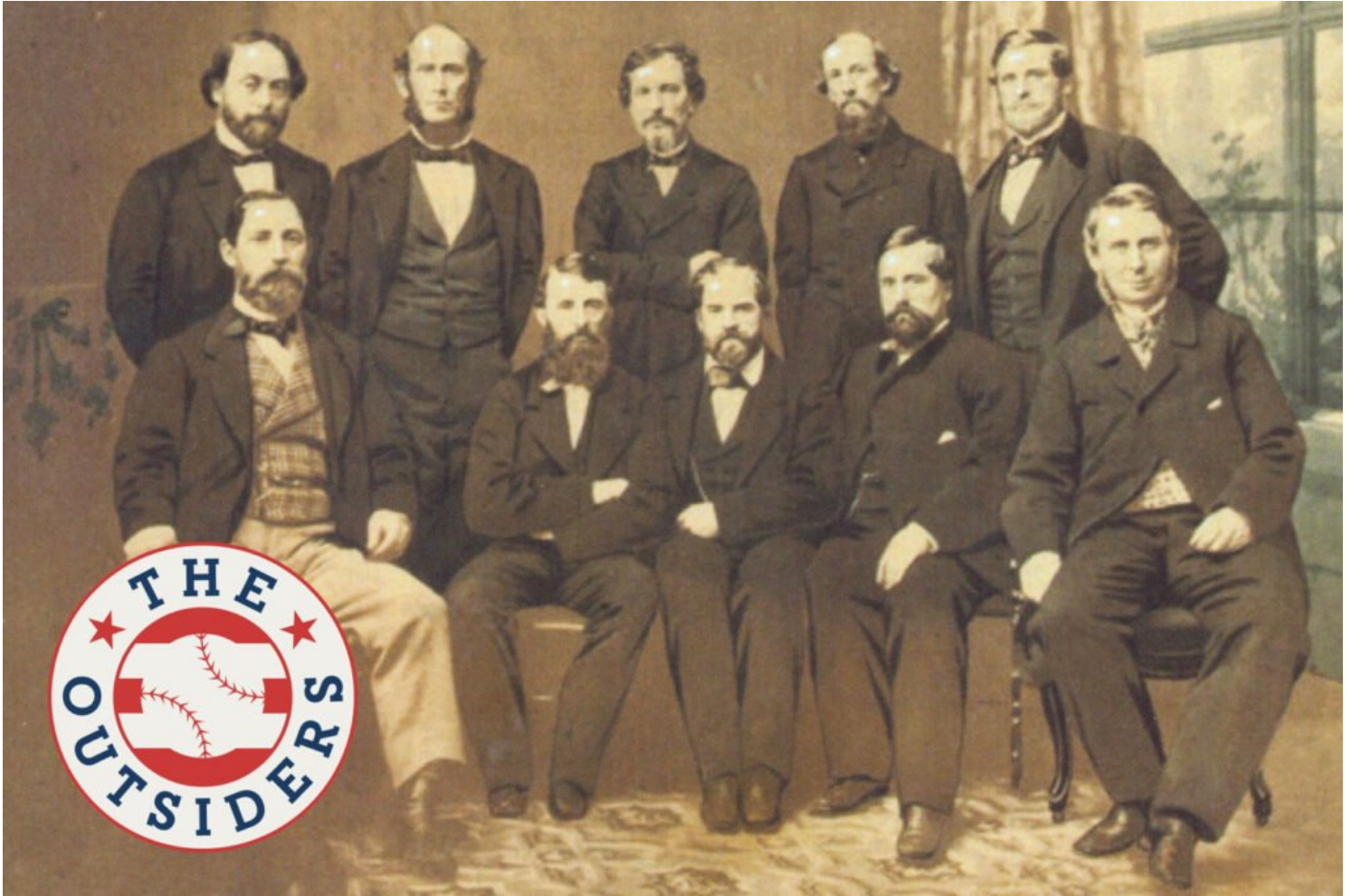


The Outsiders: No. 28, Doc Adams



By Joe Posnanski (/author/joe-posnanski/) 6h ago

56

This offseason, leading right up to the 2021 Baseball Hall of Fame announcement, we're counting down the 100 greatest eligible players (<https://theathletic.com/2202108/2020/11/25/the-outsiders-hall-of-fame-top-100/>) not in the Hall of Fame and ranking them in the order in which I would vote them in. Each player will receive a Hall of Fame plaque based on the pithy ones that the Hall used to use back at the start. We continue our essay series with No. 28, Doc Adams.

