

History of the National League Pre-1876

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Timeline: Early Baseball (1830s-1876)

Back in the 1820s, the game we now call **baseball** was first known as **Rounders**, **Town ball**, **Round Ball**, and **Base Ball** before the two words combined as one. Some researchers and historians have noted that in some form, a sport involving a stick and a ball was played in the late 1700s.

Rounders: was first played by English schoolchildren and featured a batter (the striker), a pitcher, 4 bases, and an infield in the shape of diamond. When known as **Town Ball** or **Round Ball**, the rules varied, as did the number of players each team could play. Town Ball games, for instance, could have 20-50 players in the field.

Baseball began in the northeast US, where non-athletes such as dairy workers, clerks, lawyers, and plumbers played their games on wheat fields and town squares. As the sport grew in popularity, city-based teams formed and up to 24 squads competed against one another. By the mid-1850s, the best known and most successful team was the **Eckfords** (Brooklyn, NY).

Until 1869, a code of ethics was enforced: baseball was a game played by amateurs, not paid athletes.

1839: Legend had it that **Abner Doubleday** established baseball's rules at Cooperstown, NY. The Mills Commission in 1907 credited Doubleday as the father of the sport, but research conducted since then has all but eliminated him from baseball's beginnings. Moreover, Doubleday, a career military officer and Civil War general, later claimed he never played baseball.

1846: June 19th: Baseball's first game was played at New Jersey's Elysian Fields, where the **New York Knickerbockers** defeated the **New York Nine** 24-1 in 4 innings. **Alexander Cartwright**, considered one of the true founders of the game, served as the umpire. It was Cartwright or possibly Knickerbockers president **Daniel "Doc" Cartwright** who authored baseball's rules: Infield was shaped to form a diamond, bases were 90' apart, each team was to field 9 players, and 3 outs completed an inning.

Reporter **Harry Chadwick** later designed the now familiar box score and codified the rules in his book **The Game of Base Ball**. It was Chadwick's rules that helped shape and maintain the game of baseball.

Early terms: A run was called an **ace**; batters were **strickers**; a pitcher was a **hurler**; the catcher was a **behind**; foul balls were called **ticks**, and spectators were known as **cranks**. Not all terms faded from use: Some of Chadwick's 19th century descriptions are still in use today: passed balls, assists, grounders, pop-ups, and double-plays.

1857: Game was reduced to 9 innings and a minimum of 5 innings had to be played for the game to count. Prior to 1857, first team to score 21 runs was the winner.

1858: Distance between the mound and home plate was set at 45'.
A batted ball caught on a single bounce was no longer an out – the ball must be caught.
The first year of the *called* strike.
Home teams chose the umpire prior to each game.

Uniforms, stadiums, and rules changes:

- Players wore baggy **wool uniforms** (later flannel); jerseys included long sleeves with cuffs. Socks were long (no stirrups) & players wore high-top shoes.
- **Stadiums** were constructed of wood. Some of the grandstands behind home plate formed a sharp V shape. Earliest parks had no outfield bleachers. A few of the fields were oval – the shape of a racetrack. The playing field in Rockford (Illinois) had 5 trees around 3rd base. It was not unusual for a baseball to get lost in the grassy outfield.
 - **Batters** could call for their pitch of choice.
Since 9 balls were a walk, the batter was to do his part to hit the ball.
 - Until 1881, **Pitchers** (also called Boxmen) stood 45' away and could throw threw underhand or sidearm (nothing above the belt-line until 1884). Prior to the pitch, he could jump around the squared-off mound area.

- **Catchers** normally stood several feet (10-15') behind home plate. Even though C Deacon White closed the gap in 1875, few chose to squat behind home plate until the early 1900s.
- **Substitutions** were forbidden until 5th inning and the opposing team had to agree with the change.
- **Umpires** could rule from the side or *while sitting in a chair*.
Until the early 1900s, only 1 umpire officiated per game.
If no one was on base, the umpire normally stood behind the pitcher and called balls and strikes from that point. Once a runner reached base, the umpire then positioned himself behind home plate.
It was not unusual for an umpire to appeal to the spectators for assistance.
Teams and umpires also could fine players 25c for use of profanity.
- **Pitches in use:** the fastball, changeup, and curveball.
Brooklyn's **Candy Cummings** was credited with inventing the curveball

Changes to come:

- The **number of pitches** required for a strikeout or walk varied year by year until the 1890s.
For one year only (1876), the walk counted as a hit.
- Opposing players normally sat on the same long bench. **Dugouts** were built much later.
- **Outcomes** of some games resembled the score of a *football* game – 49-33, 32-12, or 30-9.
- Due to transportation costs and tepid interest from the press, teams west of Kansas City received little attention.
- All leagues – including the AL and NL, **adhered to the Blue Laws**, wherever they existed.
These laws regulated what kinds of businesses could be conducted on Sundays. Law also forbade drinking.
- The term *minor leagues* was a misnomer – some very good teams formed in small cities.
In addition, some players earned more than those playing in the major leagues.

