

Backwoods Baseball - The Game in Maine 1865-1872

DAVID C. SMITH

University of Maine

at Orono

ANNE E. BRIDGES

University of Maine

at Orono

Baseball, in an organized form, was widely played in the post Civil War period in Maine. In the 1850s two sets of rules were used, but by 1860 the Massachusetts game was dying out, and it was replaced by the New York version, similar to that played today. The Massachusetts game continued to be a feature of schoolyard ball until World War II. The game was a feature of juvenile books during the periods, in which the rules changes were often part of the plot and apparently served to further publicize the game.

The game grew very rapidly, and box scores were being printed in the press as early as the spring of 1866. Leading teams, among them the Cushnocs of Augusta, had playing grounds, elected captains, built club houses, and during the off season sponsored concerts, dances, and other social functions to raise money and keep the sport before the population. The Cushnocs also fielded a junior team for boys under eighteen which was very active. The winners of the championship held a silver ball emblematic of their success, and responded to challenges for the trophy. and often for fairly large purses of money. The junior championships also were contested for a trophy. Games were played until quite late in the year as box scores were published into November. The agricultural society fairs offered prizes for the best teams in a tournament.

Throughout the next few years the team representatives involved met, set out rules for championship play, organized tournaments and generally arbitrated and ruled on the sport. The game spread to cover the entire state. Town and country championships were competed for. The better Maine teams also competed for New England championships.

Scores were often very high in this time, although the better state championship games were not much higher than games in our time. When the championships were held many prizes were made available to teams, and individuals who had excelled. or who had done very poorly. Occasionally the games were quite violent and major injuries were reported in the press.

The junior championships and the teams involved were increasingly the focus of press attention. One of the reasons for this is that the best team, Dirigoes of Augusta, were unbeaten for several seasons. They held the New England championship for a period as well, and played the New York Flyaways for the national championship, although they were defeated in this effort. Representatives of the team served on the national and regional governing bodies of the sport in the years before the National League was organized.

The press reflected the intense local interest with stories on the well known professional teams and players of the period. Coverage of the sport with these stories, and many box scores attest to the popularity of the game across Maine, and New England in general. By the time of the organization of the national league many public schools and colleges had playing fields and teams. Either for intra-mural, and soon inter-collegiate play, sports were important parts of student life. Baseball became the national game in Maine in the decade after the Civil War. More work is needed on who played and the relationship of the game to social class, but what is known is that many played, the press reported it, and the game met with general approbation with most social arbiters.