Daniel Lucius (Doc) Adams
New York Knickerbockers, 1845–1861

The closest thing that baseball has to a true father, Doc was the first shortstop in the history of the game. He played a critical role in setting the bases 90 feet apart, headed the convention that solidified baseball as a nine-player, nine-inning game and was an evangelist for removing the rule that allowed balls caught on one bounce to be considered outs.

In general, this list focuses on the greatest baseball players — and Doc Adams was surely not a great baseball player. There is no record of him even playing the game we might now consider baseball until he was 30 years old. No scouting reports of Doc's talents survive, and I imagine the good doctor would probably be grateful for that.

But for a game that has spent so much time mythologizing itself and its origin story, it is basically impossible to believe that the man who most directly connects to that origin is not in the Hall of Fame.

Let's review: The Baseball Hall of Fame is in Cooperstown because of an utterly bizarre, absurd and made-up story of the game being invented there in 1839 by a Civil War major general named Abner Doubleday. A few years ago, you might remember, former commissioner Bud Selig wrote a letter to an autograph collector named Ron Keurajian that went as follows:

“As a student of history, I know there is a great debate whether Abner Doubleday or Alexander Cartwright really founded the game of baseball. From all of the historians which I have spoken with, I really believe that Abner Doubleday is the ‘father of baseball.’ I know there are some historians who would dispute this though.”

People wrote it at the time, yes, but in general, I don't think it got nearly enough play that the commissioner of baseball claimed the Earth is flat. There is no evidence that Abner Doubleday ever even played or thought about baseball in his entire life, and it would have been tough for him to invent it in Cooperstown in 1839 since he was inconveniently at West Point at the time.

But it was a pleasant myth that a vast majority of people chose to believe for a while because it gave baseball an All-American birth — who better to invent than the man who fired the first shot in defense of Fort Sumter in the Civil War — and because Cooperstown is such a lovely village.

As the Doubleday nonsense grew less and less defensible — except, apparently, to Bud Selig — a new man was elevated to the role of “Father of Modern Base Ball.” Those words, in fact, are on his plaque in the Baseball Hall of Fame. That man is Alexander Cartwright, and that plaque reads like so:

Set bases 90 feet apart. Established 9 innings as a game and 9 players as a team. Organized the Knickerbocker Baseball Club of N.Y. in 1845. Carried baseball to Pacific Coast and Hawaii in pioneer days.

We now know, thanks to the wonderful research of baseball’s official history by John Thorn and others, that most of the key facts on Cartwright’s plaque are not true either. Cartwright, at least, has a direct connection to baseball, which makes him a titanic improvement over Doubleday. He was a founding member of the New York Knickerbockers, who did play a major role in the evolution of baseball. And it does seem likely that Cartwright was the critical voice in moving the game from a square field to a diamond. So there’s something here.

But he was not behind setting the bases 90 feet apart or establishing nine innings and nine players as the setup of baseball. When he left for California in 1849 to be part of the gold rush, the bases were not 90 feet apart but, instead, “42 paces,” which Thorn believes to be closer to 74 feet apart. Also, the game was still being played with any number of players and any number of innings. Cartwright was in Hawaii in 1857 when those rules were codified.

The basic trouble is that, though it’s tempting to think so, baseball was simply not invented by one person. It was a game that evolved, step by step, from rounders and cricket and various town ball games played throughout the young country. No one person emerged from this morass with two stone tablets and announced, “The game shall be played with nine players and it shall last nine innings and the bases shall be 90 feet apart and a manager shall keep a man named Blake Snell in the game if he is dominating opposing batters.”

