

*The Ball once struck off,
Away flies the Boy, To*

The Next Destin'd Post

And then Home with Joy

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Interview with Bill Johnson, New Chair of SABR's Origins Committee

Protoball: How did you get interested in baseball's origins era?

Bill Johnson: My earlier research began with a simple inquiry into Hal Trosky's life story for the SABR Biography Committee as I had married into the family and gained access to a great deal of source material. Once into the sources, my interests expanded to include Iowa baseball players, but in order to better understand and then tell their stories, I had to dig into the origins and proliferation of the game in the Midwest. The tipping point, though, was at the 2009 SABR convention in Cleveland, where we saw the premier of Sam Marchiano's *Base Ball Discovered*. Since then I've become absolutely mesmerized with the "origins" field.

Protoball: Do you see aspects of your prior work and training that led you to take on a SABR research committee, or is this mainly a chance to change gears and start something new?

Bill Johnson: My academic background is in rhetoric, with a graduate degree in history, and my professional identity grew over a 30 year career in the US Navy. Exposure to disciplined historical inquiry, written and oral argumentation, and a general comfort with the opportunities that the structure and legitimacy that a committee can offer all bleed across a range of disciplines; this opportunity to actively engage in exciting work with an array of talented and dedicated researchers is almost too good to be true.

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Protoball: As a relative newcomer, what are your impressions of the field, and its progress, at this point?

Bill Johnson: There are some gold-standard historians/diggers and meta narratives that do a superb job of outlining the “known”. The fact that individuals like John Thorn, David Block and so many others are actively engaged in the field, pursuing both SABR research as well as independent lines of inquiry, puts a credible, public face on the aggregate work. The thing that I’ve been amazed by, and encouraged by, to this point is the amount of outstanding work occurring at the local level. From town to town and state to state, diggers are diligently uncovering pieces of the story of baseball’s origin and spread, and eventually we should be able to piece the entire story together into a sort of coherent, unified view.

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Local Baseball History Group Forms (Around Priscilla!) in Rochester NY

She claims to be a just founding member, but the first meeting was held at her house, and current President Joe Territo calls her the group’s “driving force” and “my teacher and my mentor,” so maybe she meant more to them than that.

The group is the Rochester Baseball History Society (go to <http://rochesterbaseballhistory.org/>) and the suspect is our longtime fellow Digger, Priscilla Astifan.

This spring the RBHS presented a ten-week exhibit, “Rochester Baseball: From Mumford’s Meadow to Frontier Field” at the Central Library of Rochester & Monroe County. The exhibit comprised 20 graphical panels providing a “comprehensive overview of the game’s history in Rochester, from its roots with a band of players at Mumford’s Meadow in 1825 (see Protoball entry 1825c.1 at <http://protoball.org/1825c.1>) through present day.”

The RBHS site lists 13 current research fact-gathering projects (five of them are Priscilla’s) and has offered a range of public programs, including lectures and a guided tour of relevant gravesites.

Advice for other communities? We asked RBHS what advice it had for consolidating local interest in baseball’s earliest days: “Don’t be afraid to begin small -- our group did, with fewer than six initial members. All you need is a few like-minded local baseball enthusiasts holding regular monthly meetings to keep the group focused on short and long term goals, which are very important. Then, define and form partnerships for expanding your scope.

“We are especially fortunate to have a diversified and talented board of directors including a baseball historian, an attorney, an award winning sports columnist and author, a physician, a commercial artist, a professional photographer and collector of early baseball artifacts, an internal communications manager, and a mechanical engineer.

“Four members are vintage ball players at the Genesee Country Museum. You never know who the devotion to baseball history will bring together, and there’s room for many different talents and areas of interest. No special credentials or degrees are needed, only a sincere love of the game and its heritage.”

Note: Protoball is assembling a list of local societies with significant origins-era focus. If you know of others, please let us know. Our new Protoball page on the RBHS is at [http://protoball.org/Rochester Baseball Historical Society](http://protoball.org/Rochester%20Baseball%20Historical%20Society).

Digger News

British-born **Joe Gray** is collecting information on the play of modern base ball in Britain, and has recently turned up games played as early as 1870 in Dingwall, Scotland. Joe reports that his personal interest is expanding to include earlier British baserunning games. His very comprehensive web page is found at <http://www.projectcobb.org.uk/>.

Having added nearly 1000 finds of the early play of modern base ball around the US, **Bruce Allardice** has begun to turn up earliest games in other countries. In July he pinned down and entered new “Earliest Known Games” in Argentina, Bermuda, Burma, the Netherlands, Panama (a Cricket and Baseball Club in 1883, yet), Uruguay and several other nations.

