

Evolution or Revolution? A Rule-By-Rule Analysis of the 1845

Knickerbocker Rules

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(Note: This draft comprises Part One of a two-part examination of the main rules of base ball as of about 1860. It covers the Knick Rules, and Part Two will examine the major 1857 rules reformulation in 1857. We invite comments, critiques, and relevant new data; we intend to post successive version on Protoball over time.)

Summary

The rules of baseball set down by the Knickerbocker Club of New York in 1845 represent an evolutionary moment in the development of the modern game of baseball rather than a revolutionary invention of a new game. A rule-by-rule analysis of the Knickerbocker rule set that has come down to us shows that most of the rules that have previously been considered revolutionary, or an invention of the club, have antecedents in older bat and ball games. While both the 1845 rules and the Knickerbocker Club are historically significant, both are merely parts of the evolutionary development of modern baseball rather than the starting point of that development.

In the ongoing quest, during the late 19th and most of the 20th century, to discover the singular moment at which point baseball was invented, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York was in an enviable historical position. Their substantial historical legacy, which historians have recognized for most of

¹ Thanks to Larry McCray for helping design the “Roots of the Rules” Project and reviewing earlier drafts of this research report.

the last century, rests largely upon two things. First, they left us a set of playing rules which are largely accepted as the foundation of modern baseball.²

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they were not Abner Doubleday.

Not being Abner Doubleday was significant to early historians and researchers who first looked into the origins of baseball in the United States in a serious, scholarly manner. Any serious historian who took a look at the baseball creation myth provided by the Mills Commission in 1905 immediately dismissed it as the nonsense that it was.³ However, a story must begin somewhere and, if baseball wasn't invented by Doubleday, as the Mills Commission insisted, the questions surrounding the origins of the game still remained unanswered. Into this void of unanswered questions stepped the Knickerbocker Club, who would assume the position of sire of the National Game.

The idea of the Knickerbockers as the originators of the modern game of baseball is substantially more rational and evidenced-based than the Doubleday myth, especially given the fact that the Knickerbocker Club actually played a form of baseball. But many of the claims made about the club, upon which their position of primacy rested, proved, in the end, not to be true. It was claimed that the Knickerbockers were the first baseball club. While this was based upon the best evidence available at the time, it turns out not to be true and we are currently aware of several clubs that pre-dated the Knickerbockers and played

² Protoball Chronology 1845.1 (<http://protoball.org/1845.1>)

³ For a scholarly debunking of the Doubleday myth, see Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop*; Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It*; or Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*.

some form of baseball.⁴ It was claimed that the Knickerbockers were the first organized club that had a set of by-laws but the Olympic Ball Club of Philadelphia had a formal constitution by 1833.⁵ It was claimed that the Knickerbockers were the first to codify the game of baseball but, based upon the testimony of William Wheaton, we know that this is not true. Wheaton, a member of the Knickerbocker Club, was, in 1837, a member of the Gotham Base Ball Club and he claimed that, while a member of the Gothams, it “was found necessary to reduce the rules of the new game to writing. This work fell to my hands...”⁶

We now know for a fact that the Knickerbockers were not the first baseball club, that they were not the first club that had a formal, organized structure and they were not the first club to set the rules of baseball down in writing. Given the testimony of Wheaton, we could also argue that the Knickerbockers were not even the first club to play the New York-style of baseball that gave birth to the modern game. Yet they are still one of the most significant clubs in the history of baseball for the simple fact that it is their rules that have survived. While there were earlier, pre-modern baseball clubs and earlier, pre-modern sets of rules, it is the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845 that have been handed down to us. William Ryczek, in *Baseball's First Inning*, writes that the Knickerbocker Rules represent

⁴ Thorn, John; “1843.6 Magnolia Ball Club Predates Knickerbockers”; *Base Ball*, Volume 5, Number 1; p 89.

⁵ Hershberger, Richard; “1831.1 The Olympic Ball Club of Philadelphia”: *Base Ball*, Volume 5, Number 1; p 77.

⁶ Brown, Randall; “1837.1 The Evolution of the New York Game – The Arbiter’s Tale”; *Base Ball*, Volume 5, Number 1; p 83. Wheaton’s testimony originally appeared in the San Francisco Examiner on November 27, 1887.

the “only documented, unbroken line between baseball as played in its current form and any prior version of the sport...”⁷

So the argument that the Knickerbocker Club represents the spring from which modern baseball flowed forth and that they should be credited with originating the modern game rests on their 1845 rules and there is no doubt that these rules are significant. In the seminal *Baseball: The Early Years*, the Knickerbockers are described as having “blazed a path others were to follow”⁸ and Peter Morris has written that the club “unified all the multiple strands” of early American baseball “into a single ‘regulation game.’”⁹ It is a fact that elements of the 1845 rules are still used in the game today and the Knickerbockers are given credit for introducing such elements as foul territory, tag-outs and three-out innings to the game. But were these rules the original invention of the Knickerbocker Club or did they have antecedents in earlier forms of American baseball games?

