

# ADAMS OF THE KNICKERBOCKERS

By Robert W. Henderson.

It is hard to believe, but when the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club started the modern game of American baseball, the game almost died in its infancy. That it did survive was due to Dr. Daniel L. Adams. His fellow team mates dubbed him "The Nestor of Base Ball," the wise counsellor, for it was his keen enthusiasm and persistent effort that kept the game alive during its first years.

Long before the Knickerbockers various forms of baseball and its first cousin "town ball" had been played, mostly by children, although a few town ball teams are known to have existed. There were no definite organizations, certainly no leagues, and no precise playing rules. About the year 1840 a group of young business men formed the New York Baseball Club, but evidently this club did not prosper. Some of its younger members later formed the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club. At least one game between the New York and Knickerbocker Clubs is recorded, but after this no more is heard of the New York Club.

In 1842 a group of professional and business men began to meet "for health, recreation and social enjoyment." They were men of standing in the community, doctors, lawyers, brokers and successful merchants. It was customary for two or three of them to round up enough players. The game they played was a primitive form of baseball, closer to the English game of rounders than baseball as now played. This group made baseball history when in 1845, they not only formally organized the Knickerbocker

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Robert W. Henderson, Adams of THE Knickerbockers, undated and unpublished, Paul J. Reiferson, ~~Westport~~ Weston, Ct.

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Base Ball Club, but formulated the first set of rules of the game in its American form.

True, they adopted their rules from those printed in many juvenile books of the period. But when they changed the method of putting out a player from the old rounders rule of "plugging" him with the ball as he ran, that is by throwing the ball at him, to touching the runner with the ball in the hand of an opposing player, the children's game was converted into a robust, manly game and baseball was on its way.

Strange as it may seem, the first five years of the newly formed club were tough going as far as baseball was concerned. The club's objective of "social enjoyment" seems to have outweighed "recreation," which meant "baseball." There were no other teams to challenge, and on game days members turned up or not as they pleased. Sometimes enough men appeared to choose sides, but many times they had to amuse themselves with One Old Cat or similar substitutes.

The first real "fan" was Dr. Daniel L. Adams. He joined the Knickerbockers a few months after it was organized, on April 14, 1846. His enthusiasm for baseball was soon recognized, and he was promptly elected vice-president. In 1848, when the Knickerbockers consisted of thirty-three members, Adams became President. In this position he used all his influence, and worked unceasingly to put baseball on its feet. He was a forceful speaker. At the regular social meetings of the club, usually dinners, he missed few opportunities to give a "pep" talk on his favorite game.

He even persuaded his fellow members to pass a rule fining a player who failed to report for a game.

Adams was born in Mount Vernon, N.H. in 1814, graduated from Yale in 1835 and from Harvard Medical School in 1838. He started his practice in New York City in 1839, and shortly thereafter, seeking a means of recreation and exercise, joined the Knickerbockers.

In the year 1953 the writer was fortunate in meeting Roger C. Adams, a son of Dr. Daniel L. Adams. From him we have authentic information on the contribution of his father to the early history of baseball in the United States.

Roger C. Adams tells us that his father undertook the job of making the balls, and personally supervised the turning of bats. The Minutes of the club, preserved in the New York Public Library, record that the doctor collected one dollar and a quarter for each ball he made.

Adams' method of making balls was to form a small, round core of rubber clippings, and to wind yarn around this core until the ball reached the required size. He then took a piece of leather, cut out four equal quarter-sections, and sewed them together over the yarn, thus making a good, hard cover.

For six or seven years Adams made all the balls himself, not only for the Knickerbockers, but for other clubs as they came into existence. The records show that the last payment to Adams for balls was on December 15, 1859. Later a bootmaker was persuaded to take over the difficult job, and on April 18, 1862 the first commercial sale of baseballs is shown on the invoice

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of John Hill's Tool Shop, which charged "1/2 doz. Base balls" at \$6.50.

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Where did Dr. Adams get the formula for making a baseball? His son Roger cannot enlighten us on the matter, nor can he state if Adams was the first to make the type now used, although of course considerably improved over those made by the doctor. Balls are as ancient as recorded history. There have been many kinds, inflated, solid, or stuffed with all kinds of materials from sawdust to feathers. The baseball type may well have originated with Adams, although it resembles rather closely the yarn-rolled balls used for centuries in the game of court tennis. If Adams had the tennis ball in mind, he substituted a leather cover for a cloth cover, making it tough enough to withstand a blow from a wooden bat, instead of the softer blow from a heavily stringed racquet.

When the Knickerbockers began playing baseball, they were uncertain as to the best number of players on a side, and did a little experimenting. At first, following the example of a cricket team, they played with eleven men. It soon became evident that this large number resulted in too many men in the field, especially when according to the early rules a batter was out if a ball was caught on the first bound. The team was gradually reduced to eight men: pitcher, catcher, three basemen and three outfielders.