Bill Humber is working on the story of Canada’s earliest base ball, focusing in part on William Shuttleworth, a key person on an 1854 team. Bill is also continuing to identify the nature of the “Canadian game,” which preceded the arrival of the New York game in Canada.

“Baseball in the Bronx, before the Yankees,” is **Gregory Christiano’s** new book. It focuses some on the Morrisania Unions, and draws extensively on Craig Waff’s Games Tab ([http://protoball.org/Games Tabulation](http://protoball.org/Games_Tabulation)) and other PBall data. A google search of <“Gregory Christiano” Bronx> takes you to Amazon page for Gregory’s book.

Tom Heitz participated in a large Cooperstown tour organized in part by filmmaker Ken Burns. Tom presented a lecture on base ball’s early rules and supervised a throwback Town Ball game for the tour on the lawn behind the Fenimore Art Museum.

Rich Arpi reports that the Minnesota SABR chapter has discussed the idea of mapping the spread of base ball in Minnesota by locating the first known modern game in the larger MN towns.

John Bowman is taking a fresh look at the history of the 90-foot basepath in baseball, and is reflecting on how the choice of a different distance might have affected the game.

On July 19, **Deb Shattuck** presented “Bloomer Girls: Women Baseball Pioneers” at the Triple Play Baseball Festival at Yachats on the Oregon Coast. The presentation is based on her forthcoming dissertation at the U of Iowa. The festival was the work of former MLB pitcher -- and geneticist -- Dave Baldwin.

Greg Perkins has written articles on base ball, town ball, and cricket for the *Northern Kentucky Encyclopedia* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009) and has helped organize a VBB club, the Ludlow Base Ball Club, which is named after an 1870s club. He continues to collect data on the Cincinnati Red Stockings.

Mark Brunke continues to collect information on very early ballplaying in Sacramento, Seattle, and Victoria British Columbia. He is finding that some early pioneers in that region played both base ball and cricket, at first.

Monica Nucciarone has been contributing to a new documentary about base ball in Hawaii. The film, by former Boston University student Drew Johnson, touches on the influence of base ball on the political evolution of Hawaii, starting with 1840s ballplaying there as introduced by missionaries. Drew notes that Japanese baseball, as well as the US game, was part of the later story of Hawaiian baseball.

A new version of the “This Game of Games” website was launched in June by **Jeff Kittel**. The site, which traces early ballplaying in Greater St. Louis and the Trans-Appalachian West, is at <http://www.thisgameofgames.com/>.

News from the Protoball Website

[] “Roots of the Rules” Project – *New Project*

Protoball is preparing to launch a “Roots of the Rules” document that is intended to capture what we know about the histories of the 35 base ball rules formulated by New York’s base ball establishment in 1857. Only in 1857 does a reasonably complete set of the modern components of the game – including nine innings, nine players, ninety-foot basepaths, and the dimensions of the ball -- take its place in official rules.

In September and October we plan to subject this document to detailed review by our most informed researchers. We then plan to house it on the Protoball site, updating it when new evidence brings clarification. The document will highlight what we know and what we still need to find out.

An initial 44-page draft of this research paper is found at http://protoball.org/1857_Rules. It was drafted by Jeffrey Kittel. If you are able to provide review comments, please send them to Lmccray@mit.edu, referring to line and page numbers where you see issues, errors, or needed commentary.

[] Local Working Groups – the Spread of the Game -- *NewCollection*

Protoball plans to add pages devoted to existing groups – local baseball history groups, SABR chapters etc – whose work includes coverage of the early local ballplaying, including the earliest known appearance of the modern (Brooklyn, or “New York”) game. The first group shown is the Rochester Baseball History Society – see http://protoball.org/Rochester_Baseball_Historical_Society. Let us know of other local groups that could be listed.

[] Next Issue of the *ND Post* – On the Earmarks of “Modern” Base Ball

Researchers continually face plenty of uncertainty as to whether a reported early game was played by modern rules or not. Richard Hershberger has agreed to help lead an effort to codify rules of inference – for instance, is a report of nine players on a team sufficient indication that a game is following modern rules? Is a game score reporting “tallies” instead of “runs” the modern game or a predecessor game?

If you are interested in contributing to this effort, please let us know.

Bob Tholkes' Harvest from the June/July 19CBB List-serve

Our Man Block Does It Again: John Thorn posted the link to a BBC News item about David's discovery of a reference to the Prince of Wales and the Earl of Middlesex playing baseball in a copy of the Whitehall Evening Post from 1749. This reminded Richard Hershberger of the "Lady Hervey letter" of 1748, also referring to the Prince and base ball, which led to a discussion of the letter. David later posted (under "1749 baseball") the exact text with background information on which the BBC item was based.

