

The Sporting Press: Writing About Baseball in the 1830s-1870s

The earliest American publication to write about sports was probably **Spirit of the Times**, which first was published in 1831, by William Trotter Porter (1809-1858). Porter, who also owned **American Turf Register**, which he acquired in 1839, mostly focused on sports that were popular with upper class men (the sub-title of his publication was “The American Gentleman’s Newspaper”). His magazine became known for its coverage of horse racing, rowing, and yachting; but by the early 1850s Porter began to cover some baseball (or base ball, as it was then written), while also covering cricket—this sport was still very popular in the United States prior to the Civil War. By the late 1850s, more readers wanted to know about baseball than cricket, and that may in part be due to the attention Porter’s magazine gave it. Some media historians have credited him with printing the first box scores and even calling baseball the “national game.”

Another early publication was **Turf, Field, and Farm**, which debuted in 1865. Its publisher was a Civil War veteran named Sanders D. Bruce (1825-1902), and its focus was mainly on horse racing and boxing—then called "prize fighting." In the late 1860s, Bruce’s publication was covering baseball sporadically, while also reporting on cricket. Perhaps the earliest publication that included a lot of baseball coverage was the **New York Clipper**, a newspaper devoted to covering entertainment, including the theater and various kinds of sporting events. The Clipper debuted in 1853, published by Frank Queen (1823-1882). Henry Chadwick wrote for it sometimes; but as baseball historian John Thorn has pointed out Chadwick was not the first reporter the Clipper assigned to cover baseball—it was probably William H. Bray. Unfortunately for researchers, the custom in that era was to rarely allow a writer to have a by-line; as a result, we do not know much about who wrote the stories or provided the summaries of the games in the Clipper or in many other publications of that time. (As for Chadwick, he briefly tried to publish a newspaper devoted exclusively to baseball: **Ball Players Chronicle** debuted in 1867, but it did not last very long.)

We can also find a few other short-lived publications of that period, including the **New England Base Ballist**, published in Boston in 1868. However, most of the major titles that modern readers might know, like the **Sporting News**, came along much later (published by Charles Spink, the Sporting News debuted in 1886; before that, Francis C. Richter debuted a sports publication called **Sporting Life** in 1883, and it often covered baseball.)

There is no evidence that newspapers of the 1850s or 1860s had a sports page. Articles about the recent games could appear almost anywhere in a typical paper. But there wasn't anything like a sports page (or sporting page, as it would have been called back then) until perhaps the 1880s. Meanwhile, the arrival and expansion of the telegraph was a HUGE help to sporting publications-- once there were telegraph wires from coast to coast (or at least in most major cities), newspapers and magazines could provide up to date scores and game summaries. We begin to see an expansion of coverage after the Civil War, and the availability of telegraphed reports was one big part of that expansion, as was improvements in railroad travel, which made it easier for teams to get from one place to another more quickly.

QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS:

Little is known about the early baseball writers. Can we find out more about any by-lined reporters, or get some idea of who these early writers might have been?

I have provided the names of some of the major publications that wrote about baseball during that era—but were there any others, including local publications?

What are the similarities and differences between the American sporting press and the British sporting press of that era?

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