

Sliding in the Amateur Era

Richard Hershberger

Did base runners slide in the amateur era, and if so, how frequently? Looking at period reports, the most striking feature is that the evidence is thin. There are undoubted reports of runners sliding, but they are few and far between. The problem then is to determine if reports of sliding are rare because sliding was rare, or because it was commonplace and therefore unremarkable: are they man bites dog reports, or dog bites man? Or something in between?

To finish off the preliminaries, there are several distinct acts which today share the name “slide.” There is no hint of evidence for the hook slide or the pop-up slide in the amateur era. What there is evidence for is the straight slide into the base, both head-first and feet-first. There also are two reasons for a runner to slide: to avoid a tag, or to stop quickly without overrunning the base. Part of our task is to determine which of these or both led to sliding in the amateur era.

The earliest example in my notes of what seems to be a slide is from the New York Clipper of October 10, 1857:

...one of the Liberty’s, running to the first base and falling upon it with his hands, was decided in time.

Did the player literally fall down on the base, or is this a case of there not yet being a conventional vocabulary for the writer to employ? Another point to consider is that 1857 is when we start to see gloriously detailed accounts of games. Absence of evidence is always weak evidence of absence. This is especially true of baseball events first documented to 1857, as there are so few earlier detailed descriptions of the game.

There are two similar accounts from the following year, from the New York Sunday Mercury of July 25, 1858 and October 31, 1858:

[picked nines New York vs. Brooklyn 7/20/1858] Davis struck a fine ball, and made the second base with a mighty close shave, the ball having been passed up so quickly to Holder that Davis hadn’t the twentieth part of a second to spare, and he only touched the base by sprawling on the ground. Judgment was asked, and the umpire decided Davis “not out.”

[Olympic of Brooklyn vs. Independent of Somerville 10/14/1858] A striker of the Olympic was running from the second to the third base, the ball was passed to the third base, and reached it nearly at the same time as the runner, but it was at least a foot from him in fair view, when he fell on the base—decided “out.”

47
48 These raise the same questions as the 1857 account. The last one is particularly
49 interesting. This is from a letter to the editor by a member of the Olympic club,
50 complaining about the umpire. Did the slide (or fall) by the runner catch the umpire
51 unprepared to properly interpret the play, or was it simply a blown call?

52
53 We first see a form of the word “slide” in this account, from the New York Sunday Mercury
54 of August 26, 1860:

55
56 [Atlantic vs. Excelsior 8/23/1860] McMahan ran from the second to the third base, where he was put
57 out... The ball was thrown by Leggett to Whiting to head off McMahan, who reached the base
58 simultaneously with the ball; but in “sliding in,” he so far overreached the base that his arm was the only
59 part of his body on the base. Judgment was asked for, and the umpire promptly decided that
60 McMahan was “not out.” But McMahan, immediately after, incautiously raised his arm from the base
61 before Whiting had a chance to deliver the ball; and the latter, detecting the movement, instantly
62 touched him with the ball, and demanded judgment, which the umpire, of course, gave—deciding
63 McMahan “out,” as he undoubtedly was.

64
65 The placing of “sliding in” in quotation marks suggests that this was not yet regarded as a
66 standard usage. Subsequent accounts use the word routinely and without the quotation
67 marks, suggesting that it was a recognized standard usage, which in turn implies that the
68 action it named was common enough to merit a standard name. This and later accounts
69 lack the hint of a pratfall. The simultaneous appearance of a standard vocabulary and
70 disappearance of the language of “falling” and “sprawling” may hint that those earlier
71 runners were truly sliding into the base, but the writers had not yet found the best
72 vocabulary to describe it.

73
74 The account also seems to describe a feet-first slide, since it is hard to see how
75 over-sliding head-first would leave only the arm touching the base. This seems to have
76 developed into a trend, according to this account from the Philadelphia Inquirer of June
77 24, 1865:

78
79 The system of which I disapprove, and I am confident I will be upheld by the majority of players is, that
80 on the field we notice the “slide game,” or when a player in an effort to gain his base will throw himself
81 on the ground, feet foremost, sliding for fully a distance of twenty feet.