But if there is one person who comes closest to bringing forward the modern game, it would be Doc Adams.

He was called “Doc” because he was, in fact, a doctor. He graduated from Yale, got his medical degree from Harvard, and practiced medicine for a few years before he moved to New York and followed his destiny into baseball history. He had long been fascinated by ball games

going back to his days in college — baseball, town ball, one-eyed cat, you name it. In September 1845, Alexander Cartwright and others founded the Knickerbockers, who used to play ball on the famed Elysian Fields in Hoboken, N.J.

“They went into it just for exercise and enjoyment,” he told *The Sporting News* in 1896. “And I think they used to get a good deal more solid fun out of it than the players in the big games do nowadays.”

Adams joined the Knicks about a month after they were founded, and he was a pivotal member of the Knicks from the start — he became president of the club in his first year. As a player, he was a left-handed batter and had enough power that, he said, “sometimes I used to get the ball into the (Hudson) river.” As team president, he actually made the baseballs out of yarn, rubber and horsehide leather, and he personally supervised the turning of the bats. By all accounts, everybody liked Doc.

The Knicks were hardly a success from the start; he recalled there were times he would go to Hoboken for practice and see just two or three other players had shown up. But slowly the team began drawing more and more players, and in time they began drawing curious fans too.

Thorn believes it was 1849 or 1850 when Adams invented the shortstop position. “It had formerly been left uncovered,” Adams would write of the spot. Apparently, he went to shortstop because it was the best way for him to cut off outfield throws. I love that the shortstop position was basically invented by a New York doctor who just happened to wander out to the spot because outfielders couldn’t throw the ball all the way to the infield.

Adams was a mainstay on the Knickerbockers, the team president more often than not, and perhaps the most enthusiastic baseball player in the country. He was selected as the chairman of the rules committee of 1857. “The distance between bases,” he would say, “I fixed at 30 yards.” There’s your magical 90 feet between the bases.

And that committee, in addition to the distance between the bases, also set the other core rules that Cartwright got credit for — nine innings and nine players. As mentioned, Cartwright was in Hawaii at the time. And Adams was the chairman of the committee.

Baseball was not invented by Doc Adams, of course. It was not invented by anybody. But if the Hall of Fame is about honoring those people who gave us this great game of baseball — and it very much is — then Doc is a pretty big oversight.

(Photo of Doc Adams, second from left, front row, courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

Joe Posnanski (</author/joe-posnanski/>) is a Senior Writer at The Athletic. He has been named national sportswriter of the year by five different organizations and has won two Emmys as part of NBC's digital Olympics coverage. He is the author of five books including "The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini," released in October of 2019.



56 COMMENTS

Add a comment...

Jack W. 6h ago

Great article, Joe (as usual). Finally know why they call it shortstop



16



Richard H. 5h ago

Adams has been getting a lot of play for modern reasons, but I think the better candidate is William Wheaton. He drafted the rules that were the immediate predecessor to the 1845 Knickerbocker rules, then was a founding member of the Knicks and, along with William Tucker, drafted their rules. Adams joined the Knickerbockers about a month later. The stuff we talk about with him were later developments.

Speaking of which, much of this was codifying developments that had already happened. Nine players were added to the rules in 1857, but had been the standard for games between clubs throughout the decade. The size of the diamond is something of an open question. The 1845 rules set it with the diagonals (not the base paths) at 42 "paces." So what is a pace? There are three candidates. 2.5 feet was a dictionary definition of the time. That is where John Thorn's 72 foot base paths comes from. Take it as 3 feet and you have nearly exactly the modern diamond. The third (and my favored) option is that it was a literal pace. Some guy laid out the bases by actually pacing across the diagonal. But as clubs tended to use the same spot over and over, they would just put the bases in their usual spots. By 1857 some clubs favored the larger size. One club in its published rules stated the diagonal as 42 "paces or yards." So the 90 foot paths were out there, with the 1857 convention adopting this as standard. How much Adams had to do with that is not clear.

