

No. 4 • November 1997

Lehigh University
Information Resources

Special Collections *Flyer*

Play Ball!

Special Collections is, as its name suggests, focused on collections, or aggregates of material which form a coherent resource for teaching and research. However, once in a while individual books or other items are particularly apt at revealing a present much changed from the past.

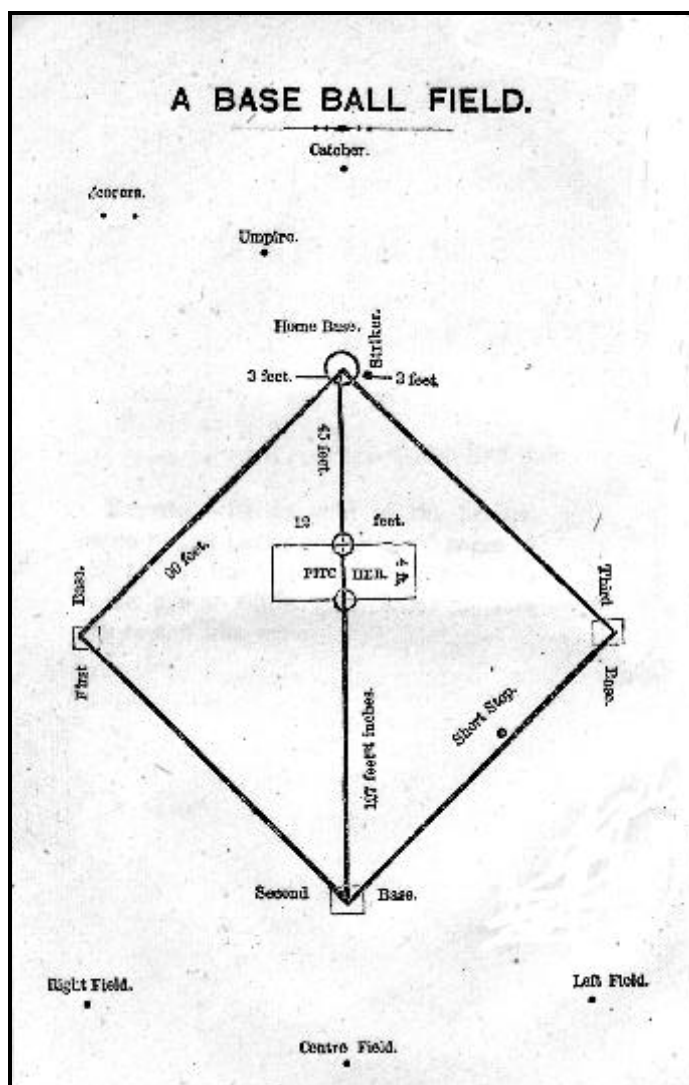
Such is the case with the book under discussion here, *The Base Ball Player's Book of Reference, Containing the Rules of the Game for 1866; with an Explanatory Appendix; Full Instructions for Umpires; Instructions on Scoring; the Three Best Averages of Each Club for 1865, etc.*, published in New York by J.C. Haney & Co. The recently completed World Series provides an appropriate opportunity to take a look at it, although the men who prepared this book would no doubt have been astonished to know that a future world champion team would come from what was to them a sparsely populated, mosquito and alligator-infested swamp, and would on top of it be named after a tropical fish!

As will be seen, however, team names and locations are not the only changes that the sport of baseball has undergone in the last 130 or so years.

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There has been much debate about certain aspects of the history of baseball. Clearly it was not invented by Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, New York. Just as clearly, the sport was one of the chief amusements of Union soldiers during the Civil War. This small volume, measuring $5\frac{3}{4}$ by $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches, with a mere 76 pages, is proof of how quickly baseball became a serious matter in the year after the end of that conflict.

The unnamed authors of this rule book were at pains to invoke seriousness of purpose. "The physique of Americans", they note in the Introduction, "has long been a vulnerable point for the attacks of foreigners on the weaknesses of our countrymen, and hitherto we have only too-well merited the palpable hits made by our healthy out-door-sport-loving cousins of England." Not only would baseball "bring us up to the physical standard of our forefathers," but it would also, therefore, enable Americans to be seen as the equals of those English cousins, at least on the



playing field. For, as they succinctly note, “[w]hat Cricket is to an Englishman, Base Ball has become to an American.”

But what was baseball in the period just after the Civil War? It was an increasingly specialized sport searching for the right combination of offense and defense, even as it does today, with changes in the hardness of the ball, the height of the pitcher’s mound, and that true abomination, the designated hitter.

Several of the significant differences are evident from the diagram of the playing field (shown on the other side), which is the frontispiece of the book, and its only illustration.

Besides the shape of the pitcher’s mound, two facts stand out: the game has a “striker” or “batsman” and not a “batter,” and the umpire is standing in a strange spot. Since these are the key relationships of the game, let’s take a closer look at the rules.

Describing the pitcher’s responsibility, Rule 5 says: “The pitcher must stand within the lines, and must deliver the ball as near as possible over the centre [sic] of the home base, and for the striker.” The rule further explains the phrase “for the striker.”

“If the batsman is in the habit of striking a very low or very high ball, then the pitcher must pitch the ball to suit his particular style ...; but ... the batsman cannot demand a low ball if he is in the habit of striking one hip high. “Further, according to Rule 6, if the pitcher fails to do this, “the umpire [who is standing not behind the catcher, but to the side] shall call one ball, and if the pitcher persists in such actions, two and three balls; when three balls shall have been called, the striker shall take the first base.”

Since the contest between the pitcher and the batter is central to the game, it has been the subject of the most changes over the years. As can be seen from the rules quoted here, a batter took first base after three balls. It took a while before the concept of the strike zone came into the game, and the umpire moved behind the catcher. It also took a while to settle on four balls and three strikes as the appointed number to end a turn at bat.

Aside from these admittedly rather central aspects, it is remarkable how similar other aspects of the game were to today’s play. Batters reached base

in the same manner, and were put out by balls caught in fair or foul territory, and by being tagged or forced out. Modern players would certainly have no trouble with these aspects of the game.

Perhaps the quaintest part of *The Base Ball Player’s Book of Reference* is a section at the end entitled “The Model Base Ball Player.” In spite of the high moral tone this section takes, the authors admit that “this ... individual is not often seen on a ball ground...”

Nonetheless, they hope for a player who “comport[s] himself like a gentleman on all occasions ... and in so doing ... abstains from pro-fanity and its twin and vile brother obscenity, leaving these vices to be alone cultivated by graduates of our penitentiaries.”

Moreover, he never “dispute[s] the decision of an Umpire, for knowing the peculiar position an Umpire is placed in, he is careful never to wound his feelings by implying that his judgement is weak; his partiality apparent, or his integrity of character doubtful ... Moreover, he is never guilty of questioning the decision of the Umpire by his actions ...”

We can be reassured in thinking that players of today match this ideal to the same extent they did in 1866.
— P.A.M.

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Special Collections is pleased to have an exhibition of its books in the permanent gallery of the newly-opened Lehigh University Art Galleries in the Zoellner Arts Center. The exhibition includes a volume of Audubon’s *Birds of America*, along with eight other books illustrating the role of books in physical and intellectual exploration. The gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.
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Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Special Collections Librarian. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 974-6471; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.

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