82
83 Here are three more accounts, respectively from the New York Sunday Mercury of
84 September 15, 1861, August 12, 1866, and the Detroit Advertiser and Tribune October
85 18, 1866:

86
87 [Eckford vs. Eureka of Newark, 9/13/1861] [Northup of the Eureka at second base]. Anxious to avail
88 himself of all the chances, Northup seized the first favorable opportunity to run for the third base, and
89 started for it. The ball was there, however, as soon as he—notwithstanding he adopted the sliding
90 scale motive to avoid it. By accident, he raised his foot from the base while the ball was yet in the
91 hands of Grum, who, of course, immediately touched him, and demanded judgment, which the umpire
92 promptly pronounced in favor of the ball, and the second hand (Northup) was declared out. This
93 decision, though manifestly just, was in direct antagonism to the feelings of the “outer circle,” and was
94 responded to by a general hiss, which, however, had not effect upon the invincible “Peter,” [Pete

95 O'Brien] who knew he was *right*.
96
97 [Mutual vs. Union of Lansingburgh 8/10/1866] In the third inning, McQuade retired, from lifting his hand
98 off the base and being touched by Goldie, Waterman fielding the ball to the first-base finely.
99

100 Ives obtained his run by a tremendous jump and slide on to the base under the pitcher's hands.
101

102 The practice was mentioned by Henry Chadwick in 1868 in *The American Game of Base*
103 *Ball*:

104
105 Some base runners have the habit of sliding in to a base when they steal one.
106

107 In our final account the runner did not slide despite his teammate's calling to him to do so,
108 from the Philadelphia Sunday Mercury of July 12, 1868:

109
110 [Athletic vs. Excelsior of Rochester 6/29/1868] ...hope never forsook any of us, until Dick [McBride]
111 hesitated in the last inning between second and third base, undecided whether to run back to second or
112 to go on; and, mind you, there was a man on second. Dick's hesitancy broke the camel's back. Had
113 he listened to "Cuthy," and slid for his third, he would have got it. Had he run for it he would have made
114 it.
115

116 What to make of these accounts? There aren't many. In the fourteen years from 1857
117 through 1870, the end of the NABBP era, my notes contain but ten mentions of what can
118 plausibly be interpreted as sliding. One certainly can take from this that sliding was very
119 rare indeed, but I am not so sure. Fully half of the accounts describe the runner being
120 put out: one through (alleged) umpire error, one when the runner failed to slide when he
121 should have, and three when the runner recklessly removed himself from the base
122 following a successful slide. The plays merited mention not because the runner
123 performed an unusual act, but because of the subsequent out. (One constant feature of
124 early baseball reporting is that how outs were made is noted more carefully than how runs
125 were made: the reverse of modern baseball reporting, reflecting the early condition that
126 outs were harder to get than today, and runs easier.) This, combined with the other
127 citations, suggests that by the post-war period slides were not extraordinary.
128

129 Another point to take away is that many of these accounts seem to describe attempts to
130 evade a tag rather than to prevent overrunning the base. A bit of indirect evidence that
131 preventing such overrunning was not the point of sliding comes from the enactment for
132 the 1871 season of a new rule allowing runners to overrun first base without risk of being
133 tagged out. This rule was due to the danger of injury from pulling up suddenly, according
134 to the New York Clipper of December 10, 1870:

135
136 This rule was suggested by George Wright, whose lameness, like that of many other players, is
137 attributable to an effort to check his speed when running to first base. The new rule, by allowing the
138 base runner time to stop beyond, will avoid a frequent cause of injuries to base runners.
139

140 If sliding was a recognized option for stopping quickly at the base, no mention was made
141 in discussions of the revised rule, and players were risking injury despite having this

142 option.

143

144 So in summary, I believe that sliding was, at least by the post-war period, less common
145 than today, but not extraordinary, and was used more to avoid tags than to stop quickly.

146

147 I close with an excerpt not from a period source, but from Peter Morris's discussion of
148 sliding from *A Game of Inches*:

149

150 Sliding does appear to have remained uncommon in the early days of baseball, and generally
151 inadvertent. That is, a runner realized at the last moment that he would be unable to avoid overrunning
152 and base and therefore chose instead to dive. Thus a premeditated slide may have been regarded as
153 a novelty.

154

155 I quote this in respectful disagreement with Morris. I come to a different conclusion, but
156 intelligent observers can read the evidence differently.