

Notes, Documents, and Queries

The First Baseball Game, the First Newspaper References to Baseball, and the New York Club: A Note on the Early History of Baseball

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On June 19, 1846, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York and the New York Club met at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey and played what has been commonly accepted as the first baseball contest between two teams.¹ Historians of the sport have long recognized the Knickerbocker's contributions to the early history of baseball. The formation of the club in 1845 marked the beginning of organized baseball and for more than a decade it served as the organizational model for the numerous teams that emerged in the New York metropolitan area. Equally important, the Knickerbockers established the basic pattern and rules of baseball.²

Little is known, however, about the New York Club except that they crushed the Knickerbockers 23 to 1 in their contest and then disappeared from the baseball scene. In 1861, Henry Chadwick, the leading sportswriter of the nineteenth century, maintained that the New Yorkers actually predated the Knickerbockers, although he felt that the latter club deserved "the honor of being the pioneer club of the present game of Base Ball." A century later, Harold Seymour articulated a similar theme in his scholarly study of the history of baseball. He noted that the New Yorkers were probably in existence prior to the Knickerbockers, but the club was only "half-organized" and they did not last more than a season.³ Their one-sided victory does indicate that they were not novices at the game and Duncan F. Curry, the first president of the Knickerbockers, claimed that several members of the New York Club were experienced cricketers.⁴

Harold Peterson recently attempted to throw new light on the New York Club. He asserted that the men who would later comprise the New York and Knickerbocker Clubs had played baseball for several years in Manhattan on an in-

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formal and unorganized basis as one group. In 1845, one contingent decided to establish the Knickerbockers as a permanent club and rented a playing area at Elysian Fields. Other ballplayers found the Hoboken ballfield inconvenient and decided to remain in New York where they continued to play the game on an informal basis. They adopted the name the New York Club for their contest with the Knickerbockers only as a means of differentiating themselves from their former compatriots. The disappearance of the New York Club was also no mystery, as many of the ballplayers rejoined the Knickerbockers following the 1846 contest.⁵ Peterson's thesis appears contradictory. If the New Yorkers found Hoboken inconvenient in 1845, why did they rejoin the Knickerbockers there just a year later?

Several references late in 1845 to the New York Club in the *New York Herald*, unnoticed by earlier historians, provide new insight into this club and the early history of baseball. These notices preceded by eight years what has been accepted as the first newspaper references to baseball.⁶

On October 21st, the *Herald* reported that a baseball contest would be played between the New York Club and a team known as the Brooklyn Club at Elysian Fields. This contest precedes by eight months what has been accepted as the date of the first baseball game. The newspaper did not report the outcome of this contest, but four days later it noted that the New Yorkers defeated the Brooklyn Club in a rematch, 37 to 19. Since the published box score of the game listed only eight players on each squad, one might surmise that they were not playing by the rules recently devised by the Knickerbockers.⁷ The fact that the New Yorkers played at Elysian Fields and knew the Knickerbockers suggest that they were familiar with their rules. The reason for only eight players, in all likelihood, was that one team showed up with a player short.

Baseball historians have never taken note of the Brooklyn team, but their identity is not a mystery. The members of the Brooklyn Club came from participants on the Union Star Cricket Club of that city. Over half the names of the Brooklyn team corresponded with those that appeared in the box scores of the Union Star's contests.⁸ Moreover, the rematch was held on the grounds of this cricket club. Finally, the Stars, along with the Knickerbockers, were present at the New York Club's anniversary dinner.⁹ While Brooklyn and Union Stars had overlapping membership, my suspicion is that they were not one and the same. In fact, I suspect that the Brooklyn Club did not have any formal organizational structure. Rather, they were comprised mainly of members of the cricket club who used the cricket grounds to play baseball as a break from their usual ballgame.

In a more revealing statement, the *Herald* reported on November 11th that the New Yorkers gathered on their grounds at Elysian Fields to mark their second

anniversary with an intersquad game (this time with nine men on each side) and a post game dinner.¹⁰ It can be said, consequently, that the New Yorkers had been meeting regularly since 1843. But were they an organized team? Since they probably paid a rental fee for their grounds at Elysian Fields suggests they had some degree of organization, although, in all likelihood, it was not to the same extent as the Knickerbockers with their formal constitution.¹¹ The presence of both clubs in Hoboken and the fact that the New Yorkers were in existence since 1843 makes it dubious that they were once one team. Rather, the two squads met at the New Jersey ballfield and decided after 1846 to pool their resources.¹²

New York Herald

Oct. 25, 1845

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BASE BALL PLAY—The subjoined is the result of the return match between the New York Base Ball Club and the Brooklyn players, which came off on the ground of the Brooklyn Star Cricket Club yesterday. Messrs. Johnson, Wheaton and Van Nostrand were the umpires.

