BASEBALL RULES

by James S. Distelhorst

Image courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

"The American National Game of Baseball," a lithograph by Currier and Ives (1866), depicts Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey. On June 19, 1846, in the first documented baseball game, the New York Knickerbockers played against the New York Nines at Elysian Fields. The Knickerbockers lost, 23 to 1.

"I see great things in baseball,"

Walt Whitman wrote in 1846. "It's our game—the American game. It will take our people out-of-doors, fill them with oxygen, give them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set. Repair these losses, and be a blessing to us."

The same year that Whitman wrote about the medicinal value of baseball, a man at the intersection of medicine and baseball—Daniel Lucius "Doc" Adams, an 1838 graduate of HMS—played in the sport's first documented game. A member of the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, Adams played against the New York Nine at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey. Although his team was overmatched, losing 23 to 1, he went on to become known as a father of baseball.

Institutions often have their own creation myths, wherein they reinterpret their pasts in such a way as to make a crucial point about their identities, and baseball is no exception. Most fans associate the founding of baseball with Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, New York. The legend goes that, in Cooperstown in 1839, Doubleday plotted out for the first time what we would today recognize as a baseball field. Yet Doubleday, destined to become a Civil War hero, was then a West Point student. He is not known even to have set foot in Cooperstown during that entire year. In addition, Doubleday never mentions baseball in his voluminous journals. Nonetheless, in 1908, a committee appointed by the baseball establishment officially sanctioned the Doubleday creation myth of baseball because it erroneously confirmed the American origins of the game during a period of political isolationism, and because it supported the financial interests of certain committee members.

Daniel Lucius "Doc" Adams

photo by John Richmond Husman,
courtesy of Mrs. Daniel P. Adams

Virtually all baseball historians now reject the Doubleday story. In fact, it was the young urban professionals of mid-nineteenth-century New York City—the Knickerbockers—who began to fashion their game into what would become the baseball of Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Roberto Clemente, Carl Yastrzemski, Roger Clemens, and Ken Griffey, Jr. And the Knickerbockers were led during their formative years by Doc Adams.

Daniel Lucius Adams was born November 1, 1814 in Mount Vernon, New Hampshire. The son of a physician, he was graduated from Yale in 1835 after transferring from Amherst College. After his HMS graduation, he practiced briefly with his father in New Hampshire. In 1839, he moved to what is now the East Village of New York City to establish his own general practice. There he also treated the poor in the New York Dispensary, which provided free medical, surgical, and dental aid.

Soon after arriving in New York, Adams began playing baseball. In the fall of 1845, several weeks after the formal organization of the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, he and several physician-friends joined the team. The club elected him vice president in 1846, the year of the first documented game of baseball. A year later he was elected president, a position he held for three years.

The Knickerbockers rented a playing area at Elysian Fields for $75 a year. "Once there we were free from all restraint," Adams said, "and throwing off our coats we played until it was too dark to see any longer. I was a left-handed batter, and sometimes used to [hit] the ball into the river. People began to take an interest in the game presently, and sometimes we had as many as a hundred spectators watching.

"The first professional English cricket team that came to this country...used to come over and watch our game," Adams added. "They rather turned up their noses at it, and thought it tame sport, until we invited them to try it. Then they found it was not so easy as it looked."

The Knickerbockers, who each paid a two-dollar initiation fee and five dollars in annual dues, emphasized gentlemanly behavior. Fines were imposed for using profanity (6-1/4 cents), arguing with the umpire's decision (25 cents), and disobeying the team captain (50 cents). After each game, whatever the outcome, the Knickerbockers treated the visiting team to a gala dinner.

Within the next few years, other young professional men organized similar clubs, copying the Knickerbockers' bylaws and even their uniforms. The Knickerbockers wore white flannel shirts, blue woolen pantaloons, and straw hats. The Eclectic Club adopted white shirts and caps with blue trim, blue flannel pantaloons, and red belts; the Brooklyn Charter Oaks wore pink shirts with white stars, white pantaloons with pink stripes, and blue-peaked white caps.