Finally, "It was a game that evolved, step by step, from rounders and cricket and various town ball games played throughout the young country." This is not good. Baseball is only indirectly related to cricket, and certainly did not evolve from it. Rounders was an English name for the same game as baseball. You can find writers into the 1860s who describe them this way. Town ball was an American regional dialectal term for, again, the same game. The oldest name for baseball is "base ball," coming from the mid-18th century. Modern baseball is the direct descendant of a specific version developed in New York City for organized adult play, as codified in the 1845 Knickerbocker rules. These had several unique features: three-out innings, foul territory, and tagging the runner rather than throwing the ball at him.

These all predate Adams's involvement. He was important in the later development of a version that had already been established.

 20 



Eric S. 2h ago

@Richard H. WIL WHEE-TONNN!!!

 1 

Brian G. 2h ago

@Eric S. Shut up, Wesley.

 5 

Matthew K. 2h ago

@Richard H. oh man, I had to break out the Pythagorean Theorem to check the distances on the bases! Gotta say I hadn't used it since college!

Jimbob W. 1h ago

Wheaton is probably 27



Thomas F. 5h ago

Works for me, but glad HOF is in Cooperstown, if only by historical fraud.



11



Preston T. 4h ago

@Thomas F. Agree. We lucked out on location.



2



Brian G. 4h ago

The Halls of Fame for Tennis, Basketball, Baseball, Football, and Hockey can be visited on consecutive days by simply gassing up the car for a small road trip. Maybe even a couple others...



3



John P. 3h ago

The horse racing and boxing halls of fame are also within driving distance of Cooperstown (Saratoga Springs and Canastota, respectively).



3



Nathan J. 3h ago

@Brian G. The Hockey HOF is excellent



2



Max N. 2h ago

You used to be able to add the US Soccer Hall of Fame; it was very close to Cooperstown in Oneonta. Oneonta was home to two of the best soccer colleges years ago, Oneonta State and Hartwick. It's now in Frisco, TX for some reason.



Ray C. 33m ago

@Max N. The Hamburger Hall of Fame was within a short drive from Cooperstown when I visited (in the 80's?). Unfortunately, their hamburgers were the Tom Yawkey of burgers, not the Babe Ruths.



Nathan J. 5h ago

Really enjoyed the article.

But does a person like Adams really need to be 'elected' to the HOF? I mean seriously, if the historical record is clear about the contribution, and the HOF is a museum then just make an announcement that the individual is being recognized for his contribution to the game. Think it's kind of silly to ask modern electors to sift through accounts which frankly some of them either won't grasp or care about (being blunt here).

Just a thought



Richard H. 2h ago

@Nathan J. The Hall of Fame is actually three institutions under one roof: The room with the plaques, the museum, and the research library. Four, if you count the gift shop. When we talk about someone being elected to the Hall, we mean the room with the plaques. Do we care? Personally, I find the room with the plaques the least interesting of the three, and frankly a bit absurd with its faux-classical temple architecture and bronze effigies with dubious information written on them, fathers bringing their sons to stand in religious awe. But that's just me. Clearly lots of people do care about it.



Paul C. 5h ago

Well argued, counsellor.



Preston R. 4h ago

A New York team playing their games in New Jersey? Perish the thought!



10



Preston T. 4h ago

This upcoming era election has two completely obvious candidates: Adams and Bill Dahlen. They can't possibly screw this up, can they? Luckily, there tends to be a lot more expertise than cronyism on the old-timer committee, so I'm not as dubious as I could be. Would be great to see Jack Glasscock in there as well (on merit, you children), but we've never seen three elected from one veterans vote, so it would be tough.



3



Ron W. 4h ago

The fact Selig argued for the Doubleday case is infuriating. Thorn has been MLB's official historian for almost a decade and was known as a baseball historian years before that. Couldn't have Selig picked up the phone to call Thorn before making an obviously untrue statement?

