

Baseball Fever: West Newbury's Golden Days on the Diamond

Between the late 1860s and the 1890s, baseball [mania](#) enthralled New England, including West Newbury. Town fans had much to brag about: in the 1860s-70s the West Newbury Rocket Club punched above their weight, trouncing teams from much larger cities and towns. They “played with most of the crack nines in New England [but were never defeated](#).”

It is said that the [first recorded baseball game](#) in America occurred in Hoboken, NJ in 1846. After the Civil War, the game became “[more popular than ever](#).” By 1867 the [Newburyport Daily Herald](#) carried the observation that children in the street had “caught the infection of baseball” so that “[w]indows, hats and noses are in danger.” In the same year, West Newbury raconteur [Ben Perley Poore](#) entertained an after dinner crowd with the claim that the Puritans may have “abolished Christmas dinners, but they ... [played base ball on feast days](#).”

On April 6, 1871, the [Boston Red Stockings](#) played their first game. The Boston team took several players, the name—as well as the red socks—from the [Cincinnati Red Stockings](#), whose club became the first professional team in 1869. The new professional team in Boston had an amplifying effect here. Within a month of the Red Stockings’ first appearance, [J. Tappan & Co.](#) on Newburyport’s Market Square was advertising baseballs, bats, shoes, spikes &c.—“Also, Agent for the Famous Red Stocking [Dead Red](#) Balls.”

Baseball was blood sport in its early days. An [essay in 1879](#) began, “Now approaches the season of smashed fingers, slashed noses and mashed eyes.” The author rued rules changes from the good old days when a fielded ball was not “place[d] quietly on the base, but was hurl[ed] with unerring precision at the runner and knock[ed] two dollars’ worth of breath out of his body.” Another [1885 piece](#) along these lines fondly remembered the times before catchers used an inflatable rubber apron as protection. A catcher might be hit in the “pit of the stomach, and after taking a vacant, blasé look at the surrounding country, proceed[] to gradually and softly curl up like the petal of a tiger lily, until he looked like a sleeping caterpillar.”

Notwithstanding the hazards, everybody played, usually at [Griffin’s Field](#), now the [site of the Carr Post](#). Hundreds attended, paying 10 and later 15¢ at the gate. [In 1875](#) the “Hornplebs” combmakers lost to the “Leather Bellies” shoemakers, 23-12. In 1889, the

West Newbury Messenger reported that the Town doctor broke his arm while pitching. The Town’s Indian Hill Council beat the Haverhill Enterprise nonetheless.

Women did [follow baseball](#) (“many of them have acquired such proficiency as to keep score in the most approved method”) and some played. Although no record of a women’s team has been found for West Newbury, a female club was noted in [Newburyport in 1884](#). The report failed to describe the players’ attire—a significant question considering the unsuitability of long skirts and corsets for rounding bases and fielding. In 1895, the [athletically talented](#) Boston [Bloomer Girls](#), a touring women’s exhibition team, was [banned in Duluth](#) because the mayor disapproved of women wearing trousers in public.

At various times between the late 1860s and the mid 1890s, West Newbury was represented by the [Ironsides](#), the [Independents](#), the [Rockets](#), and the [Blues](#). None was more impressive than the Rockets. Their [undefeated](#) five-game season in 1868 included a game with the Riverside Club of South Amesbury, “Rocket making 117, Riverside 22—Riverside minus 95.” In [1870](#) they enjoyed an eleven-game undefeated season, playing throughout the North Shore.

The most celebrated baseball game in West Newbury took place on [June 11, 1894](#), when the Blues (called in [1893](#) “as good an amateur ball team as can be found in the state”) met the “old Rockets who had not tossed a ball for 22 years.” It was a festive event: the West Newbury Cadet Band entertained the crowd. Play started at 3:30 with a two-base hit for the Rockets. In the second inning, “the Rockets began to forge ahead a little, but as several of their number ha[d] a tendency to embonpoint they soon got fagged out running bases, and the Blues gained steadily till the end of the sixth inning, when the game was called, the score then standing 28 to 18 in favor of the Blues.” Led by the band, the teams marched to G.A.R. Hall at Post Office Square. An oyster stew supper ensued. “It was a gala day for West Newbury and most of the citizens turned out to see the game and listen to the music.”

By [1895](#), West Newbury no longer had a home team. The best of the Blues had dispersed to other clubs. [Dr. Orin Warren](#), who intended to use the land for Carr Post, owned Griffin’s Field by then. He agreed to “one good game” for the year there on September 14, 1895.

NEWBURYPORT HERALD.

BASE BALL.

Some discensolate base ballist has written the following parody of Longfellow's "Excelsior:"

The noon day sun was pouring down
Upon a meadow sere and brown,
Where stood a youth with bat on high,
Loud to his comrades rang the cry,
"Base ball!"

He hopes to win himself a name,
By playing soon a "great match game;"
For him 'twill be the greatest fun
To hear the words "Live Oaks have won,"
"Base ball!"

His brow was bumped, his eye was black,
His coat was torn from off his back;
But still, like battered bugle, rang
The accents of that swollen tongue,
"Base ball!"

Around the field he saw the light
Of friendly faces beaming bright,
Just by his head a ball has flown,
And from his lips escapes a groan,
"Base ball!"

"Now stop the game," the old man said,
"The 'second base' has smashed his head,
The 'pitcher,' too, has sprained his wrist,
The 'umpire's' brain is in a mist,"
"Base ball!"

"Oh, drop that bat!" the maiden said,
"And make a long 'home run' instead,"
A "hot ball" hit him in the eye,
But still he answered with a sigh,
"Base ball!"

"Beware! you'll soon be 'out on foul!'"
This was the fielder's awful howl;
But still there echoed in his ear,
In that deep voice, so thick and queer,
"Base ball!"

"Used up," he sinks upon the ground,
While pitying comrades gather round,
And in the awful throes of death,
He murmured, with his latest breath,
"Base ball!"

There, on the cold earth, drear and gray,
To perfect jelly-smashed, he lay,
While o'er the autumn fields afar
Was heard the victor's loud buzza,
"Base ball!"



Earliest known photo of baseball being played
Litchfield County, CT 8/10/1869

Source: Wikimedia.org

Source:

7/10/1868

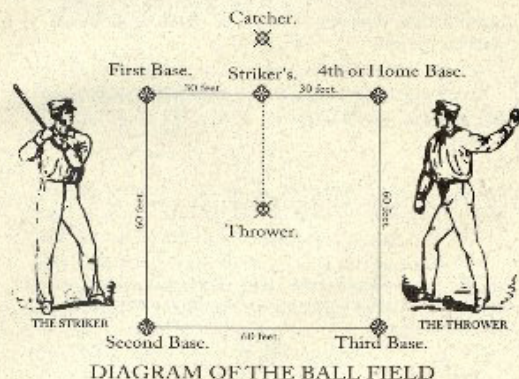
Newburyport Daily Herald

Source:

Baseball-Almanac.com

THE RULES OF THE MASSACHUSETTS GAME (TOWN BALL)

The Rules & Regulations
Governing The Game Of Base Ball
As Adopted By
The Massachusetts Association
Of Base Ball Players
At Dedham, May 13, 1858.



HORACE N. NOYES.

We print in this issue the picture of Horace N. Noyes, a promising young pitcher of West Newbury and of which a sketch appeared in the MESSENGER a week ago.

Horace Noyes, ace pitcher for
the West Newbury Blues

Source: 11/18/1893

West Newbury Messenger

G.A.R. Library Historical Collection