During those formative years of baseball, the Knicks, as they called themselves, were the most organized and therefore the most influential of the baseball clubs. For more than ten years, they virtually ruled baseball;

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when they changed their rules, other clubs followed.

Adams made a major contribution to the game when he increased the number of fielders from eight to nine by adding a "short fielder"—himself—to play in the shallow outfield. His original goal had not been to convert potential singles into groundouts, but to use the position to relay throws from the outfield to the infield. Then, when the balls became harder by being wound more tightly, they could be both hit and thrown farther. And so Adams, the short fielder, moved closer to the infield, and eventually became what we now recognize as the shortstop. This new player pushed the second baseman toward first base into his present position.

In fact, the person winding all the baseballs was Adams himself. "We had a great deal of trouble in getting balls made," he said, "and for six or seven years I made all the balls myself, not only for our club but for other clubs when they were organized. I went all over New York to find someone who would undertake this work, but no one could be induced to try it for love or money. Finally, I found a Scotch saddler who was able to show me a good way to cover the balls with horsehide, such as was used for whiplashes. I used to make the stuffing out of three or four ounces of rubber cuttings, wound with yarn and then covered with the leather."

During his second term as Knickerbocker president, from 1856 to 1858, Adams was elected presiding officer of the first convention of the 12 organized baseball clubs, which was held in a New York hotel in 1857. He also chaired the rules committee and drafted the first thorough revision of the Knickerbockers' original bylaws. He is credited with several important rule changes at that time.

The only official stipulation of the baseball diamond's dimensions, for example, required that the infield diagonal between home and second base measure "42 paces equidistant." Adams was the first to fix the distance between bases at 90 feet, where it remains today. The distance from home plate to the pitcher's base was set at 45 feet.

Adams also proposed changing the winner of the game to be the team that led after seven innings, rather than the first team to score 21 runs, as it had been previously. The number of innings was later changed to nine.

As the chair of the Committee on Rules and Regulations, Adams also supported the "fly game," which required a fly ball to be caught in the air—not, as the original regulation stated, on the first bounce—in order to count as an out. Ultimately his view prevailed.

photo courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York

By the time Doc Adams retired from the Knickerbockers in 1862, the team had become thoroughly professionalized. Pictured above is a Knickerbocker posing for a team photo taken in 1864.

The following year, a second convention was held, with 22 clubs represented. They agreed to form the National Association of Base Ball Players, even though the teams were all from New York City. The clubs also agreed that players should be neither compensated for playing nor allowed to bet on games in which they played.

In 1861, Adams married Cornelia Cook. He later called his marriage "the crowning achievement of my life." In addition to having two daughters, they had two sons, with whom Adams played baseball in the backyard into his seventies.

In 1862, after 16 years with the club, including 12 as an officer, Adams retired from the Knickerbockers. The club named him, in the classical idiom of the time, the "Nestor of Ball Players," recalling the king of Pylos, who served as counselor to the Greeks at Troy. The Knickerbocker Club itself disbanded just ten years later, after baseball had become thoroughly professionalized.

In 1865, Doc Adams retired from medical practice for health reasons. Nonetheless, he lived for 34 more years, remaining active in banking in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and then moving in 1888 to New Haven, where he died in 1899.

Baseball historians agree in recognizing the contributions Doc Adams made to the game: Fred Ivor-Campbell calls him "the Nurturing Father of Baseball," while John Thorn calls him the "first among the Fathers of Baseball."

And when Doc Adams left the Knickerbockers, it was not, he said, "before thousands were present to witness matches and any number of outside players [were] standing ready to take a hand on regular playing days. We pioneers never expected to see the game so universal as it has...become."

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The author wishes to thank the following for their help in researching this article: John R. Husman, John Thorn, and Kenneth Shouler, who also supplied the portrait of Doc Adams.