By the way, Thorn's book about the early history of baseball, "Baseball in the Garden of Eden," is a joy to read: amzn.to/386BwOD



7



Richard H. 2h ago

@Ron W. It's even worse than that. If you look at the best baseball historians (as contrasted with journalists telling stories) they never have bought into the Doubleday story. Robert W. Henderson and Harold Seymour stand out here. More subtly, they also don't buy into the alternative Cartwright version, when it comes to inventing the game, as contrasted with founding the Knickerbockers (which is usually exaggerated, but has a solid kernel of truth to it).





1



Brad L. 4h ago

Don't be too hard on Selig. He's about as dense as a brick. Is his HoF plaque have an expression of cluelessness? If not, it should.

 10 

David F. 4h ago

@Brad L. Yep, yep, and yep.

Rick P. 2h ago

@Brad L. If Bonds and Clemens can't get in the HOF, Selig shouldn't be there either.

 6 

Ken M. 45m ago

@Brad L. If the HOF had any sense of humor, it would use the image of Selig shrugging during the All-Star Game tie.

Nathaniel S. 4h ago

I think, after reading your piece, that I would have very much enjoyed having a beer with Doc.

 3 

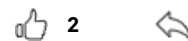
Jackson G. 4h ago

The shadow list makes its return – kind of disappointed that I didn't swap Lofton with today's player but...

28. Reggie Smith (1966-1982) – Smith could do it all – he got on-base, he hit for power, he played good defense, he had speed on the base paths, he played for winning teams. As Joe said yesterday, in 1978 Don Sutton said that Smith was a better player than Steve Garvey which in part led to a fight between Sutton and Garvey. I hope Sutton won the fight, because he was 100% right.

Let's break it down. Steve Garvey was in the midst of what I'd say was his best season in 1978, but just looking at offensive numbers, I'd say that Smith was clearly better that year, as well as 1973, 1974, and 1977. He was about as good in 1969, 1972, and 1975. And he was much more valuable defensively. Really, the only advantages Garvey had over Smith were a slightly better batting average (not that Smith was a slouch in that regard) and a much better publicist.

Smith's route to the Hall of Fame at this point is through the Modern Baseball Era Committee – they seem to be in an electing mood, as they elected Ted Simmons last year, and gave decent support to four other players, but Smith wasn't even on the ballot. Still, Simmons getting elected and Lou Whitaker getting on the ballot shows there is a path for guys who got no support from the BBWAA.



Victor L. 4h ago

Steve Garvey is not in the HOF.



Darrell H. 2h ago

@Jackson G.

You could definitely debate who was better between Garvey and Smith between 1974 to 1980, with a few seasons possibly able to go either way, especially as a hitter. That was Garvey's peak and why he was so highly regarded at the time.



Darren S. 2h ago

@Victor L. Mentioned this in the comments on the Garvey article, but not only was Smith a better player than Garvey, several other 70s Dodgers have an argument as well:

Cey - 53.8 WAR

Lopes - 42.4 WAR

Garvey - 38.1 WAR

Garvey - 36.1 WAR
Baker - 37.0 WAR

Garvey was a good player, just not great. He also had one other advantage over Smith that you didn't mention....



Darrell H. 1h ago

@Darren S.

My comment was between 1974 and 1980, Garvey was arguably better than Smith, especially because Smith often didn't play due to injuries. There's something to be said for being there.

As for the players you mentioned, again, I gave a specific time period. The only player you might be able to argue with at that time was Lopes. I like the speed game as I think used properly, it really helps a team.

I think Lopes never got his credit due as a player, and I think the only mention of him in this series will be between you and I in the comments.



Josh R. 32m ago

@Darren S. When Garvey was playing, I swear everyone thought he was a future Hall of Famer. Very clear memory for me.



David F. 4h ago

Great stuff, thanks.