In order to determine if the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845 were a revolutionary step forward in the development of the modern game or simply an evolutionary milestone in the long history of American baseball, it is necessary to take a closer look at the rules themselves. Below you will find all twenty of the Knickerbocker Rules as they were adopted on September 23, 1845:

1ST. Members must strictly observe the time agreed upon for exercise, and be punctual in their attendance.

⁷ Ryczek, William; *Baseball's First Inning*; pp 40-41.

⁸ Seymour, Harold; *Baseball: The Early Years*; p 16.

⁹ Morris, Peter; *But Didn't We Have Fun?*; p 26.

2ND. When assembled for exercise, the President, or in his absence, the Vice-President, shall appoint an Umpire, who shall keep the game in a book provided for that purpose, and note all violations of the By-Laws and Rules during the time of exercise.

3RD. The presiding officer shall designate two members as Captains, who shall retire and make the match to be played, observing at the same time that the player's opposite to each other should be as nearly equal as possible, the choice of sides to be then tossed for, and the first in hand to be decided in like manner.

4TH. The bases shall be from "home" to second base, forty-two paces; from first to third base, forty-two paces, equidistant.

5TH. No stump match shall be played on a regular day of exercise.

6TH. If there should not be a sufficient number of members of the Club present at the time agreed upon to commence exercise, gentlemen not members may be chosen in to make up the match, which shall not be broken up to take in members that may afterwards appear; but in all cases, members shall have the preference, when present, at the making of the match.

7TH. If members appear after the game is commenced, they may be chosen in if mutually agreed upon.

8TH. The game to consist of twenty-one counts, or aces; but at the conclusion an equal number of hands must be played.

9TH. The ball must be pitched, not thrown, for the bat.

10TH. A ball knocked out of the field, or outside the range of the first and third base, is foul.

11TH. Three balls being struck at and missed and the last one caught, is a hand-out; if not caught is considered fair, and the striker bound to run.

12TH. If a ball be struck, or tipped, and caught, either flying or on the first bound, it is a hand out.

13TH. A player running the bases shall be out, if the ball is in the hands of an adversary on the base, or the runner is touched with it before he makes his base; it being understood, however, that in no instance is a ball to be thrown at him.

14TH. A player running who shall prevent an adversary from catching or getting the ball before making his base, is a hand out.

15TH. Three hands out, all out.

16TH. Players must take their strike in regular turn.

17TH. All disputes and differences relative to the game, to be decided by the Umpire, from which there is no appeal.

18TH. No ace or base can be made on a foul strike.

19TH. A runner cannot be put out in making one base, when a balk is made on the pitcher.

20TH. But one base allowed when a ball bounds out of the field when struck.

The first thing that should be noted is that not all of the rules deal with baseball as it is played on the field. The off-field rules, dealing with things such as the behavior of club members, how teams were chosen and other extraneous matters, are interesting and some study should be devoted to them. However, for the purposes of this study, only those rules which deal with on-the-field matters will be looked at. Also, it is interesting how much information about game-play is left out of the rules. Morris notes that “many crucial items are absent from the playing rules. Some of these omissions, such as the number of players per side, were left out because the club chose to keep things as flexible as possible. But other basic elements, including the direction of base-running, the placement of fielders, and how a run was scored, are also left unspecified. Their absence strongly suggests that the Knickerbockers’ rules were designed to clarify disputed points rather than to spell out all the rules of the game.”¹⁰ This lack of game-play information¹¹ is significant and tells us that the core of the

¹⁰ Ibid; pp 29-30.

¹¹ We could write another piece on the information that the Knickerbockers fail to provide us but we note that they failed to record fundamental baseball rules such as how a run is scored or in what direction the

game the Knickerbockers were playing was reasonably well-known. It was not necessary for the Knickerbockers to explain to people how to play baseball because it was already an established and popular game.