Dr. Adams soon realized that under this eight-man set-up the infield should be strengthened, and he tried playing as ninth man between second and third base. This proved to be a nice balance, and the position was adopted. The name "short stop" was given to it, and it was the doctor's favorite position. Roger states that his father related these facts to him, but he fails to remember

if the name "short stop" was invented by him. He claimed the position only. Not the name.

Gradually more and more teams began to play the new game of baseball. The famous match between the Knickerbockers and the Gothams in 1854 seems to have aroused the interest that put baseball across as a popular game rather than a side interest of a social club. By 1856 there were twelve clubs around New York City, each governed by whatever rules they thought best. In spite of suggestion, request, and finally severe criticism, the Knickerbockers steadfastly insisted upon their own rules.

The most controversial issue was the "out on first bound" rule. That is, a ball struck by a batter could be caught "on the fly" before it touched the ground, or after one bound. In either case the batter was out.

The good doctor was a staunch supporter of the "fly" game, but although he was the most influential member of the Knickerbockers he could not persuade them to alter their rule. Repeatedly in meetings he would propose to change, but he was just as often turned down. At last, aided by pressure from other clubs and the general clamor against the dictatorship of the Knickerbockers, in 1857 he won his point, and the "fly" game became the rule.

In May, 1857, the knickerbockers, forced into action by criticism from other clubs, called a conference of representatives from all the clubs in the New York City area to try to establish uniform rules. It is said that the Knickerbockers packed this meeting. They certainly outnumbered all other delegates, and elected Adams as chairman. However, little progress was made other than a decision that a game should consist of nine innings instead of

twenty-one "aces" or runs. 6

The independent teams, dissatisfied with the first conference, called another one, limiting the number of delegates from each team to three, thus preventing the Knickerbockers from controlling by numbers. Twenty-five clubs at this meeting, on March 10, 1858 organized as The National Association of Base Ball Players, and drew up a Constitution and By-laws. Adams was elected Chairman of the Committee on Rules and Regulations, an office which he held until he resigned from the Knickerbockers and retired from active playing. He drew up the first draft of rules which was adopted with little change.

As Dr. Adams' practice increased he found it impossible to take off two or three afternoons a week for baseball, and he reluctantly decided to resign. The annual meeting of the Knickerbockers was scheduled for March 26, 1862. On that date he presented a letter addressed to James W. Davis, the secretary, to be read at the meeting.

"I shall not be able to attend the meeting of the Club this evening," he wrote, "and furthermore feel compelled to tender my resignation of membership."

"I do this with great reluctance," he continued, "but in accordance with a determination long since formed, never to remain an inactive non-playing member. It will be impossible for me to play during the coming season, but although absent in body, I shall be present in spirit. My interest in the Club will never cease, nor can I forget the many happy hours spent in communion with its members."

After the Knickerbockers had regained their composure, badly upset by the loss of such an ardent and valuable member, they elected him an honorary member and appointed a committee to prepare appropriate resolutions.

"The Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of the City of New York," this handsomely engrossed resolution read, "desirous of placing on record their high appreciation of their late associate and fellow member, Dr. D.L.Adams, and their sincere regret at his retirement from the Club, did at the Annual Meeting held March 26, 1862, appoint a Committee to draft resolutions expressive of their feelings, and upon report of the said Committee, the following were unanimously adopted:-

"Resolved that by the resignation of Dr. D.L.Adams, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club has lost one of its honored members; one who for a period of sixteen years in the performance of every duty, whether at the bat or in the field, as our presiding officer, or representative in the National Association of Base Ball Players, or in daily walks of life, has ever been faithful and uniformly proved himself the courteous, high minded gentleman, and the zealous advocate of our noble game.

"Resolved that to him as much if not more than any other individual member are the Knickerbockers indebted for the high rank their Club has maintained since its organization, and we claim for him the title of 'Nestor of Ball Players.'

"Resolved that with unfeigned regret we yield to the imperative necessity that compels his withdrawal from the rolls of our active members, and beg to assure him that in leaving us he carries with him our heartfelt wishes for his welfare, happiness and prosperity, and we cherish the hope often to

be the recipients of the benefit of his good counsel and long experience."

When Adams was about sixty years of age, because of ill health, he retired from the practice of medicine and moved to Ridgefield, Conn., where he took an active part in community life.

There he married and had several children. He was 60 years old when Roger was born in 1874, and thus it happened that two generations covered a span of one hundred and forty years. Roger was twenty-three years old when his father died in 1899, and so had an opportunity as a young man to hear Dr. Adams talk of his days with the Knickerbockers. Thanks to Roger only now can we appreciate the great service Dr. Daniel L. Adams made to American sport and to baseball.