

# Notes on the Play-Testing of Early Base Ball Rule Modifications

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Through the amateur era, most rules changes were made without playtesting. The difficulty often was getting players and umpires to actually follow the formal rules, so many changes were designed to encourage the application of existing principles. This is particularly true with called strikes and balls.

The notable exceptions in experimental rules were the early fly games, often but not exclusively between the Knickerbockers and the Excelsiors. These were in a sense experimental, but in a larger sense they were demonstration games for the broader baseball fraternity's benefit.

The next such was Chadwick's ten-men ten-inning game. His campaign for this reached its climax in the mid-1870s but it dated back a decade earlier (and didn't complete die out for some years longer). The Knickerbockers and Excelsiors (again) played ten-men matches together through the late 1860s, and some of the NA clubs did the same in the early-mid- 1870s.

Once you hit the NL era Harry Wright emerged as the leading rules guy, and he often used games late in the season as some combination of tests and demonstrations. Here is one, regarding the elimination of fair-fouls:

[Hartford vs. Boston 10/28/1876] In this game Nichols pitched for the Bostons, and a rule, which is proposed to adopt next year, will be in vogue. This rule provides that all hit balls which go out of the diamond between home and third and home and first shall be called fouls, and no foul bound shall be out. Foul flies will be out when caught. This will do away with the provoking fair-foul business, and greatly relieve the umpire. New York Sunday Mercury October 19, 1876

There was a series of games between Boston and Chicago in 1878 testing two ideas: moving the pitcher back six feet (to 51 feet) and reducing the number of balls for a walk from nine to six:

[reporting on a series of experimental games Boston vs. Chicago] The second game, to be played Tuesday, will be an exposition of Harry Wright's pet plea,—that the pitcher should be moved farther back, so that the batsman can get a longer range at the ball, and be able to bat more effectively. To test this idea, the pitcher's square will be put back six feet, so that its front line will be where the back line is now. Chicago Tribune September 15, 1878

Yesterday's experiment [moving the pitcher back] can hardly be called a success. The object sought in the changes proposed is, of course, to make more batting and general play, but not to lengthen the game. To play the game as yesterday would no doubt make it more lively, but would also prolong it, which is to be avoided. Chicago Tribune September 18, 1878

[reporting on a series of experimental games Boston vs. Chicago] For Monday's game the rules as to balls and strikes will be changed so that the pitcher will be allowed only six balls instead of nine as now, and the batsman will have only three strikes instead of practically four as now—that is, the warn or "good ball" will not be called but when three strikes have been called the batsman retires. Another improvement in the way of making the game better understood by the attendance will be the manner of calling balls; instead of waiting until three bad balls have been pitched before calling one ball, the umpire will count all the balls pitched out loud as they are delivered, from "one ball," "two balls," "three balls," up to "six balls." it is hoped that this will make the game more easily understood by the spectators. In this game, also, the batsman will be allowed to stand a little nearer to the home-plate than now—that is, within six inches instead of within a foot as at present. Chicago Tribune September 15, 1878

In all of these cases there is a distinct air of the point being persuasion as much as investigation. And really, how could it be otherwise? It takes many games to really work out the implications of a rule change. This is why there can be constant tweaking from one season to the next.