Beyond that, it has been generally accepted that the rules the Knickerbockers did establish, within the context of an already well known game, were innovative and revolutionary. However, modern baseball historians such as David Block, in *Baseball Before We Knew It*, and John Thorn, in *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, have, in reviews of the Knickerbocker Rules, challenged this assertion. Presented below are those 1845 rules dealing with on-the-field-play and evidence of antecedents to those rules. Reviewing these historical antecedents should allow one to draw conclusions about the nature of the Knickerbocker Rules. Based upon that evidence, one should be able to determine if the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845 were a revolutionary step forward that resulted in the creation of the modern game or if they only captured a moment in the evolutionary development of the game.

Review of the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845

Rule 4: The bases shall be from "home" to second base, forty-two paces; from first to third base, forty-two paces, equidistant.

bases were run. Smaller details such as how big a game ball was, what size bat was to be used, whether a runner could advance on a foul ball, whether tag-ups were used, whether a foul ball counted as a strike are also omitted. It's impossible to play a game of baseball based solely on information provided by the 1845 Knickerbocker Rules.

The interesting things about this rule do not involve the distances between the bases but, rather, the use of bases, generally, and, more specifically, the use of four bases. The modern use of ninety-foot base-paths, as noted by John Thorn, was not implemented until the adoption of the 1857 rules¹² but the use of bases and a four-base layout have numerous antecedents in base ball games.

Block wrote that “The four-base square or diamond configuration was almost certainly a known commodity to the young Knickerbockers, having already appeared in at least four descriptions of early baseball-related games published in America before 1845.”¹³ The four books that he mentioned were William Clarke’s *The Boy’s Own Book*, published in 1829; Robin Carver’s *The Book of Sports*, published in 1834; *The Boy’s and Girl’s Book of Sports*, published in 1835; and *The Boy’s Book of Sports*, also published in 1835. The importance of these books in the formulation of the Knickerbocker Rules was noted by Robert Henderson, in *Ball, Bat and Bishop*, when he wrote that “There is no direct evidence that the Knickerbockers consulted any printed book of rules when they formulated their own, but the great popularity of [these books], which totaled several editions, and must have run into hundreds if not thousands of copies before 1842, must have resulted in the knowledge of a ‘diamond-shaped’ field for a base-running game in the minds of hundreds of boys. In fact, as we have shown, boys all over the country played these games. There need be no mystery about the genesis of the Knickerbocker rules. They came directly or

¹² Thorn, John; *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*; p 73.

¹³ Block, David; *Baseball Before We Knew It*; p 81.

indirectly from these popular books of boys games.”¹⁴ Clarke specifically mentions stool-ball, which used bases, and rounders, which Henderson identified as English base ball and used four bases arranged in a square.¹⁵ Carver mentioned that base ball, goal ball and round ball used four bases laid out in a diamond.¹⁶

The earliest known instance of bases being used in a bat and ball game may come from the 14th century, when a game called oink was played in Romania.¹⁷ In the 1600s, German schlagball was played in Prague and the description of the game mentioned that a batter “attempted to make a circuit of the bases” after hitting the ball.¹⁸ The first known use of bases in ball game in America comes from 1609 when pilka palantowa was played at Jamestown.¹⁹ There is no doubt that the uses of bases in bat and ball games predates the Knickerbocker rules by several centuries and there is evidence that games such as ball-paces, balle au camp, goal ball, lapta, theque, tut-ball, the cat family and various forms of town ball all used bases.

It is evident that, by 1845, the use of bases in bat and ball games was centuries old and there does not appear to be anything original or innovative in Knickerbockers’ adoption of rule four.

¹⁴ Henderson, Robert; Bat, Ball and Bishop; p 163.

¹⁵ Clarke, William; The Boy’s Own Book; 1849 edition; p 27-28.

¹⁶ Carver, Robin; The Book of Sports; p 38.

¹⁷ Protoball Chronology entry 1310.1 (<http://protoball.org/1310.1>).

¹⁸ Protoball Chronology entry 1600c.1 (<http://protoball.org/1600c.1>).

¹⁹ Protoball Chronology entry 1609.1 (<http://protoball.org/1609.1>).

Rule 8: The game to consist of twenty-one counts, or aces; but at the conclusion an equal number of hands must be played.

John Thorn has noted that there are some who believe that this rule is unique in the respect that, for the first time, the conditions for victory in a baseball game were explicitly laid out.²⁰ While this may be true, in the sense that this is the oldest surviving record that notes the condition of victory, it seems unlikely that the Knickerbocker Club invented the idea of winning a baseball game by scoring more runs than your opponents. The more significant aspect of this rule seems to be the denotation of the run (or count or ace) as the way in which a club scored. How many runs were needed for victory or in what time frame one had to score the runs is not as relevant as the idea that the run was the principle way in which a team scored. This may be evident in the fact that by 1857, the first-to-21 rule was replaced by most-runs-in-nine-innings. The conditions of victory changed with the adoption of the 1857 rules but the idea of the run as the way in which a team scored remained. The idea of the run is at the heart of rule eight and the scoring of runs or the prevention of the scoring of runs is at the heart of baseball.