Six of the original Knickerbockers sit for a daguerreotypist in 1846. Doc Adams is in the center of the front row. Alexander Jay Cartwright, who worked with Doc Adams in refining the rules of baseball, is in the center of the back row. Cartwright, the owner of a book and stationery store, had once been a volunteer fireman with the Knickerbocker Engine Company.

daguerreotype courtesy of Transcendental Graphics

TREATING THE KNICKERBOCKERS

When Daniel Lucius "Doc" Adams, HMS Class of 1838 and a true baseball immortal, retired from his medical practice in 1865, what sort of practice was he quitting? And what kind of care would he have offered his injured New York Knickerbocker teammates in the mid-nineteenth century?

At the time Adams left medicine, the rules of medical play were in flux. There were competing teams—such as the Thomsonians, homeopaths, and osteopaths—and it was not clear whether the players on the side of "regular" medicine, which evolved into today's scientific medicine, were winning. Indeed, apart from their social status, there was little to distinguish the methods of the "regular" doctors from those of their competitors.

In regular medicine, a great shift in practice was taking place, largely in the direction of abandoning the "heroic" methods of the preceding century and a half—bleeding, purging, blistering, and the use of toxic chemicals—in favor of milder remedies.

As yet, there was little in the way of "evidence-based" medicine; the rules of evidence were just beginning to be hammered out. But ideas about the body were changing as Claude Bernard's lessons about the internal milieu became more familiar. The belief that bodily ills resulted from fluxes—unpredictable increases or depletion of vital substances, much influenced by the environment—had been the basis of much medical practice. Recognition that many aspects of the body were self-regulating undermined efforts to offset these fluxes.

Actual practice of the period, such as that of physician Henry Taylor, was a mix of old-fashioned, aggressive remedies; innocuous herbal treatments; and a modicum of what appears now, as it did then, to be good sense. A few years after Adams's retirement, Taylor provided insight into the medical practices of that era when he published *Our Family Doctor and General Receipt Book: A Complete and Reliable Guide to the Mysteries of Health, of the Art of Good and Inexpensive Living, and of Household Economy Generally* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1869).

Today's clinicians would be comfortable with Taylor's comments on tobacco and his common-sense advocacy of well-lit reading areas, frequent bathing, and exercise. In a foreshadowing of today's headlines, Taylor regarded "tobacco as one of the greatest enemies of the human family, and indeed of all life; hence no animal but man will touch it."

Although there was no sports medicine at that time, if one of Adams's Knickerbocker teammates were to complain of lumbago, "chronic rheumatism in the lumbar region," Taylor writes that, "blisters have been strongly recommended, and may often be used with advantage; as may also the external use of turpentine and the essential oil of sassafras, mixed with guaiacum [a resin from Haitian trees]. If these fail, the part may be bathed with the tincture of capsicum, [tabasco peppers], or Cayenne pepper." The same remedy, using a derivative of hot pepper now termed "capsaicin," has been recently revived to treat some kinds of chronic pain.

If a baseball player were to develop muscle cramps, one treatment option was a nightly dose of a pill composed of half a grain of opium, six grains of rhubarb, and six grains of prepared chalk. "Ten grains of the rust of steel should also be given every morning and noon," Taylor wrote.

Treatment of sprains, baseball-induced or otherwise, included "cold lotions, such as are composed of three parts of water, one part of spirits of wine, and one part of laudanum [opium tincture]. The part also should be supported with a moderately tight bandage, and perfect rest allowed the limb, if possible." Indeed, this therapy sounds rather modern until Taylor continues that "it is always proper to apply leeches" to sprains, an intervention he also recommends for bruises.

Thus Adams's advice to his teammates, according to Taylor, was likely to be consistent in some respects with current treatments—advocating frequent bathing and exercise, prohibiting tobacco, and treating sprains with cold, rest, and compression. Such advice calls to mind the words of another baseball great, Yogi Berra: it's "déjà vu all over again."

James S. Distelhorst '79