Henry W. 4h ago

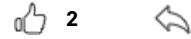
Just like the mainstream media to steal the honors of inventing baseball from a military man. No, it has to go to some Ivy League intellectual without even a degree in sports management. Outrage!





Henry W. 3h ago

Anyway, great article. Never knew about Doc Adams. Sounds truly deserving of Hall of Fame honors.



Edward R. 3h ago

Ok. What in the hell is one eyed cat ball? World wants to know



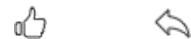
Keith M. 2h ago

@Edward R. A corruption of "one old cat", which features a pitcher, a hitter, and any available fielders. We called it "Indian ball" when I was a kid in the 1960s.



Edward R. 1h ago

Thanks Keith, had no idea



David N. 1h ago

Was that what we used to call "work ups"? Guys rotating through positions until it was their turn to hit?



Michael W. 1h ago

@Edward R. It ain't the one "peepin' through the sea food store". 😊
Shake, rattle and roll.





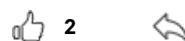
Murray S. 3h ago

Great history—thanks!



JOHN B. 3h ago

You left out the fact that there weren't any fences to keep the ball in the park so outfielders had to play very deep therefore throwing the ball to the infield could be quite a task



Clifford O. 1h ago

@JOHN B. How far did a batted ball travel those days before it hit the ground? They seldom used more than one ball during a game in early days so it got "punky." Bats were longer and heavier, so bat speed was slower, Pitches were underhand and slower without the spin batters get today. You weren't seeing 475-foot launch angle shots.



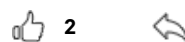
Mark H. 3h ago

Another gem. And a nice shout out for John Thorn, who has done great work.



Richard S. 3h ago

@Mark H. Let's put John Thorn in the HoF!



Darrell H. 3h ago

Since nobody has mentioned it yet, let me be the one. I thought this was supposed to be "players" not in the Hall of Fame that perhaps should be over some that are. Or at least could have made the top 100

over others that did.

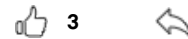
I think this history lesson belongs in a different category.



David N. 3h ago

“And I think they used to get a good deal more solid fun out of it than the players in the big games do nowadays.”

-- his authorship of other innovations may be in dispute, but this seems to be pretty good evidence in support of Doc being baseball's very first Grumpy Old Codger.



Ian G. 3h ago

Next you'll tell me Doc Graham was a myth and Joe Jackson never walked out of a cornfield! :)



Byron M. 2h ago

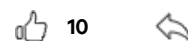
"And I think they used to get a good deal more solid fun out of it than the players in the big games do nowadays.”

Never change, baseball. Never change.



Mark S. 2h ago

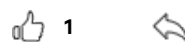
The Blake Snell reference: delightful.



Darren S. 2h ago

I'm confused about how he invented the SS position. Did he add himself as an additional fielder or did he

reposition himself from the outfield or somewhere else?



Thaddeus S. 1h ago

@Darren S.

Could this be considered the first "shift"?



Mike M. 2h ago

Great article as always Joe. And finally, a Knick that was under publicized.



Frank L. 2h ago

Great article! Enjoying this series.



Rich C. 2h ago

Great to read



Samuel C. 1h ago

Joe-A bit off the beaten path, but I would suggest a wonderful sidebar to this series are the players who were on the way to HOF careers when some distinct event interrupted their career. There are some obvious events (the World Wars are the first thing to come to mind), and most baseball fans know of men like Williams and Feller and DiMaggio and Greenberg who came back but lost years in service, I think it would be nice to add in players like Cecil Travis (Washington) who were on the track that could be HOF worthy but were not the same afterward. Travis-for instance-was a high BA shortstop before the war but suffered frostbite during the Battle of the Bulge and just wasn't the same player on his return.



Ray C. 34m ago

The Hamburger Hall of Fame was within a short drive from Cooperstown when I visited (in the 80's?). Unfortunately, their hamburgers were the Tom Yawkey of burgers, not the Babe Ruths.



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