Block wrote that “It is interesting to note that the Knickerbockers did not define what was meant by ‘count’ or ‘ace.’ Perhaps by that time the terms were so commonplace that no explanation was necessary. It remains a mystery, though, why the club did not choose the word ‘run’ to identify a score in rule 8,

²⁰ Thorn; *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*; p 73

even though that term appeared on their preprinted score sheets in 1845. ‘Run,’ like several other baseball terms, had been borrowed from cricket.”

Both Clarke and Carver²¹ insinuate that a complete circuit of the bases constituted a run, implying that the modern definition of a run scored was in place by at least 1829 and the run as a unit to tally scores were used in predecessor games such as barn ball, long ball, town ball, round ball and tip-cat. There is a reference to runs scored in a game of wicket in 1815²² and there is the possibility that wicket matches in New England in 1840 were played to a specified number of runs.²³ The idea of the run as a tally was something that, as Block noted, was common in cricket going back to the mid-eighteenth century and Henderson quotes a description of baseball from the 1744 edition of the *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* that is as good a description of scoring a run as any:

The Ball once struck off,
Away flies the Boy
To the next destin'd Post,
And then Home with Joy.²⁴

While the specifics of the first-to-21 rule may be a unique invention of the Knickerbockers, the idea of the run, the run scored and victory by outscoring one's opponent certainly predated the 1845 rules. Run scoring and run

²¹ Clarke, pp 27-28, and Carver, p 38.

²² Protoball Chronology 1815.4 (<http://protoball.org/1815.4>)

²³ Protoball Chronology 1840.22 (<http://protoball.org/1840.22>)

²⁴ Henderson, p 133.

prevention is the essence of baseball and the Knickerbockers certainly did not invent that concept. They did not invent the idea of victory in a baseball game. What is unique or original in rule eight was made irrelevant by the 1857 rules while those things that are at the core of the rule predate the Knickerbockers.

Rule 9: The ball must be pitched, not thrown, for the bat.

There are numerous predecessor games that involved a player initiating game-play by pitching or throwing a ball to a batter. The cat family, town ball, German schlagball and stool ball all involved pitching a ball to a batter and Block mentions two books, one published in 1811 and the other in 1835, that depict underhand pitching in a ball game.²⁵ Block also specifically states that pitching “was evident in all known descriptions of early baseball before 1845.”²⁶ The idea of pitching was not, in any way, the invention of the Knickerbocker Club.

As to the specifics of the Knickerbockers’ pitching rule, William Wheaton, in 1887, noted that the idea of underhand pitching predated the Knickerbocker Rules. Wheaton stated that he and his friends “found cricket too slow and lazy a game. We couldn’t get enough exercise out of it. Only the bowler and the batter had anything to do, and the rest of the players might stand around all the afternoon without getting a chance to stretch their legs.”²⁷ The underhand pitching rule was used by Wheaton and the Gothams to increase the action in the game, making it easier for a batter to strike the ball and put it in play. “The

²⁵ Protoball Chronology 1811.4 (<http://protoball.org/1811.4>) and 1835c.12 (<http://protoball.org/1835c.12>).

²⁶ Block, p 84.

²⁷ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

pitcher really pitched the ball, and underhand throwing was forbidden. Moreover, he pitched the ball so the batsman could strike it and give some work to the fielders.”²⁸ There is also evidence of a ball game played in North Carolina around 1840 where the pitcher was required to pitch the ball high or low, depending on the desire of the batter, showing, again, that the idea of “pitching for the bat” was not something invented by the Knickerbockers in 1845.²⁹

As noted, the Knickerbockers did not invent pitching, pitching underhand or “pitching for the bat.” There is nothing unique or original about rule nine.

Rule 10: A ball knocked out of the field, or outside the range of the first and third base, is foul.

The introduction of the concept of foul territory into American baseball is often cited by historians as one of the unique contribution of the Knickerbocker Club to the game. Block calls it “a radical concept”³⁰ and Morris considers the rule to be “revolutionary.”³¹ But there is evidence that the idea of foul territory was not particularly radical, that the introduction of the concept into pre-modern, American baseball was not particularly revolutionary and that the use of foul territory in baseball predates the 1845 rules.

