Humble Beginnings, a Myth and America’s National Pastime

By: Chris White | July 30, 2014

John Thorn, official historian of Major League Baseball, said Abner Doubleday “never knew that he had invented baseball.”

In fact, Thorn said that it was well after Doubleday’s death in 1893 that he was designated the inventor of the game and that designation would have come as a big surprise if he found out. The story that Doubleday invented baseball has changed the history of the game forever. But we will get to that in a minute. Every game has a beginning and so does baseball.

The first playing of a “bat and ball” game dates back to 14th century Russia and a game called Lapta, consisting of two teams with five or more players, a bat and a ball. The object of the game was for the batter to hit the ball and run to the opposite side and back before getting hit by the ball. The next games to come into the picture were Cricket and Rounders, both played in England for several centuries. It was from Rounders that the American game of Town Ball was created.

Town Ball dates back to the early 1800s and was played primarily in Massachusetts, New York and Philadelphia. Two teams competed in the game and, instead of a pitcher and a batter, Town Ball had a bowler and a striker. The bowler tossed the ball to the striker and, after hitting the ball, the striker would try to complete a round of four bases before getting hit by the ball. The first team to score 100 “talleys” won the game.

Town Ball became a big success, especially during the Civil War. Soldiers usually spent their downtime playing Town Ball and the game’s footprint grew because of that. Brodie Duke, one of Washington Duke’s sons, was a prison guard for the Confederacy in Salisbury, N.C. in his youth during the Civil War. Duke played the game at the prison and the game is still played at the Duke Homestead in Durham, N.C. today.

So, what about the Doubleday story?

Doubleday was a New York native and a graduate of West Point. He was a Union general and was second-in-command at Fort Sumter, ordering the first shots for Union forces during the Civil War.

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Duke Homestead State Historic Site
Doubleday also played an important role in the Second Battle of Bull Run in Manassas, V.A. and the Battle of Antietam in Sharpsburg, M.D.\(^6\)

The discovery that Doubleday created the modern-day game of baseball began with a disagreement between British sportswriter, Henry Chadwick, and Baseball executive, Albert Spalding. Chadwick published an article in 1903 saying the game derived from Rounders. Spalding disagreed and a commission was formed to settle the two men’s differences.\(^7\)

The commission determined after a few years of research that Doubleday invented baseball, based on the claims of Abner Graves, a mining engineer from Colorado. Graves said he was present when a then school-age Doubleday “drew in the dust a diagram for a completely new ballgame,” according to Thorn. But Thorn argued the game Graves described was very similar to ones that had been played in the area for about a century.\(^8\)

Graves’ claim was later proven false by historians and it is now accepted that Alexander Cartwright developed rules for the modern-day game of baseball. Cartwright founded the New York Knickerbocker Baseball Club in 1845 and a formalized set of rules for the game was adopted at that time.\(^9\) But that has, in no way, diminished Doubleday’s impact on baseball history.

In fact, before the claim was proven false, Stephen C. Clark made a request to National League president, Ford C. Frick, seeking the establishment of a Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. to commemorate Doubleday and baseball. The Hall of Fame welcomed its inaugural class in 1936. Cooperstown, this small town in Central New York, has since become synonymous with baseball - all based on a myth, a story about the game’s creation.\(^10\)

Baseball was already popular and considered a pastime by the 1900s, especially during the 1941 season. Joe Dimaggio set the record for the longest hitting streak, 56 games, which has never been broken. Ted Williams became the last man to bat .400. The Brooklyn Dodgers won its first pennant in 20 years. A separate league was created for women who were home during World War II.\(^11\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.
However, the game – and the country for that matter – was forever changed in 1947 when Jackie Robinson took the field for an all-white Brooklyn Dodgers team, breaking the color barrier, unifying the country and solidifying baseball truly as “America’s Pastime.”\textsuperscript{12}

As American author, Gerald Early, said in 1952:

“I think there are only three things America will be known for 2,000 years from now when they study this civilization: the Constitution, jazz music and baseball.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

We love to play Town Ball here at Duke Homestead!

Before baseball was our national pastime, Americans played Town Ball. Town Ball derives from the English game, Rounders, and was played in Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania during the early 1800s. Two teams competed, often pitting town against town. Instead of a pitcher and a batter, Town Ball had a bowler and a striker. The bowler tossed the ball to the striker. After hitting the ball, the striker would try to complete a round of four bases before getting hit by the ball. The first team to score 100 “talleys” won the game.

Town Ball became a huge success especially during the Civil War. Brodie Duke, Washington’s second son, played the game while he was a guard at a prison in Salisbury, N.C. Baseball is connected to the Civil War as well. For a time, the invention of baseball was falsely attributed to Union general, Abner Doubleday. That was later proven false and Alexander J. Cartwright is now more commonly accepted as the creator of rules for modern-day baseball – although that has been disputed as well.

Cartwright founded the New York Knickerbocker Baseball Club in 1845 and a formalized set of rules for the game was adopted at that time. The Doubleday story still made an impact on baseball’s history, however, as the National Baseball Hall of Fame was opened in Cooperstown, N.Y. in 1839 and some fields bear Doubleday’s name to honor him.

Town Ball’s popularity waned by the end of the century, while baseball continued to grow as a sport into the 1900s. However, the game – and the country for that matter – was forever changed in 1947 when Jackie Robinson took the field for an all-white Brooklyn Dodgers team, breaking the color barrier, unifying the country and solidifying baseball truly as “America’s Pastime.”

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Before baseball became our national pastime, Americans played Town Ball - a game that evolved out of the English game, Rounders. Much like baseball, Town Ball had two teams but instead of a pitcher and a batter, the positions were called bowler and striker. Town ball also had an extra base and “talleys” were used for scoring instead of runs.

Town Ball was played primarily in the Northeast during the 19th century and, during the Civil War, games of Town Ball were played at a Confederate prison in Salisbury, N.C. - the same prison where Brodie Duke was stationed. By the time of the Civil War, Alexander J. Cartwright’s “New York-style” of baseball was growing in popularity and it soon eclipsed Town Ball. Baseball was well on its way to becoming “America’s National Pastime” by the end of the 19th century.

We still play Town Ball today at Duke Homestead to not only remember where modern-day baseball came from but to also honor the connection this game has with the Duke family.

Works Cited


Some Additional Information on Brodie Duke and Town Ball Retrieved from Duke Homestead State Historic Site