1859: National Association of Base Ball Players lasted until 1870.

1862: During the Civil War: Confederate troops oversaw Union POWs play baseball.

1864: RULE: Runners must tag or touch all four bases to score.

1865: Batting averages were recorded.

Influenced by members of notorious Tammany Hall, the NY Mutuals threw a game vs. the (NY) Eckfords.

1869: The **pitcher's box** underwent its 5th change in 5 years – from the original 12' x 3' rectangle to 6' square. Since some players were allegedly being "bought," **paying the players** was supposed to remove this temptation. **Cincinnati Reds** were believed to be the first team to field **professional** (paid) baseball players. From 1869-70, the Reds allegedly won 93 straight games before losing to the Brooklyn Atlantics 8-7. Same period: The **Boston Red Sox** went 56-0-1 and outscored their opponents 2,395-574.

Need for Change (part 1):

By 1870, the *gentlemen's* game of Baseball, began to earn a terrible reputation:

- Fans and players threatened the umpire with his very life; some umpires had to literally run from mobs or were escorted to safety by heavily armed police (see 1890s).
- The pre-1900 pro athlete in all 3 major sports (basketball, football, and baseball) was looked down upon. The prevailing belief was that only amateurs should play sports; those accepting money were prostituting themselves.
- Some players arrived drunk or openly consumed alcohol during the game. If they weren't baiting and fist-fighting the opponent, they fought themselves, fans, and/or the hapless umpire. Players were paid poorly – increasing the temptation for them to throw games for pay.

- Schedules were not honored, and players jumped from one team to another (aka **revolving**).
The NY Excelsiors were run by the corrupt **William "Boss" Tweed**. Another Tammany Hall associate, **Andrew Freeman**, later bought the NY Giants.
- In a span of 30+ years, the mix of competition from other leagues, periodic rule changes, and an influx of college-bred athletes such as Christy Mathewson raised the bar of play. Still, those in power displayed such contempt for darker skinned players that the latter were barred from play until the 1940s.

1870: July 23rd: NY Giants P Ryne Wolters blanked the Chicago White Stockings 9-0. Since shutouts were rare, a NY Herald writer used the word "**chicagoed**" to describe a team that was held scoreless. The term lasted into the 1920s.
Chicago beat Cincinnati Reds for the 1870 championship. Team however disbanded in November.

1871- 1875

- National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP)** formed. James Kern was president.
- Teams were to play each opponent 5 times. The club that won 3 of the 5 was the champion.
 - Entry fee for each of the 9 teams was \$10. League achieved some success – many games drew crowds.
 - Since members were to accept rules and regulations, amateur players and teams were not to sign on.

League members included Philadelphia Athletics, Troy Haymakers, Washington (DC) Olympics, Boston Red Stockings, Rockford (IL) Forest City, NY Mutuals, Cleveland Forest Citys, Ft. Wayne Kekiongas, and the Chicago White Stockings, who played home games at a former horse track (Dexter Park) that was built near the city's stock yards.

- Since the new league was player-run, there was no **reserve clause** that bound a player to one team.
- Other flaws: NAPBBP had no central authority, there was no fixed schedule (dates were arranged by mail), no control over gambling or controlling on-field drunkenness.
 - Instability: Few teams played the full schedule, and franchises (loosely termed) came and went.
 - Disputes included scheduled dates of games, ticket pricing, gate receipts, and officiating.

1871: RULE: Batters could call for their pitch of choice.

Chicago White Stockings moved east and north from Dexter Park to **Lake Park/Union Grounds** (aka Lake Street Dumping Grounds), at the corner of Michigan & Randolph. Park held 6,500-7,000.
Stockings included pitching ace and Civil War veteran George Zettlein.

6/5: Overflow crowd of 10,000 saw visiting NY Mutuals beat previously undefeated Chicago White Stockings (7-0) 8-5. Sloppy play: Chicago committed 19 errors, Mutuals 7.

10/7: **The Great Chicago Fire** destroyed Chicago's Ballpark and club equipment.
Club's crucial 3-game series with Rockford was wiped out.
Chicago played remainder of games on road. Opposing teams loaned/gave CWS needed equipment.

10/21: Chicago beat Troy Haymakers 11-5 - Chicago's 1st game since 9/29.

10/30: Chicago played final games vs. Athletics and Haymakers.
League championship vs. Philadelphia was played in Brooklyn, NY.
CWS lost to Athletics 4-1. Due to lack of funding, Chicago club disbanded the following year.

1873: NAPBBP Rule: Uniform ball was to be used in all games.

1874: 1B Charlie Waite was perhaps **the first to wear a fielding glove** – albeit without fingertips.