In *Baseball Before We Knew It*, Block, himself, noted that foul territory was not an original idea, although he did state that the introduction of the idea into

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Protoball Chronology 1840c.33 (<http://protoball.org/1840c.33>).

³⁰ Block, p 85.

³¹ Morris, p 28.

baseball was innovative.³² There is some evidence that foul territory was used in bat and ball games in the 18th century, particularly in trap ball. Clarke mentions a form of trap ball play where “Two boundaries are formed, equally placed, and at a great distance on each side of the trap, between which it is necessary the ball should pass when struck by the batsman; if it fall outside either of them he is out.”³³ Joseph Strutt, in a book published in 1801, also noted the use of foul territory in trap ball, writing that “It is usual in the present modification of the game, to place two boundaries at a given distance from the trap, between which it is necessary for the ball to pass when it is struck by the batsman, for if it falls withoutside of either, he gives up his bat and is out.”³⁴

Besides trap ball, there were other bat and ball games that employed the use of foul territory. A 1743 source regarding a game of cricket insinuates the use of foul territory by stating that “All play was forward of the wicket...”³⁵ Clarke’s description of rounders, or English base ball, also suggests foul territory by noting that a batter was out if “the ball, when struck, falls behind home...”³⁶ *The Boy’s Own Book*, in its description of the game feeder, specifically states that “One ‘foul’ is out...”³⁷ Finally, there is reference to a base ball game played in Ontario in 1838 that specifically mentions foul lines, although there is some questions about veracity of the source.³⁸

³² Block, p 85.

³³ Clarke, p 27.

³⁴ Strutt, Joseph; *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*; 1801; pp 99-100.

³⁵ Protoball Chronology 1743.3 (<http://protoball.org/1743.3>).

³⁶ Clarke, p 29.

³⁷ Henderson, p 154.

³⁸ Protoball Chronology 1838.4 (<http://protoball.org/1838.4>).

Based upon this evidence, there is no doubt that foul territory was not the unique invention of the Knickerbocker Club and that it was a feature of trap ball play in the 18th century. It's also possible that it was used, to some extent, in games such as cricket and feeder. As far as the idea that the Knickerbockers were the first to apply the concept to baseball, Clarke's description of English base ball and the possibility that foul territory was used in an 1838 baseball game in Canada brings that into doubt. However, generally speaking, foul territory was not a feature of pre-modern, American baseball games prior to the Knickerbocker Rules and they should be given some credit for popularizing its use. It should also be noted that there is no known antecedent for the ninety degree foul territory set-up used in modern baseball and this may have been the unique contribution of the Knickerbockers, although, again, the idea of foul territory was not itself unique.

Rule 11: Three balls being struck at and missed and the last one caught, is a hand-out; if not caught is considered fair, and the striker bound to run.

The three-strikes/out rule appears to have been a well established rule in baseball games prior to 1845. Block states that "In the half century preceding the Knickerbocker rules of 1845, every published description of early baseball embraced some variant of the three-strikes rule as a fundamental tenet of play." He specifically mentions the Medieval English game of "kit-cat," the cat family, trap ball and English base ball as games that used some form of the rule.³⁹

³⁹ Block, pp 85-86.

Clarke mentioned trap ball, where “if the striker miss the ball when he aims at it, or hits the trigger more than twice without striking the ball, or makes ‘an offer’ (the trigger to be touched but once, he is out...”⁴⁰ as well as rounders, where the “in-player is also out if he miss striking the ball.”⁴¹ Carver wrote that in base or goal ball “If [the batter] miss three times...he is out...”⁴² In the description of feeder from *The Boy’s Own Book*, the batter was out “if he miss three times” and Henderson speculated that this was where the three-strikes rule originated.⁴³ The Boy’s Book of Sports, in its description of base ball, stated that “If the striker miss the ball three times...he is out...”⁴⁴ There are also several sources that mention the rule being used in town ball.⁴⁵

The three strikes/out rule was well established in baseball games prior to 1845 and it can in no way be seen as a unique contribution of the Knickerbocker Club.

Rule 12: If a ball be struck, or tipped, and caught, either flying or on the first bound, it is a hand out.

This was not only another well established baseball rule prior to 1845 but, as Block has noted, it “is, perhaps, the oldest in the game. [The rule] characterized all of baseball’s ancestors, including stool-ball, trap-ball, and most

⁴⁰ Clarke, p 27.

⁴¹ Clarke, p 29.

⁴² Carver, p 38.

⁴³ Henderson, p 154.

⁴⁴ Henderson, p 159.