But Didn't We Have Fun, Ultimate Frisbee Edition. Richard Hershberger draws a parallel from a report that the modern sport of Ultimate Frisbee is losing its carefree amateur character; it reminds Richard of the development of competitive baseball in the 1850s.

A Good day at the Elysian Fields. George Thompson posted a *New York Morning Express* summary of activities at the famous Elysian Fields on a day in May, 1859.

The birth of Wilkes' Spirit. George Thompson continues sharing interesting items from the *Morning Express*, this one about possible vandalism aimed at *Wilkes' Spirit*. Peter Mancuso opined that it was more likely aimed at an abolitionist paper printed on the same site.

New York Picked Nine, Fashion Race Course Match. John Thorn posted a quote from the *Clipper* about the 1858 selection of the New York team. Bob Tholkes offered further info on the splits among the clubs over the selection process.

1866 Barnstormers? Bob Tholkes quoted a *Wilkes Spirit* item indicating that a New Jersey did what was later called barnstorming, with the expected profit apparently from betting. John Zinn tracked down and posted articles about the same team.

"Base-ball" in a German-English dictionary, 1837. Richard Hershberger posted the discovery that baseball was included in a German dictionary published in 1837.

Sorry, I Don't Understand Your Banter. Bob Tholkes posted a *Wilkes Spirit* game account of 1866 in which the writer, commenting on a scoreless inning, called it a “Roland to an Oliver,” and inquired about possible meanings. John Zinn, Gary Goldberg-O'Maxfield, Richard Hershberger, and George Thompson responded, defining it as a literary allusion to a medieval *chanson*.

Baseball's First Cartoon? John Thorn posted an 1856 cartoon, asking if it is the earliest known. Later he discovered that it actually dated from 1876, which did not diminish anyone's interest in the item; John also posted a companion cartoon from the source.

The New York Tigers. John Thorn posted the link to his latest Our Game blog, a guest appearance by Richard Hershberger about a mystery NABBP member club of 1859.

Interview with Bill Johnson, concluded from page 2

Protoball: Are there particular new Origins Committee program initiatives that you think might fit the times and SABR's current capabilities?

Bill Johnson: Of all the 'things' going on in the field, the single most exciting to me is the Protoball.org website. Distributed research, in any field, benefits demonstrably from community-wide access to a research nexus, a place where the work can be shared and questioned...in the field of serious academic history, that is vital to creating defensible histories and credibility for the historians.

Protoball, then, allows us to reach across borders and penetrate stovepipes. Origins work can support, and be supported by, say, the UK Chapter or the 19th Century Committee or the BioProject and Bibliography committees and, as we expand the vision globally, by groups that transcend the U.S. There is tremendous opportunity in the field, and almost any path the Origins membership chooses to follow will add to our collective knowledge.

I feel very fortunate to have been given this opportunity by SABR. I really do hope to help the Origins Committee by working to minimize any cross-organization barriers as we create a more complete picture of baseball's proliferation. Mostly, though, I hope to stay out of the way -- to paraphrase an old saw, "every group has 'that person', the one who is too loud, stands too close at parties, and speaks when they should be listening; if you can't figure out who 'that person' is in your group, then it's probably you." In this arena, the origins of baseball, I have yet to find 'that person'. That troubles me.

Protoball: What had surprised you most as you've begun to familiarize yourself with the origins field and its small fleet of researchers? Are there particular recent advances that struck you as interesting and important?

Bill Johnson: Within the extraordinary body of work that has been created by a relative few, the attempts to begin mapping the spread of the game as a function of the spread of society (transportation modes like rail and waterway, communications via news/media sources, and so on) is compelling. Some are already working on this approach, and the results will be compelling. This will also provide access of the committee to other venues like the terrific annual SUNY Oneonta/NBBHoF annual Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. The origins of the game are a small but relevant slice of American and world history, and need to be discovered, analyzed and understood.

Protoball: Do you find that a lot of your baseball friends are a little attached to the Doubleday Legend on where base ball came from?

Bill Johnson: I am afraid that I am guilty, certainly more so now, of self-selecting baseball friends who are conversant with the Mills Commission, William Bray's diary, and the like. Most true baseball fans, in my view, don't want to buy into something that's been debunked, and are happy to learn more about what we have learned about the actual origins of the game. That, alone, makes this committee and its membership invaluable. The memory of the game is not changing, merely being revealed.

Note: Bill's email address: bill.johnson162@gmail.com.

