

Baseball in Auld Lang Syne

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Illustrations from Photographs

WHENEVER I sit out on the bleachers of an afternoon, watching the perfect, well-oiled movements of Manager McGraw, Hughie Jennings, or Larry Lajoie, I cannot help thinking of the game as it was played a score of years ago, when the delight of my life was to smash a twine-wrapped rubber ball, and then see how many bases I could make before it landed in some distant lot. If some of our younger fans could go to a baseball game as it was played when I was a youngster, they would think it more amusing than a minstrel show.

But, still, in a hundred years from now, our great-grandchildren may think that we play a queer, pokey game; and so it goes.

I remember quite well when the baseball rage first swept my little town—Olean, New York. We had been playing "three-old-cat," or town ball, and when the innovation of uniforms and a grown-up umpire came in, all the young men of that place promptly gave up everything else under the sun but eating and sleeping to play the game.

The great, sweeping, radical change in the new game as it was brought to us there in New York, was that the runner was to be thrown out at first, instead of being "pasted." For me this was a welcome departure, as my sides bore innumerable blue spots, testifying that I was not very skilled in the art of dodging. A curious little thing I noticed about the game, was that it was great, rollicking fun to hit a runner between the shoulder-blades as he sped down the course toward first base, but that the joke dragged when I myself was the runner.

The halcyon day of the umpire was when I first began playing, for then the number of runs averaged from 20 to 80. If he made an outrageous decision, once in a long while, nothing was said, for the losing side had still a big opportunity to even up things.

But our Olean team was a winning one. It was known as the "Beefeaters," from the fact that the sons of four butchers were members. We lined up against Rochester and



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Buffalo, and came off with the palm. We thought that we were playing fast ball, but I think it is safe to say, that it would not make a present day major leaguer dizzy with astonishment.

The catcher in that Auld Lang Syne played away back of the bat, catching the ball on the bounce. He would stand there waiting for the ball to come bouncing along and then he would calmly reach out his hand and take it in. The catcher was about half-fielder, for he had to spend much time in chasing balls.

One day our catcher instituted a startling change. Instead of waiting for the ball to take its bouncing course, he stood right close behind the batter and caught the ball before it touched the ground. His friends seriously advised him to stand back farther as he might get hurt. Many of the local experts talked it over and came very near reaching the decision that he was violating one of the rules of the game. But when he was asked why he stood up so close, he explained: "It's a whole sight easier to stop the ball in the air than to chase it all over the lot."

When the catcher was standing away back, the man on third could dodge in almost any time. The catcher was then little more than a spectator.

The baseman of that day hugged his base all the time. If he got both feet off the base at the same time he would jump back, for fear that it would get away. A fielder never had to look where to throw the ball; he had merely to send it to a base and never fear.

But it was the fielders who earned their money, poor fellows. A fielder had to be an amateur long distance runner. They could have earned big salaries by chasing flies on the mileage basis.

One day our little town was stirred to its depth, as the country editor would say. One of the men went to Buffalo and brought back with him a "spring bat." A spring bat is a wonderful piece of mechanism. It had a handle of rattan wound with thread. Whenever it was swung with the lusty power of New York youth, the ball was sure to stay a long time in the air. A man who could not knock out a home-run with it

was rather looked at with pity; what was considered as a very good piece of work, enough to get a few cheers, was when the batter lifted the ball so far that he had to go and help both sides find it.

It was rather interesting the way the outfielders stopped the ball. None of them had gloves, and all were afraid of bruising their hands, so when a fly came rolling out to one of them he would plant his heels together and let the ball bounce against his shins. It never occurred to anyone to do otherwise. A minute or two of delay in returning the ball was too inconsequential to be worried over.

Even in that early day the umpire had a bad name. His decisions were not always considered correct, but he did not have to keep his eye on miscellaneous pop-bottles flying through the air. But the principal difference between the umpire of then and the one of today is that the early one's life was safe.

Here is something that I have noticed: every year the baseball joke, as delivered over the footlights, becomes more and more popular. This shows how the game is taking hold of the American public. A few years ago, the singing comedian never composed songs about anybody except some politician, but now a few lines on a popular baseball player get a bigger hand than on any other person.

I guess baseball blood runs in my family. My oldest son, Roy, is a corner-lot champion. He lives baseball. At the dinner table we can get nothing out of him except slides, inshoots, team work, backing up and the like. He is saturated with baseball. Last summer he was offered a job picking strawberries on the Rockefeller estate in Cleveland, Ohio, near which we live. All the other boys in our neighborhood thought it was the chance of a lifetime to earn some money for themselves, but Roy would not accept the offer. When I asked him why, he told me of his great ambition: the first money he earned he wanted to make playing baseball.

Naturally, I always want my home team—Cleveland—to win. I never get tired of watching Lajoie play. Just as a poet is born, or a great musician, so was Larry Lajoie born to baseball.



"MY FACE SLIPPED OUT OF MY HANDS"

There are two kinds of baseball players, to my way of thinking. One is the natural, the other the artificial. The artificial player, if he is patiently trained, will become a creditable performer; but he is always aping some one else. He is never himself. He tries to throw a ball just as some one else throws it, or to bat

as his manager does. He will succeed partially, but he will never loom up big in baseball. The natural player does it his own way, unhampered, in the way that nature meant, and after a while the club owners come around with a fountain pen and say, "Will you fill in this blank contract?"