⁴⁵ Protoball Chronology 1835.4 (<http://protoball.org/1835.4>)

⁴⁵ and 1840.24 (<http://protoball.org/1840.24>).

varieties of cat...⁴⁶ Specifically, he was talking about catching a ball on the fly and noted that the Knickerbockers' use of the bound rule was unique. However, there is ample evidence that the bound rule predated the 1845 rules and Block did note the 1733 poem "Stool Ball, or the Easter Diversion" where the goal of the fielders was:

To seize the ball before it grounds,
Or take it when it first rebounds.⁴⁷

Based upon this, it is evident that the bound rule was likely used in stool ball in the first half of the 18th century.

William Wheaton stated that the bound rule was "an old rule," although his Gotham Club discarded it in the 1830s and used only the fly rule in their games.⁴⁸ Larry McCray, writing about the history of the bound rule, noted a contemporary source where the rule was used in a game of wicket that was played in Connecticut in 1841 and he stated that:

Several other references to pre-1845 use of the bound rule appear in retrospective accounts. Historian Harold Seymour associates the practice with the old-cat games (but does not give a source), and a recollection of such games around 1840 in Illinois recalls a one-bounce rule. The rule is remembered for ballgames played in the 1820s in New York State, and in 1840

⁴⁶ Block, p 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

in accounts from Georgia and North Carolina. In New England, one account attributes the bound rule to the traditional ballgame called base.⁴⁹

Clarke mentions that the rule was used in trap ball and rounders while Craver states that it was used in base and goal ball.⁵⁰

The rule that a batter was out if a fielder caught the batted ball on the fly or the bound, without a doubt, predates the Knickerbocker Rules and is in no way a unique contribution to the game.

Rule 13: A player running the bases shall be out, if the ball is in the hands of an adversary on the base, or the runner is touched with it before he makes his base; it being understood, however, that in no instance is a ball to be thrown at him.

The elimination of soaking or plugging and the introduction of the tag-out and the force-out is commonly believed to be one of the Knickerbockers' most unique and important contributions to baseball. Morris has written that the rule is revolutionary⁵¹ while Thorn has stated that "This rule forms the key distinction between the Knickerbocker game and other forms of base ball..."⁵² Rule thirteen, according to Block, was "the Knickerbockers' single greatest contribution to the game of baseball," and "a critical step in sculpting the balance and grace of the modern game." He went on to call the rule "sparkingly original..."⁵³

⁴⁹ McRay, Larry; "1845.1 The Knickerbocker Rules – and the Long History of the One-Bounce Fielding Rule"; Base Ball, Volume 5, Number 1; p 95.

⁵⁰ Clarke, pp 27-29 and Carver, p38.

⁵¹ Morris, p 28.

⁵² Thorn, Baseball in the Garden of Eden, p 75.

⁵³ Block, p 87.

However, there is one important source that contradicts this claim to sparking originality. William Wheaton, former Knickerbocker, when talking about the 1837 formation of the Gotham Club, stated that “The first step we took in making baseball was to abolish the rule of throwing the ball at the runner and ordered instead that it should be thrown to the baseman instead, who had to touch the runner before he reached the base.”⁵⁴ Based upon Wheaton’s testimony, the tag-out rule predates the Knickerbocker Rules by almost a decade.

Given that baseball historians have universally agreed that rule thirteen is one of the Knickerbocker Club’s most unique and important contributions to the game and that the Wheaton article is the only known source that impeaches this position, it is important that Wheaton’s testimony be questioned. The article appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1887 when Wheaton was seventy-three years old and it is entirely possible that his testimony is confused and that his memory is faulty. It is possible that he confused the activities of the Gotham Club with those of the Knickerbocker Club. There is also the possibility that, within the article, Wheaton, when talking about the introduction of the tag-out/force-out, was talking about the activities of the Knickerbockers, although, given the context of his statement, this is unlikely.

With that said, the Wheaton article, at the very least, casts doubt on the idea that the Knickerbockers were the fathers of the tag-out/force-out. If one accepts Wheaton’s testimony to be true, the rule predates the Knickerbockers by

⁵⁴ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

eight years. It should also be noted that Wheaton did not say that the Gotham Club invented the rule or that it was unique to them. His testimony leaves open the possibility that the rule predates the formation of the Gotham Club in 1837. Given this, one is unable to state, unequivocally, that tag-outs/force-outs were unique to the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845.⁵⁵

Rule 14: A player running who shall prevent an adversary from catching or getting the ball before making his base, is a hand out.

