
Of Apples and Oranges

by

STAN GROSSHANDLER

Hales Corners, Wisconsin

The concept for this talk was stimulated by a recent article I wrote attempting to select the 10 greatest professional football teams. This article precipitated controversy and caused me to wonder if I really could compare athletes and teams of different eras.

I contacted historians, athletes, and writers whom I felt were knowledgeable and asked their opinions. Over 35 people were contacted either in person, by phone, or letter.

For a frame of reference I decided on the following outline and applied it to baseball, football, basketball, and hockey.

1. PLAYING AREA
2. RULES — both playing and scoring
3. EQUIPMENT — both the ball and other
4. PHILOSOPHIES AND TECHNIQUES
5. MEDICAL CARE AND TRAINING METHODS
6. SCHEDULES AND EXPANSION
7. SOCIO-ECONOMIC — education and financial.

While baseball is said to have changed the least over the years it still has many outstanding changes.

The early parks were small and often favored certain types of hitters; while today's artificial turf also helps certain types of players.

Rule changes such as pitching distances, outlawing of the spitter, changing strike zones, changes in batting rules such as the rule instituted in 1930 that no longer gave the batter a homer for a ball that bounced into the stands.

Baseball's ball and equipment have changed drastically over the years.

The philosophies of the hitters and pitchers have changed. The batter now tries for the home run; while the use of the relief man has changed the whole concept of pitching.

Expansion in baseball, as with the other sports, has diluted the available talent.

Most historians such as Fred Lieb feel that there are fewer superstars around today; although more good ball players.

While the pressures due to TV are greater today, the players are more educated and able to cope with them.

Although football rules have changed little; when made they have drastically changed the game such as the 1933 rules on passing, and moving the goal posts for the pros.

Professional football records were so poorly kept up until 1960 that comparisons of earlier passers is almost impossible.

Equipment changes have made great changes; for the players are able to go all out with less fear of injury today. The ball makes for much easier passing.

The two platoon system with the emphasis on defense has changed the complexion of the game greatly.

The economics of the game are such that it is no longer a lark to be played a couple months while you are looking for a better job.

Training methods and medical help have not only prolonged careers; but made for better developed players.

The same outline that holds true for baseball and football can obviously be applied to basketball and hockey. Most notable in these sports are the change in the philosophies of play and the dilution of talent.

CONCLUSIONS

Cliff Kachline of the baseball Hall of Fame states, "Just because modern scientists know all about space travel and the atom does not make them any greater than the scientist of 100 years ago. I believe every era," he said, "produces an equal number of great men that can not be compared with any other era but only with their contemporaries."

The late Dick McCann of the football Hall of Fame felt that the great players of today would be great years ago and vice versa.

Don Smith of the football Hall of Fame sums it up beautifully when he says, "Good conversation YES — Good sense NO."

To conclude: to compare athletes and teams of different eras is like comparing apples and oranges, it can not be done.