

Cricket and the Rise of Baseball

Bruce Allardice, June 2015

It is well substantiated that Cricket preceded Baseball as America's first widespread "team" sport, with organized clubs, match games, and intercity match games.¹ This study will attempt to quantify how the two games developed in the U.S.

1. Chronology

As a gauge of the two sports' popularity, I did a survey of several online U.S. newspaper databases for the years 1840-1859. The cutoff date, 1859, was selected because all sources agree that, by 1860, baseball had eclipsed cricket in popularity. The search was for instances of the words "cricket club" and "base ball."² The former was chosen as a proxy for cricket because searches for the word "cricket" produced ten mentions of insects, names of steamboats, and titles of books, to every mention for the sport. Using the words "cricket club" lessens the number of potential hits for cricket, but this study is not about total numbers so much as it is comparisons between cricket and baseball."

	GenBank		Chron. Am.		19 th Cent.		News. Arch. ³		TOTAL	
	CC	BB	CC	BB	CC	BB	CC	BB	CC	BB
Dates										
1840-44	40	0	4	0	29	8	0	1	73	9
1845-49	76	8	7	0	44	13	5	0	132	21
1850-54	170	4	14	1	138	75	1	2	323	81
1855-59	537	850	84	95	166	108	174	187	961	1240

As can be seen, baseball simply doesn't register much until the late 1850s. Cricket clearly predominates in the newspaper reporting. This may be due to the fact that cricket clubs existed in many states by the early 1850s, whereas baseball was mostly confined to the area around New York City. Visits by touring English and Canadian cricket clubs also generated publicity for the sport.

A look at Genealogy bank by year, for the late 1850s, bears out baseball's rise to dominance in the country as a whole.

Dates	1855	1856	1857	1858	1859	1860
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Cricket club	45	96	111	114	171	141
Base ball	47	77	96	272	358	689

It appears that 1858 is the first year where baseball clearly predominates over cricket, nationally.

To try and get a more exact reading of the two sports, I did a survey of the *New York Clipper*, at the time the nation’s premier newspaper for sports coverage. In this survey, I included a search for the word “cricket,” in addition to the proxy “cricket club.”

Dates	1853	1854	1856⁴	1857	1858	1859
Cricket	56	96	138	217	184	197
Cricket Club	2	12	35	50	62	57
Base ball	0	4	25	47	56	56

As can be seen, “base ball” draws even with “cricket club” in 1858. But baseball doesn’t pull ahead, even by 1859. This may be due to the *Clipper* being a New York newspaper. New York was the nation’s hotbed for cricket, and newspapers in other areas did not follow the *Clipper*’s reporting on local NYC cricket games. Put another way, while cricket competed with baseball for popularity in the NYC area, baseball had surpassed cricket elsewhere. And even in New York, by 1856 the *Clipper* was admitting that “Base Ball has made rapid progress in this vicinity during the past year, and bids fair to become a formidable rival to the more scientific game of cricket.”⁵

2. Cricket vs. Baseball, by location

I also looked at how cricket and baseball spread geographically. This analysis takes the 20 biggest American cities, per the 1850 census,⁶ and compares when each city had its first cricket club and first baseball club. (Cities are listed in order of population rank in 1850.)

City	1st Cricket	1st Baseball
New York	1837	1846
Baltimore	1846	1858
Boston	1843 ⁷	1857
Philadelphia	1831	1858
New Orleans	1828	1858
Cincinnati	1845	1858
Brooklyn	1844	1849
St. Louis	1858	1859

Albany	1837	1856
Pittsburgh	1853	1860
Louisville	1843	1858
Charleston	1848	1866
Buffalo	1857	1856
Providence	1856	1857
Washington	1848	1859
Newark	1845	1855
Rochester	1853	1858
Lowell	1856	1866
Chicago	1851	1856
Richmond	1857	1866

The two bat-ball games shared much, perhaps most notably many of the same players. For example, the cricket playing Wright brothers (George and Harry) brought to baseball both their existing cricket skills and their genius for organizing clubs, to become baseball's first superstars. The sports shared playing grounds as well. For example, the 1858 game between Chicago's two best baseball clubs was held at the Prairie Cricket Club grounds, and an 1860 game between two Boston baseball clubs was played at the Boston Cricket Club grounds in Cambridgeport. Cricket teams sometimes played baseball teams at the latter's game, most notably the Detroit Base Ball Club and the Detroit Cricket Club in 1860. Indianapolis made official the connection of the two sports, hosting a "Base Ball and Cricket Club" in 1866.⁸

As can be seen, cricket invariably preceded baseball, in every part of the country. The average gap between the two sports in these 20 cities is 11.5 years, showing that the average big city had several year's exposure to the team sport of cricket, prior to forming a baseball club. While the cricket line of bat-ball games aren't direct predecessors of baseball, the fact that these cricket teams existed, and that they were composed of respectable "middle class" individuals, undoubtedly helped popularize team sports in general, and baseball clubs in particular.

¹ Cf George Kirsch, "American Cricket: Players and Clubs Before the Civil War," *Journal of Sports History*, vol. 11 no. 1 (Spring 1984), 28-50; Tom Melville, *The Tented Field: A History of Cricket in America* (1998); George Kirsch, *Baseball and Cricket: The Creation of American Team Sports, 1838-72* (2007); P. David Sentence, *Cricket in America, 1710-2000* (2006). Kirsch's article explores the sociological dimensions of cricket playing as well.

² The game was almost always given as two words ("base ball") at this time. The one word usage did not become common until the 1890s.

³ Genealogybank, Chronicling America, 19th Century Newspapers, Newspaper Archive. Four databases are chosen, to get the widest possible data results.

⁴ No issues for 1855.

⁵ *New York Clipper*, November 22, 1856.

⁶ The 1850 is chosen because it better reflects the adult age population spread of the 1850s, than the 1860 census. The 1850 lists 4 "districts" of Philadelphia, and the Williamsburgh section of what is now Brooklyn, as separate cities.

"First" baseball dates taken from www.protoball.org. "First" native cricket club dates from my own newspaper database research; Melville; Protoball database; and Kirsch.

⁷ Boston had cricket club as early as 1809. The Boston Cricket Club existed in 1843.
For Boston and Philadelphia, the “Massachusetts’ and “Philadelphia” baseball games were played earlier than the dates listed here. The dates given here are for the New York game.

⁸ References from Protoball database.