A prohibition against both fielder and batter's interference is found in 18th century cricket rules⁵⁶ and Block, who notes the possibility that this rule was first introduced into baseball by the Knickerbockers, believes, based upon his knowledge of early baseball, that it was an old rule. His reasoning is interesting. He writes that "the game was an activity for children or teenagers and was played with a soft ball on a field considerably smaller than in modern baseball. There is no indication from any source that it was a rough-and-tumble sport. Given this, it seems unlikely that the practice of disrupting or preventing a fielder from catching a ball would have been tolerated in fair play."⁵⁷

Given Block's belief that general fair play and sportsmanship would preclude any form of interference and the 18th century references to interference rules in bat and ball games, it seems unlikely that this rule was the unique

⁵⁵ It should also be noted that there may have been other attempts to eliminate or mitigate the impact of soaking. The use of the cross-out, whereby a runner was out if a ball was thrown between him and the base he was running to, is a known feature of pre-modern, American bat and ball games such as town ball. It is unknown how old this rule is or how prevalent its use was but, like the tag-out and the force-out, the cross-out can be seen as a rule developed to eliminate an unpleasant aspect of pre-modern baseball.

⁵⁶ Protoball Chronology 1704.4 (<http://protoball.org/1704.4>) and 1774.1 (<http://protoball.org/1774.1>).

⁵⁷ Block, p 88.

contribution of the Knickerbockers. While the Knickerbockers were gentlemen, it would seem a stretch to credit them with the invention of sportsmanship and fair play.

Rule 15: Three hands out, all out

Along with the rules introducing foul territory and tag-outs/force outs, this rule, putting in place the three-out inning, helped define the modern game of baseball and Block notes that it was “a break from the most common [method of terminating a team’s at-bat.]”⁵⁸ The most common methods used in American baseball games were the one-out/all-out rule, whereby any out would end a team’s turn at-bat, and the all-out/all-out rule, whereby all members of a side got a turn at bat. But there is some evidence that the three-out inning predated the Knickerbocker Rules.

Wheaton noted that “In the old game when a man struck out those of his side who happened to be on the bases had to come in and lose that chance of making a run. We changed that and made the rule which holds good now.”⁵⁹ While he appears to be talking about the one-out/all-out rule and the introduction of the three-out inning, it is not exactly clear within the context of the source if he is talking about his time with the Gothams or the Knickerbockers. But the possibility exists that the three-out inning was used by the Gothams in the late 1830s. Block writes about two games that appear to have used the three-out inning and predates the 1845 rules. Specifically, he mentions the game of kit-cat

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

where “it may be previously agreed that three put outs shall end the innings” and a New York game called “three out, all out”.⁶⁰ The possibility also exists that the three-out inning was also used in games of wicket played in Western New York and in baseball games played in Canada prior to 1845.

There appears to be sufficient evidence to state that the three-out inning was used in bat and ball games prior to 1845 and John Thorn states simply that “it is not a Knickerbocker innovation.”⁶¹

Rule 16: Players must take their strike in regular turn.

Block calls this “an obvious and intuitive rule that flows from the order of the game. Without it, teams could simply have their best players bat over and over.”⁶² He goes on to state that the rule was a common feature of early baseball games.

Clarke mentions that, in trap-ball, players bat “in order”⁶³ and that, in rounders, the players took their turns at bat “in rotation.”⁶⁴ Carver, in his description of base ball, states that players were to bat “by turns.”⁶⁵

This is sufficient evidence to state that rule sixteen was not the unique invention of the Knickerbocker Club.

⁶⁰ Block, p 90.

⁶¹ Thorn, Baseball in the Garden of Eden, p 78.

⁶² Block, p 90.

⁶³ Clarke, p 27.

⁶⁴ Clarke, p 29.

⁶⁵ Carver, p 39.

Rule 17: All disputes and differences relative to the game, to be decided by the Umpire, from which there is no appeal.

This is another rule that predates the Knickerbocker.

In the 1838 Constitution of the Olympic Ball Club of Philadelphia, it is noted that the team recorder “shall be umpire between the captains on Club days, in the event of a disputed point of the game, and from his decision there shall be no appeal, except to the Club, at its next stated meeting.”⁶⁶ Wheaton stated that the Gothams had a scorekeeper “and it was he who decided all disputed points.”⁶⁷ There are also several 18th century references to umpires used in cricket matches.⁶⁸

Rule 18: No ace or base can be made on a foul strike.

Block states that this rule “has no precedent among any of the earlier descriptions of baseball and related games.”⁶⁹ However, if we accept that foul territory was not the invention of the Knickerbocker Club and that this rule is the natural extension of the foul territory rule then it is probable that this rule predates 1845, although no evidence exists supporting this conclusion.⁷⁰

Rule 19: A runner cannot be put out in making one base, when a balk is made on the pitcher.

