

Pitching, Past and Present

The Evolution of the Twirler's Art

AN interesting comparison of pitching fifty years ago with that of the present day is furnished by Bozeman Bulger in a recent contribution to the press.

The most interesting discovery in a chase through the rather inaccurate and incomplete history of the national game of baseball is that the function of the pitcher has been completely reversed. It becomes comparatively easy, therefore, to answer the question: "What is the difference between the pitching of today and that of fifty years ago?"

The difference is that the function of the pitcher of fifty years ago—sixty-six years, to be exact—was to toss the ball so as to enable the batter to hit it.

Though the original framers of the rules were ignorant of the fact at that time, pitching is and always has been the pivotal point of the great American game. It naturally follows that this branch of the science has been afforded the greatest opportunity for development. Practically every important change in the rules has been aimed at the pitcher. The bat, the ball, the distance between the bases and the fundamental rules of the game have stood for half a century, while the pitching has gone through a steady grind of evolution.

The history of pitching science can be divided into four distant eras:

The day of the underhand toss.

The day of the overhand toss or throw.

The day of the curve ball.

The day of the spit ball.

When the first rules were adopted by the old Knickerbocker Club in 1845 the framers did not realize that the pitcher was to be the pivotal man of the game. They placed him behind a line that was

forty-five feet from the batter's box and he was instructed to throw the ball so that the batter could hit it. He could stand at any place behind that line that he chose, but to prevent him from throwing the ball with too much speed he was forced to deliver it with an underhand toss. That is to say, he could not bring his throwing hand above his waist line.

Of course, the game was in a very crude state at that time, and the fine points were lost in the shuffle. To give the reader an idea: The Knickerbockers played the New Yorks a game in 1846 and were defeated 23 to 1. Notwithstanding the sting of the defeat, both teams waited five years for a return match.

Under those rules the pitcher was compelled to deliver fair balls to the batter and the batter could refuse to strike at them until he got one to his liking. No strikes were called unless the batter struck at them. An instance of the great advantage enjoyed by the batter is that in the early sixties in a game between the Atlantics and the Mutuels, Al Smith, of the Atlantics, pitched fifty-four balls to McKeever, of the Mutuels, before a strike was called. Can you imagine a thing like that on the Polo Grounds today?

This method of pitching underhanded kept up for many years, until several shrewd pitchers saw the necessity of lessening the number of runs and began to find means of evading the rules so that they could prevent the batter from hitting the ball. Probably the best of these underhand pitchers was Tony Bond of Boston and Hartford. He kept inching up on the rules until he was throwing from a point several inches above his waist. That forced a change in the rules by which the pitcher was

allowed to throw with an overhand motion and put as much speed on the ball as he could. It was then that the art of pitching really began to develop.

That is getting a little ahead of the story, however, for it was in the days of the underhand toss that the curve was discovered.

In 1867 pitching became recognized as a science. The Charter Oaks of Hartford, Conn., came to Brooklyn that year to play the Excelsiors on the Capitoline grounds, and they were noted for their heavy batting. The Excelsiors had a young pitcher named Arthur Cummings, however, who completely knocked them off their pedestal. Cummings had discovered in practice that by twisting the ball in the hand and spinning it as it started toward the batter it would curve in a direction contrary to the laws of gravitation. He waited for the arrival of the Charter Oaks to give this curve a thorough trial, and when he did start it the heavy hitters were absolutely helpless. They could not understand how a man could cause a ball to curve and several of them were so stubborn over the matter that they spent the rest of their lives insisting that it could not be done. Nevertheless, Cummings had opened the way to many pitching discoveries, and his name went all over the country as a wonderful inventor. Some historians have claimed that Bobby Matthews invented the curve ball, but Father Chadwick, who was a witness to Cummings' great performance on the old Capitoline grounds, always declared that he was the real inventor.

The overhand throw came into vogue in the late seventies, but the pitcher was still hedged around with restrictions in favor of the batter. While he was allowed to throw the ball with great speed, he was compelled to throw it at a point indicated by the hitter. In other words, the batter could call for "high ball," "low ball," etc.

Of the early overhand pitchers, Asa Brainard, of the famous Cincinnati Red Stockings, was probably the best exponent. He could throw the ball at the point indicated by the batter and still prevent hard hitting. Brainard did not pitch the curve ball, however, one of

his reasons being that he did not believe in it. Asa Brainard, by the way, must have been a striking figure as he went into the box. He wore a long black beard that completely covered his face and hung down to the top button of his baseball shirt. It might occur to the baseball fan of today that it was a good thing that the old-time pitchers did not have to slide to bases. A beard full of dust and gravel could not have been a very pretty or comfortable affair. Brainard pitched for the Cincinnati Reds on their famous tour when they went a whole season without losing a game. He did not pitch every game, but would rest every once in a while and give Harry Wright, the centerfielder and "change pitcher," a chance.

The next school of great pitchers which came out in the early eighties was made up of Johnny Ward, Charley Radbourne, Jim Whitney and John Clarkson. They were great pitchers in every way. They had speed, curves and practically everything that is used today. Any one of them would have been a great pitcher on the diamond of 1911. Many old players who still take an active interest in the game regard John Clarkson as the greatest pitcher that ever lived. The only man that they class with him is Christy Mathewson of the Giants. Some of the old-timers say that Tim Keefe was just as good, but the majority incline toward Clarkson and Mathewson.

The most important development in pitching from 1885 until 1903 was the spit ball. This remarkable curve, or break—it isn't really a curve—was discovered by Elmert Stricklett, at one time a member of the Brooklyn club. As in other great inventions or discoveries, the inventor did not reap the benefit himself. Jack Chesbro saw Stricklett working with the peculiar curve during an exhibition game at New Orleans and began to develop it. He became the most effective pitcher in the business the following year. Other pitchers picked up the spit ball, and now it is universally used.

The spit ball differs from the curve in that it gets direction from the thumb instead of the fingers. By the

way, this is a good place to explain that ball players recognize but one curve. Such things as "out curve," "down shoot," "drop" and all those variations are known simply as a "curve." One is simply an extension of the other. In other words, a "drop" is nothing more nor less than an "out curve" with a little more bend to it. The "inshoot" is not a "curve" at all. It is a ball thrown with such speed that it naturally breaks or jumps inward. The inshoot is a natural motion of the ball according to the rules of gravitation, while the "out," or curve ball, is one that is made to curve unnaturally.

But, to get back to the spit ball. The ordinary curve, as every lad knows, is thrown by spinning the ball off the ends of the first and second fingers. The rotary motion makes it curve outward. The spit ball, on the contrary, is not directed by the tips of the fingers at all.

The spot on the ball that is usually covered by the tips of the fingers is so moistened with saliva that the fingers slip off without causing any friction. The less friction the greater the break. Therefore, when the ball leaves the hand it is directed by the thumb. This gives it a peculiar wabbling motion and it is liable to "break" either to the right or to the left.

The spit ball is very effective, in that it breaks more sharply than a curve and cannot be followed by the eye of the batter.

The fifth great discovery in pitching was made by Mathewson when he introduced the fade-away. This has not been classed in the important stages of pitching given above, as it has never been in general use.

Mathewson does not claim the invention, but he perfected it and has been most successful in its use.



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