

BASEBALL'S BIRTH.

It Sprang Into Life on
the Fields at Ho-
boken, N. J.

Rounders Was the Old Game.

Played First as a Pastime the Sport
Was Taken Up in a Professional
Way—Some of the Changes Since
1846.

(Written for the Plain Dealer.)

June 19 will be the anniversary of the first match game of baseball ever played, which took place at Hoboken, N. J., on June 19, 1846.

The game of baseball had originated nearly nine months before. It had gradually grown out of the old English school boy game of rounders. Like man, according to Darwin, baseball is the result of evolution. Rounders evolved into "townballs." In the latter sport instead of bases there were "corners." These were unattended and runners were put out by being hit with the ball, thrown directly at them by the fielders. The ball was, therefore, much softer than a baseball. It was composed wholly of rubber.

In the early '40s a party of New Yorkers assembled on a vacant lot, then a long way out of town and now covered by the Madison Square garden, to play townball every Wednesday and Saturday. At length some of them began to think that the sport might be greatly improved. It was finally decided to substitute "bases" for "corners," to use a ball with a hard rubber center, wound with yarn and covered with leather, to place men to guard the bases, and to change the name "townball" to "baseball." On Sept. 23, 1845, these gentlemen organized the first baseball club and called it the "Knickerbocker." Thus our national game was born. It has undergone innumerable changes since then, but it is doubtful if it has thereby been made any more enjoyable.

There were soon a number of baseball clubs in and around New York, and the first match game, above mentioned as having taken place June 19, 1846, was between the "Knickerbocker" and New York clubs. It comprised only four innings, the rule then being that the club first making twenty-one runs in even innings was the winner. The gradual growth of baseball to other parts of the country was very slow. Townball continued to be played, and its votaries did not take to baseball. Baseball was not played in Philadelphia—only ninety miles from New York—until 1860, fifteen years after its birth. In that year the Olympic Townball club of that city, organized in 1833, decided to play baseball instead, thereafter. The first baseball match in Philadelphia took place June 11, 1860, between the Equity and Winona clubs.

San Francisco's first match took place Feb. 22, 1860. Baseball was not played in the New England states till five or six years after its birth, and then only in such a modified form that it was called "the New England game" in contra distinction to "the New York game." The originators of our national game were gentlemen who played baseball merely for exercise and would have lightly esteemed anyone who would have transformed it into a business or profession. They and their followers for several generations were determined that it should be a gentleman's game. As clubs multiplied throughout the country it became necessary to establish some general organization with authority to control and regulate the interests of the sport and its playing rules.

Accordingly there was formed "the National Association of Baseball Players," in which any club was entitled to membership, with the privilege of sending delegates to the annual meeting. The playing rules adopted by this organization were the standard ones for the game and were observed by all clubs. Almost the first rule made by this national association positively debarred from membership any club in which there was a man who played baseball for hire or emolument of any kind, the object being to make and keep the sport purely a gentleman's game. Consequently baseball flourished between the years 1866 and 1871 as never before or since. There were hosts of clubs and in every large city many matches were played daily, usually upon some vacant lot, the attendance frequently numbering from

10,000 to 25,000 people. In the city of Allegheny, Pa., alone, there were five different baseball grounds within a stone's throw of each other, and almost every day during the baseball season there was a match on each of these grounds, and the same is true of other large cities. In view of these facts, it is remarkable to find Mr. William Ewing, the well known professional, saying in a newspaper article: "Hundreds of games are played now for every one ten years ago." The truth is that twenty-five years ago 200 games were played for every one played now.

The encroachment of the professional baseball player was gradual. The rivalry between clubs soon became so great that in order to strengthen itself and win victory over some rival each would leave nothing undone to secure the best players. Thus "inducements" were held out to men who had shown an unusual aptitude for the game to influence them to play only with a particular club. A wealthy gentleman, for instance, desiring to see his club in the front ranks would offer some young man of baseball playing ability a position in his business or counting house, with a private understanding that his commercial duties were merely nominal, while his real ones were to play baseball. Thus there were numerous clubs in the country which were virtually professional ones long before professional playing was openly permitted, and while the stringent law against it was still in force in the code of the American association. This was notably the case with those famous old-time opponents, the Atlantic club of New York and Athletics of Philadelphia.

By 1871 the number and influence of professional clubs was such that in New York on March 17 of that year was held a convention of delegates from professional clubs which openly avowed themselves such, thus cutting loose from the National Association of Baseball Players. This convention adopted rules for championship contests, the most important being that the club winning the largest number of games in a series of five with every one of the other professional clubs should be declared the champion. Prior to this championship contests had been wholly unregulated. The baseball championship originated between 1857 and 1859. At the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, N. J., the Athletics of Brooklyn at length proved their superiority over the crack New York clubs, the Empires, Knickerbockers, Gothams and Eagles, and at length came to be champions in the general estimation. In 1858 picked nines from New York and Brooklyn played what were called the "Fashion course games," New York winning the first and third by 22 to 18 and 29 to 18 respectively, while Brooklyn took the second by 29 to 8. From that time on until the establishment of the above named championship rules by the professionals, whatever club won two games out of the three from the then champion club became champion in turn.

From the organization of the professional clubs in 1871, amateur baseball playing steadily declined. Gentlemen no longer seemed to care to personally engage in a sport which had been made a business. The game gradually came to be looked upon as a money-making scheme instead of an amusing recreation and healthful exercise in which all should participate. Then, too, the steady increase of population and the consequent demand for new building sites and ornamental parks largely did away with the vacant lots and commons upon which the amateur games had been played.

The professional club association of 1871 was succeeded on Feb. 2, 1876, by the National League, formed in New York city by the following professional clubs: Mutuals of New York, St. Louis, Athletics of Philadelphia, Chicago, Hartford, Boston, Cincinnati and Louisville. In the same year thirteen minor professional and semi-professional clubs formed the League alliance, of which nothing has been heard since 1882.

The National League and American Association were for many years the two great representative associations of professional baseball players. The former still flourishes, more powerful than ever, with a membership of twelve clubs. The Players league episode of 1890 need only be mentioned.

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