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Consider the Backstop

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Consider the backstop. I am using "backstop" here not as a somewhat poetic term for the catcher, but rather am referring to the actual backstop. This piece of ballpark furniture is unremarkable, and therefore usually goes unremarked. This raises questions for the student of early baseball. When did backstops appear? What form did they take? And how far back from home were they placed?

While backstops are unremarkable, their absence is a different matter. The three earliest references I know describe fields lacking backstops. The first is from the New York Sunday Mercury of August 18, 1861, from an account of the Eckford Club of Brooklyn visiting the Harlem Club:

> The peculiarities of the Harlem ground, on which there is no stop-fence back of the catcher's position, and which afford unbounded limit to a ball that happens to pass the catcher, tended to much loss of time, particularly during the early part of the game, while McKellar and Beach acted as catchers. Almost every third or fourth ball pitched went past the catcher, when the bases were unoccupied, and not a few were pitched over and beyond the reach of the catchers. Nothing is gained by permitting the ball to have so much scope behind the catcher, and much time is unnecessarily lost.

The frequency of passed balls is not a sign of incompetent play. The Eckfords were at this time one of the best clubs in the country, and Beach was their regular catcher. The Harlems were not in the same class, but they were a solid second-tier club. The clue providing the explanation is that the passed balls occurred when the bases were empty. These were not what we would classify today as passed balls, but rather as wild pitches–a distinction not yet made. With no one on base, the pitchers of the early 1860s attempted to overpower the batters, sacrificing accuracy for speed. There was no penalty accrued for wildness, the base on balls being as yet undreamt of. Accuracy mattered with runners on base, and so the pitchers would ease up. The writer's objection to the Harlems' lack of a backstop was merely the time consumed in chasing down the overthrown balls.

We can infer from this that backstops were an established and expected feature of ball fields by 1861. We can only guess how far they go back. Presumably they require a regularly established ground devoted to baseball. These go back at least to 1845, when the Knickerbockers rented a ground at the Elysian Fields in Hoboken. It is reasonable to suspect that they were in use by 1857, when newspaper accounts of games in glorious detail begin to appear, since if backstops were a novelty they would likely have provoked comment.

The second account is from the Philadelphia City Item of August 25, 1866. It describes the grounds of two of the most prominent clubs in Philadelphia:

> We would respectfully suggest to the Olympics the propriety of putting up a board fence back of the catcher. It need not be so close to him as that on the Athletic ground, (which rather interferes with the catcher,) but near enough to stop those balls which pass him, and yet allow a base to be made. As it is, when the ball goes by him (in many cases not his fault, but owing to wild pitching) if a player be on the first base, he generally gets home before the catcher gets the ball; anyhow, he is sure of his third base, and not then by any good playing on his part. This is as fair for one side as the other, but it makes the game one of too much luck. Besides, it is not right that the catchers should have so much more to do than the rest of the fielders; it is imposing on human nature. Let this matter be attended to.

This tells that the backstop–at least at the Athletics' ground–was a board fence, not a screen which spectators could watch the game through. Where the Harlem and Olympic grounds are remarkable for not having a backstop, the Athletics' backstop is too close. How close is too close? The Philadelphia Sunday Mercury of May 6, 1866 has a woodcut of the Athletics' grounds. The backstop is a straight board fence apparently about six feet high and about twenty feet behind home. This seems plausible, but needs to be taken with a grain of salt, as these woodcuts often sacrificed perspective in favor of showing the various details of interest. The claim that it "interferes with the catcher" might seem odd until it is recalled that catchers played much further back than they do today. Exactly how far back is an open question, but it believable that they might back themselves into a too-close fence.

The third account is from the Philadelphia Sunday Mercury of September 2, 1866 relating the visit of the previous week of the Athletics to the Eureka Club of Newark. The Eurekas had, for some unknown reason, removed their backstop:

> It was remarked by all that the fence in the rear of the catcher had been removed, which gave rise to considerable discussion among the friends of the contestants. The result of its removal, however, was disastrous to the Eurekas, as Osborne, their catcher, allowed ten balls to pass him and Dockney only two.

Putting these all together, we can be confident that backstops were normal, at least on established playing grounds, by the 1860s and probably for some years prior. They were not universal, but their absence was unexpected enough to elicit comment.

This leaves the question of how far back they were placed from home. The close backstop of the Athletics' ground elicited additional criticism in the New York Dispatch of April 21, 1867:

> ...it is to be hoped that certain clubs that have had broad fences constructed a few feet in the rear of their catcher's position will see the unfairness of such contrivances, and have them removed altogether or placed so far in the rear as to be of no assistance to a catcher. We saw a game played in Philadelphia last season on a ground where they used one of these labor saving machines, and when a ball passed the catcher he simply faced about and caught it on its rebound from the fence, and the whole thing was accomplished so quickly that players either did not attempt to leave their bases at all,

> or if they did were almost invariably put out. Now this might work very well, if all the clubs erected these barricades, as the catchers would then have an equal chance to practice the above style of playing, but as many clubs will not use them at all, they had better be dispensed with altogether, for they are not at all in accordance with the spirit of the game, and we can find no rule among those adopted by the convention that sanctions or allows it.

Here the objection to the too-close backstop is not that it interferes with the catcher, but that it prevents runners from advancing on passed balls. This amounts to moral hazard, removing as it does the danger of the pitcher overthrowing the ball. This was considered serious enough that several years later the rules were amended to remedy this, as reported in the New York Sunday Mercury of December 4, 1870:

> Rule 6 was amended by adding a clause to section 6 prohibiting any fence from being erected within ninety feet of the home base, unless it be to mark the boundary of the grounds, in which case, if it be less than 90 feet distant, all passed balls touching such fence are to give one base. New York Sunday Mercury December 4, 1870

With this we have a lower limit to the question of how far was the backstop from home. Anything less than ninety feet was too close, permitted only if compelled by geography, with any runners given a base should a passed ball touch it. This rule would remain for many years. Eventually changes to catchers equipment and ideology would change this, and nowadays the backstop in a modern major league park typically is about fifty feet behind home plate.