

#1B Late 1800s Baseball Being Played was Rough

At Old, Old Ball Game: Runs and Broken Fingers

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ner Doubleday is believed by some to have invented the game, but a number of history buffs put that contention in the realm of mythology.) Individual teams tend to pick rules from a particular year, creating some confusion. Under 1884 rules, fielders can't wear gloves and pitchers can throw sidearm. Under 1886 rules, fielders can throw only overhand and thin gloves are permitted.

As major-league baseball heads toward its October climax, vintage ball is also coming to the end of its season, and signs of its appeal abound. The Grays, without a regular league schedule, arranged to play about 40 games this year, on weekends and holidays, more than four times the number of games they played six years' ago.

The team belongs to the Vintage Baseball Association, whose ranks have grown 50% to about 100 teams during the past five years, mostly in the Midwest and Northeast but also as far away as California. Dean Thilgen, founder of the 10-year-old association, says there may be 300 teams nationally. Many, like the Taverneers, aren't official association members.

Acquaintance with 19th-century nomenclature is a must. Pitchers are called "hurlers," batters are "strickers," and catchers are "behinds." Batter up is "striker to the line," a pop-up is a "sky ball," and the outfield is "the garden," because flowers grew wild in the fields where early games were held.

Vintage teams, made up of mostly white-collar workers in their 30s and 40s, eschew modernities such as chalk lines to mark the field of play and a raised pitcher's mound. Catchers rarely wear masks and batters, who don't use helmets, can be beamed with impunity by pitchers.

The biggest cause of injuries is the absence of fielding gloves, which only be-

came widely used in the 1890s. That's also the biggest cause of what modern scorers would call errors. Many vintage teams go completely barehanded. Others wear something similar to the earliest kind of baseball mitt: unwebbed and no thicker than a driving glove.

When Frank Sylvester "Silver" Flint, catcher for the Chicago White Stockings, retired in 1889, he let it be known that all his fingers had been broken at least once. Players were so beaten up that shaking their hands was likened to "grabbing a bag of peanuts," says Noah Liberman, author of "Glove Affair: the Romance, History and Tradition of the Baseball Glove," published in 2003.

"At the very least your hand swells up," says Shawn Barry, a first baseman for the New Hampshire Granite. "My fingers are so swollen from playing I can't wear my wedding ring any more—which doesn't really sit well with my wife."

Catchers may have it the roughest. Vintage pitchers don't have the velocity of major leaguers, and they use balls that are hand wound and therefore softer than the machine-wound balls used by Major League Baseball. But vintage pitchers throw from a position only 50 feet from home plate, as opposed to 60.5 in a modern ballpark.

In one game this summer, a foul ball broke the finger of Peter Duda, the Granite catcher. His replacement, Mike Connor, proceeded to break his finger the next inning. Unable to find a second replacement, Mr. Duda returned as catcher and played the rest of the game. He has since broken two other fingers at the old ball game. One will have to be fused back together after the season ends later this month, he says.

Despite the pain, Mr. Duda says, playing the game, "feels as if you're in a dream world, away from all the craziness

of daily life."

In their game last month, the Grays and Taverneers squared off at an old fort on an island in Boston Harbor. The fort has an enclosed yard about the size of two football fields. Obstacles in left field included a 10-foot-deep dip and a stand of maple trees.

In the fourth inning, with the score tied at 2-2, Ray Vasas, a civil engineer who plays for the Taverneers, stepped up to the plate. The strike zone in vintage ball is chosen by the batter and can range from either the shoulders to the waist or from the waist to the knees. Mr. Vasas, who lifts weights in his spare time, called for the higher strike zone, and quickly sent a towering fly ball toward the maples. The Grays leftfielder, waiting beneath the trees, stood with both hands cupped in front of his face.

The ball slammed into the fielder's gloveless grasp, but he couldn't control it. As it rolled under the trees, three runs scored, putting the Taverneers ahead 5-2. Along the first base line, a group of Grays applauded. It is considered genteel in vintage ball to note the opposition's success.

The game was called by mutual consent two innings early in the seventh with the Taverneers up 18-4. After three hours and many dropped balls, the players were tired and complaining of sore hands.

Milling around afterward, they compared wounds. Frank Lucas, the Grays' catcher, showed off his puffed up palms. Blood seeped out from under one of his fingernails. Second baseman Richard Stattler had three swollen joints. One of his fingers had been rendered permanently crooked in a previous contest.

Mr. Olson, the Grays' shortstop, had black and blue hands. "We're not just into baseball," he said. "We're purists."