⁶⁶ Block, p 91.

⁶⁷ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

⁶⁸ Protoball Chronology 1727.2 (<http://protoball.org/1727.2>) and 1744.1 (<http://protoball.org/1744.1>).

⁶⁹ Block, p 91.

⁷⁰ One interesting implication of this rule is that a foul strike would not count as an out, unlike some of the other pre-modern bat and ball games that utilized foul territory. It is unknown if this was a unique contribution of the Knickerbocker Club or if there is some precedent for the implied rule.

If any of the 1845 rules can be considered unique and the original invention of the Knickerbockers, it is the balk rule. It is possible to argue that, like the interference rule, it may have come from generally accepted practices of sportsmanship but there is no evidence supporting this idea. It is interesting to note that the modern meaning of the word “balk,” in the sense of “to stop short,” comes from late 15th century England and this was about the same time that games such as stool ball, trap ball and the cat family were developing in the country.⁷¹ That may simply be a coincidence but, since we know so very little about the origins of the balk rule, it is something to consider.

Rule 20: But one base allowed when a ball bounds out of the field when struck.

Block has stated that this was a “relatively inconsequential rule” but that it “appears to be original to the Knickerbockers.”⁷²

Thorn had a rather provoking thought about this rule, writing that “For years I had thought the intent of this rule was to keep the ball out of the river, which the Knickerbocker outfield adjoined, owing to the expense and difficulty of ball manufacture. Today, I am inclined to think that this rule reflects the wish that the hallmark of the New York game should be fielding, not running or batting or throwing.”⁷³ If he is correct in his thinking, it brings in the possibility that this rule could have been used by the Gothams in 1837, as Wheaton stated that the

⁷¹ Search results for “balk” at the Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=balk>).

⁷² Block, p 92.

⁷³ Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, p 77

pitching rules the Gothams put in place were designed to “give some work to the fielders,” in contrast to other bat and ball games where “the players might stand around all afternoon without getting a chance to stretch their legs.”⁷⁴

While there is no evidence that this was not an original Knickerbocker rule, there exists the possibility that the Gothams may have used the rule first.

Conclusion

There is no real desire to challenge the historical legacy of the Knickerbocker Club and the importance of the 1845 rules. But it is always a good idea to put our beliefs to the test and learn what we actually know about a given subject as compared to what we believe we know. While it appears that most of what we base their legacy upon is wrong, the Knickerbocker Club was not Abner Doubleday. They were one of the most important pioneer clubs in baseball history and their rules helped shape the modern form of the game. Of this, there is no doubt. But the club and their rules do not deserve the place of primacy that has been given them by historians over the years. The Knickerbocker Club was not the first baseball club and they were not the first baseball club to write down a set of playing rules. The testimony of William Wheaton, by itself, proves that to be the case.

None of that is particularly groundbreaking news and most contemporary baseball historians know that to be true. However, the Knickerbockers still enjoy the reputation of having crafted a unique game – the New York game, the

⁷⁴ San Francisco Examiner, November 27, 1887.

Regulation game, the modern game. They are credited with the revolutionary introduction of foul-territory, of tag-outs and force outs, and of the three-out inning into the American game of baseball. But a close analysis of the historical antecedents of the Knickerbocker Rules show that there is very little that is revolutionary about their rule set. For the most part, they are a collection of known baseball rules that had been around for decades, if not centuries. Except, perhaps, for the introduction of the balk rule, the specific use of ninety-degree foul territory and, perhaps, the do-over foul, there is nothing particularly revolutionary about the Knickerbocker Rules.

What the 1845 rules represent is the consolidation of evolutionary trends in American baseball. We see antecedents to the foul territory rule, the tag-out rule, the three-outs per inning rule, and almost all of the significant Knickerbocker Rules but the game that developed in New York in the 1830s and early 1840s was unique in that it contained all of these evolutionary elements. There were variants of American baseball being played at the same time that contained each of these elements but none, except for the New York game, that contained all of them. The baseball players of New York were creating a unique version of baseball out of the evolutionary strands of games like trap ball, stool ball, schlagball, kit-cat, oina, English base ball and countless American baseball variants. The Knickerbocker Rules of 1845 represents a singular moment in that creation process. They do not represent the beginning of the process just as they did not mark the end of the process. Their significance is not that they were revolutionary, because they were not. The significance of the Knickerbocker

Rules of 1845 is that they provide us with a unique snapshot of the evolutionary development of baseball. And that is more than enough to secure the historical legacy of the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club.