is a testimony to the powerful mythologies that have surrounded the game since its formation. As this legend suggests, baseball is as important for the ideals it has evoked as the “national pastime” as it is for the records players have set or the victories that teams have won.

Baseball developed from the English children's game of rounders during the first half of the nineteenth century. By the mid-1840s urban men began to create formally organized baseball clubs in New York City, often in association with a working profession or a skilled trade. Clubs grew from urban voluntary associations that provided a link between less affluent male artisans and middle-class males who could provide resources for their membership. Baseball clubs were social organizations that not only played the sport but also sponsored events or donated proceeds to charity, social services, or union treasuries.

By 1857 a number of clubs formally organized into the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP) when games, particularly those pairing the best teams of two respective clubs, began to attract larger groups of spectators, and when the popular press began covering baseball games with increasing frequency. At this time the press also began keeping statistics. The NABBP also compiled the game's first formalized rules with the publication of its initial guidebooks in 1860.

Before the Civil War cricket was as popular a sport in the United States as baseball, but during the early 1860s baseball became much more popular when players and sportswriters began to recognize it as a more “American” game during a time of intense nationalism. The association of baseball with national identity has been one of its greatest sources of contention. Warren Goldstein has argued that the game’s promoters attempted for a long time to portray baseball as representative of democratic ideals they have associated with the United States; however, they also labored hard to make participation in baseball an exclusive enterprise that connoted middle-class culture of white, native-born Americans.

These tensions emerged clearly during the game’s early professionalization. In the 1860s clubs began to pay and recruit their best players, first covertly and then explicitly with the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings. The National League, formed in 1876 to wrest control of professional baseball away from players and toward investors, worked to present the game as a “respectable” one for middle-class audiences by forbidding alcohol consumption at the ballpark and banning games on Sundays.
This “respectable” national community envisioned by the founders of baseball and the major leagues also excluded African Americans. The NABBP banned African Americans from playing in 1867, and the highest levels of professional baseball officially banned African American players in the mid-1880s. Even during the nineteenth century baseball presented a nostalgic image of national pride, one that celebrated the values of republican community and of independent producers. Craftsmen and artisans associated such independence with “whiteness.” The game’s founders created a “national pastime” that resisted the regimentation of the industrial time clock and the alienation of the modern workplace. However, they also set this national vision so powerfully against blacks that African Americans were uniquely barred from playing in major league baseball between the mid-1880s and 1947.

Yet African Americans still played the game during this period, creating semiprofessional “sandlot” leagues, barnstorming teams, and all-black major leagues, popularly known as the Negro Leagues. Many of the all-black teams that would emerge over the next half-century operated under white financial management, since African Americans usually lacked the financial resources, political connections, and access to public-relations outlets that could enhance their profitability.

Even with their lack of resources, some African American entrepreneurs did move into and exercise control over black baseball. Black sports entrepreneurs including Rube Foster and Gus Greenlee created and maintained the Negro National League (NNL) between 1920 and 1947. Yet because of financial instability teams and leagues often existed for short periods of time. Perhaps as important as the better-known NNL were the numerous sandlot and barnstorming teams that flourished during the 1930s and 1940s. Players on these clubs often played baseball at its highest level but did not receive a regular salary and often did not play in an organized league. Instead, they “barnstormed,” meaning that they spent most of their time on the road performing in often hastily arranged exhibitions against numerous teams throughout North America. Even franchises that were part of the NNL played many of their games outside the league in exhibitions against local teams or even against white major league teams.

Early founders of baseball associated the game they played with masculinity just as they had with whiteness. They worked to prove that baseball was a manly game, distinguishing it from rounders, which was known as a game for children. They changed the rules to make baseball more difficult and therefore more “manly.” Either as members of an emerging middle class or as part of a growing working class of wage earners, many men felt that the new social formations of modern life undermined their authority as men, and they responded to this situation by attempting to symbolically revitalize their masculinity. Sports, and particularly baseball, were part of this movement.

During World War II women entered this “man's world” at the same time that many women in the United States were working in occupations traditionally reserved for men. Drawing from widespread interest in women’s softball during the 1930s and 1940s, major league owners formed the All American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL). Although women in the league played a game long associated with manliness, the league also required them to live according to a “femininity principle,” wearing makeup and skirts while playing, attending charm school, and appearing in a way that was both sexually appealing and “respectable.” Susan Cahn argues that the founders of the AAGBL actually highlighted the tension between the feminine appearance of players and their masculine skills because it provided a conservative social vision of women doing “men’s” work in a way that did not fundamentally challenge traditional gender relationships.

When men returned to baseball after World War II, the women of the AAGBL found it hard to compete.
against the attention fans paid once more to men's baseball. The women's league continued for several years but ended up folding in 1954. Yet the 1950s became one of the most turbulent decades in the history of mainstream baseball, largely because of television.

Before the 1950s many communities treated minor league teams almost as regional major leagues, particularly in the West and South. Television, however, worked to focus the attention of baseball fans almost entirely on the major leagues, dramatically changing the ways that people experienced the game by the end of the decade. Hundreds of minor league teams folded during the decade, and major league teams moved to new cities with greater television markets.

During the 1980s there was an outpouring of popular nostalgia for baseball. Ironically, many yearned for the game as it was played and experienced during the 1950s. Adult males, for example, returned in large numbers to the hobby of baseball-card collecting, which had developed into a widely popular boyhood hobby during the 1950s. Nostalgia for the baseball of the 1950s overshadowed the instability that actually characterized baseball during that decade. More profoundly, it masked dislocations that characterized the decade itself while it helped to recycle images of nuclear-family stability, suburban tranquility, and affluence that many associated with that time period. Themes of simplicity and stability were common within popular representations of baseball that reemerged during the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, baseball films of the 1980s represented a return to more nostalgic themes that had been expressed in the heyday of baseball movies produced during the 1940s and 1950s, and publishers flooded the market with nostalgically poetic books about the game by such writers as W. P. Kinsella, George Will, Roger Angell, and the late baseball commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti. Films and books celebrated baseball as emblematic of innocence and simplicity.

Despite the outpouring of nostalgic sentiment, baseball became a less centrally important sport than it once was in the United States. This was particularly evident after 1994, when major league owners broke off negotiations with the Major League Players Association during contract negotiations. This “lockout” interrupted the season in August and for the first time since 1905 forced the cancellation of the World Series. When the season resumed the following spring, there was a dramatic drop in attendance, evidence of the bitter disillusionment that many fans expressed.

Ironically, major league teams that had fought to exclude African Americans from the game now fought to attract black fans to the ballpark, many of whom were simply not interested in a game that for so long defined itself against blackness. At the same time, baseball might best be described as the “transnational pastime,” becoming as popular in Asian countries and in Latin America as it is in the United States. Although many still hold on to the notion of baseball as the national pastime, the idea of nation and the meaning of sports remain socially contested.

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![Image of a vintage TV advertisement for Philco TV featuring baseball players.](image)

**All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, Kenosha Comets.** 1943. National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown NY.
Hank Aaron's Hall of Fame Plaque. Cooperstown, New York. Wikimedia Commons.


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