A new Chicago club formed. New owner was **William Hulbert**. Team returned to NAPBBP.
A member of Chicago Board of Trade, Hulbert dealt in coal, and was later 2nd president of the NL when he succeeded Morgan Bulkeley. Hulbert saw a rift between the east and west coast clubs.
Chicago club included infamous C **Dick Higham**. Higham was later banned from the sport.

June 18: NY Mutuals beat Chicago 38-1. Another sloppy game: teams combined to commit 36 errors.

July 15: A Philadelphia Pearl player offered umpire \$175 to secure a Chicago victory.
The player was soon banned from league.

1875: May 11: **Chicago beat Browns** 1-0 – the lowest scoring game in League history.

July 28: Philadelphia's Joe "Josephus the Phenomenal" Borden no-hit the Chicago White Stockings 4-1 or 4-0.
The only no-hitter in NABBP history.

- Illegal bat (flattened on one side) was used and eventually removed.
- The **sinkerball** was introduced
- Not much competition. Boston (71-8) proved to be too powerful. Red Sox P Al Spalding went 56-4.
Spalding's career record was 252-65 (Boston & CWS). His .795 winning percentage is ML record.

Need for a change (part 2):

- Fan interest dropped. Clubs dropped out, including the woeful Brooklyn Athletics (2-42).
- Umpires went unpaid and were openly ridiculed by both players and fans; the NY Excelsiors were still run by corrupt politician **Boss Tweed** of Tammany Hall.
- Two of baseball's greater ills continued: **hippodroming** (public betting on games) and **revolving** (players jumping from one team to another).

Davey Force's 1874-75 contract accelerated the NABBP's demise.

Force signed with 2 clubs – Chicago and Philadelphia. Force was eventually awarded to Philadelphia.

Forming the National League:

February 2nd, 1876: **William Hulbert**, the owner of NABBP's Chicago White Stockings formed the **National League** with help from Boston P **AL Spalding** and a judge.

Hulbert persuaded **Morgan Bulkeley** to agree to take league presidency for 1 year.

Hulbert also pirated 6 players from other teams and began the League under new rules - replacing the NABBP with a constitution he authored.

Among those Hulbert took was P **Al Spalding**, who had won 186 games the previous 4 seasons (56 in 1875), 2B Ross Barnes, 1B/OF Cal McVey, and P Deacon White from Boston, plus 3B Adrian "Cap" Anson, and Ezra Sutton from Philadelphia.

Anson originally wanted to stay in Philadelphia to appease his fiancée.

To make the NL stronger than the NABBP, weaker clubs were weeded out.

The NL was a closed system, meaning not everyone could join. Local teams were rejected so that the league would appear national in scope.

Large crowds in Chicago helped keep other teams from going broke

The new league was established 11 years after General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, VA.

SABR researchers list approximately **30 Civil War veterans** played or managed in the National League, including 3 of the first 5 league presidents.

NL's new changes:

- Rules were to be enforced.
- No Sunday games, no gambling, and admission prices were specified (50c).
- Umpires would be paid.

- Cities with populations exceeding 75,000 were eligible.
- A 70-game schedule was set. Games were to be played on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.
Each of the 8 teams was to play their opponent 10 times.

- Contracts were binding - no jumping to other teams.
- NL draft: territories were established including criteria for cities wishing to be admitted.

A **blacklist of players** jumping from one team to another also existed.

A critical issue that carried into 1970s was the **reserve clause**.

In short: the clause gave owners' rights to their players and could create salary caps.

Players had to submit to contracted amount or face banishment.

Players were continually and perpetually bound to the team that owned his contract.

The clause's downside:

- Players wanted a free market, no pay cuts, and guaranteed money.

Owners saw the clause as necessary - preventing wealthier clubs from "obtaining" all the best talent, thereby tipping the competitive balance.

Unwritten rule barring blacks from baseball began in the mid-1880s.

On the other hand, American Indians and light-skinned Cubans were allowed.

Note: Incomplete statistics were kept throughout the first 40 years.

Information on number of stolen bases, strikeouts and the like were often inaccurate.

Today: The game has not only maintained but even added to its own iconography and lexicon: the diamond, the glove, the sacrifice fly, home run, bunt, or stolen base; the 7th inning stretch; the inning, the double-play, the strikeout; its own song (Take Me Out to the Ballgame), catch-phrases ("there's no crying in baseball!") and anything coined by Yogi Berra ("it ain't over till it's over").

Baseball is not confined to just 9 innings nor is it given a time limit (despite efforts to speed it up). What is more, it is no longer "America's game." Latin stars joined ML rosters over a century ago; the first Japanese player arrived in the 1960s (Japan beat the US team for the gold medal in 1984 Olympics); Toronto, Canada, has twice won the World Series, and the tiny island of Cuba continually produces elite players. This game is easy to play, fun to follow, a joy to watch, but it can also break your heart. No matter, we still cherish our sports heroes and deeply held memories. I believe that's why you are here, and that's what these books are about. Start your wonderful journey today!