

# **A Case for Harry Wright: Professional Ballist or Pioneer Physical Educator?**

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To sport historians, particularly those who study baseball, the name Harry Wright is synonymous with nineteenth century player-manager, innovator, promoter, businessman, social moralist, teacher, and pioneer of the modern game. Still others moniker Wright with the title “Father” of baseball, although Alexander Cartwright is most frequently identified as the game’s “Father,” and Wright himself, characteristic of his humility, assigned that distinction to sport journalist of the period, Henry Chadwick.

Regardless of the “Father” of baseball designation, the evidence shows that indeed Wright was a professional ballist deserving of his accolades. Other evidence suggest, however, had Wright not chosen a career in professional athletics, perhaps he would today be recognized as one of America’s pioneer physical educators. Wright’s early baseball career, his ideas and practice of hygiene, fitness, and physical training paralleled that of those two well-known early professor of Hygiene and Physical Education, Edward Hitchcock and Dudley Sargent, respectively.

In 1861 Amherst College appointed Hitchcock Professor of Hygiene and Physical Education for the purpose of improving the health and fitness of the school’s student population. Hitchcock was the first American to conduct research in anthropometry as part of his program. While Wright was not formally trained in Hygiene and Physical Education, or as a medical doctor, or even employed in a collegiate environment, like Dr. Hitchcock, he first developed a personal health and fitness regimen to maintain his health and improve his baseball prowess. Although not as sophisticated, Wright’s program incorporated many of Hitchcock’s concepts for hygiene and year round exercise, including anthropometry measurements that Wright kept on each of his players.

Wright implemented his program as part of his baseball team’s year-round training regimen. He kept meticulous journal records of measurement and hygiene related statistics on his players, and was convinced such practice was

beneficial in maintaining the team's health and improving performance on the playing field. In one of his journal entries while player-manager of the Cincinnati Red Stockings, 1868-1870, Wright refers to the "Dr. from Amherst" in his listing of player measurements. Some ten years later, 1883, a column in *The Globe* (Boston), covered a lecture given by Dudley Sargent on physical training. The article noted that the famous baseball manager Harry Wright was in attendance.

Throughout his baseball career, Wright continued to exhibit his interest and knowledge concerning various aspects of Hygiene and Physical Education. Against rebellious players who patronized saloons rather than gymnasiums, and their balking at the thought of spring training months prior to the season opener, Wright applied his knowledge, ideas, and specifically his fitness and training program to baseball.

Regardless of how one designates Harry Wright's career--professional ballist or Physical Educator--his personal journals, newspaper accounts, and other secondary sources clearly document his contribution in the application of Hygiene and Physical Education principles and research of the period to professional baseball. This investigation brings to light the significance of his contribution and enhance the understanding of scientific research as it evolved into an essential component of sport performance at all levels. To this end Harry Wright was an innovative bridge.