NEW YORK BALL CLUB.		BROOKLYN CLUB.	
Hands out.	Runs.	Hands out.	Runs
Davis,	2 4	Hunt	1 3
Murphy	0 6	Hines	2 2
Vail	2 4	Gilmore	3 2
Kline	1 4	Hardy	2 2
Miller	2 5	Sharp	2 2
Case	2 4	Meyers	0 3
Tucker	2 4	Whaley	2 2
Winslow	1 6	Forman	1 3
	— —		— —
	12 37		12 19

CRICKET MATCH.—On the same ground, after the above-mentioned contest, a single wicket match at cricket was played between two members of the Union Star Club against two members of the New York Club, for bats and balls, which resulted in the defeat of the latter. The following is the score, as made by the official markers, Messrs. Samuel Shaw and William Holman:—

UNION STAR CLUB.		NEW YORK CLUB.	
FIRST INNINGS.		FIRST INNINGS.	
C. Smith, b. by Lynch,	3	A. Barrett, b. by Smith,	0
H. Wilson, run out,	5	Lynch, b. by "	2
	—	No ball,	1
	8		3
SECOND INNINGS.		SECOND INNINGS.	
C. Smith, b. by Lynch,	10	Lynch, c. by Wilson,	1
H. Wilson, b. by "	3	Barrett, b. by Smith,	1
No balls,	2		—
	15		2
	—		—
Total,	23	Total,	5

Mr William Russel was umpire for the New York players, and Mr. King (late of the Marylebone Club, London,) for the Brooklynites.

The statements in the *Herald* confirms that the New York Club predated the Knickerbockers. This does not undermine the view of Chadwick and other writers that the Knickerbockers were baseball's pioneer club. The evidence does lead, however, to two significant questions concerning the Knickerbock-

ers. First, why did eight years pass before the press took note of baseball again? Similarly, why didn't the Knickerbockers write to the press about their baseball activity? Many sporting groups informed the New York based sporting journal, the *Spirit of the Times*, of their formation and activities. Second, writers have assumed that the Knickerbockers waited five years before entering into another baseball contest because no other baseball clubs were organized during this period. Since the references illustrate that several cricketers in New York played baseball, one wonders why the Knickerbockers did not engage the members of the city's cricket clubs in a "friendly" game of baseball. The answers to these important questions, which I discuss elsewhere, provide a clearer understanding of the Knickerbockers and the early history of baseball.¹³

Notes

1. In 1946, a celebration commemorating this contest was held at Hoboken and a plaque was dedicated to counter the claims that baseball originated in Cooperstown, New York. See Harold Seymour, *Baseball, The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 18.
2. Seymour, *Baseball*, pp. 15-20; and Robert W. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games* (New York: Rockport Press, 1947), pp. 161-7.
3. Henry Chadwick (ed.), *Beadle's Dime Base-Ball Player* (New York: Irwin P. Beadle, 1861), p. 6; and Seymour, *Baseball*, p. 18.
4. Curry's statement about the New York Club was made thirty-one years after the contest. See Alfred H. Spink, *The National Game* (St. Louis: National Game Publishing Co., 1910), p. 56.
5. Harold Peterson, *The Man Who Invented Baseball* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 76-9.
6. For the initial reference to baseball, see Spink, *National Game*, p. 56; Preston D. Orem, *Baseball, From Newspaper Accounts* (Altadena, Cal.: the author, 1961), p. 11; and Irving A. Leitner, *Baseball: Diamond In The Rough* (New York: Criterion Books, 1972), pp. 37-8. While all three writers agree that the first newspaper account of baseball appeared in 1853, they offered three different dates.
7. *New York Herald* 21, 25 Oct. 1845. The rules of the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club were adopted on September 23, 1845. The initial rules, interestingly, did not specifically require nine men on a team. (For the rules, see Henderson, *Bull, Bat and Bishop*, pp. 163-5.) There seems to be little doubt, however, that the Knickerbockers played with nine men on a side almost from the start. See Spink, *National Game*, p. 54; Peterson, *Man Who Invented Baseball*, p. 2; and Seymour, *Baseball*, pp. 17-8.
8. For the box scores of the Union Star Cricket Club, see *Spirit of the Times* 14 (Oct. 12, 1844); 385, 16 (Oct. 3, 1846): 375; and *Herald* 5 Aug., 8 Nov. 1845.
9. *Herald* 11 Nov. 1845.
10. *Herald* 11 Nov. 1845.
11. In 1865, Alexander J. Cartwright, Jr., the major spirit behind the formation of the Knickerbockers, wrote that his club was the first baseball club since "the old New York Club never had a regular organization." (For Cartwright's view, see Peterson, *Man Who Invented Baseball*, p. 175.) Cartwright's statement suggests that the New York Club had some organization, even if it lacked the more formal structures of the Knickerbockers.
12. It is highly probable that at least some of the New Yorkers and Knickerbockers knew each other prior to the teams meeting at Elysian Fields.
13. Melvin L. Adelman, "The Development of Modern Athletics: Sport In New York City, 1820-1870," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: University of Illinois, 1980), 323-7.

Editorial Note: Individuals are invited to submit materials for this new section of the *Journal of Sport History* for possible publication in a future issue.