

Early Ballplaying in New England:

What We Think We Know, and What We Wish We Knew

A main purpose of the New England Roots project is to find more facts about the evolution of baseball-like games in America's easternmost states.

Several books have treated aspects of that evolution, some with a good supporting evidence, and some with common-sense surmises. The data set that became Protoball.org was supported by SABR Headquarters to gather and store ground truths, starting with the first known game of modern (New York style) base ball in many far-flung places within and beyond the United States.

The Protoball website, most of which focusses on events prior to the first professional base ball league in 1871, was built by and for baseball researchers, most of them members of SABR.¹ If you are focused on ballplaying in a certain area, you may want to first check Protoball.org for clues and leads.

A. Protoball's Registries of Ballclubs, Ballgames, and Base Ball Firsts

[1] Clubs: The Protoball website lists well over 6,000 early modern-rules ballclubs.

Some examples:

- **56 modern-rules clubs are listed for Vermont, dated from 1858 to 1870**
- **240 such clubs are listed for Massachusetts for that period**
- **Some data on a 76 varied predecessor games in MA are arrayed**

¹Ten of more researchers are reckoned to have supplied *more than 100 data points* the website, led by Bruce Allardice, John Thorn, Peter Morris, Bob Tholkes and Richard Hershberger.

30 **[2] Individual Ballgames: More than 12,000 early modern-rules games are**
31 **tabulated, many of them with at least some details of play.²**

32 **Some examples:**

- 33 • **15 Connecticut games are listed, all from 1858-1860**
- 34 • **15 games are included from New Hampshire (1858-1869)**
- 35 • **Only one contest is shown for Vermont, an 1861 game**

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37 **[3] Assorted base ball firsts and milestones: Protoball's overgrown**
38 **Chronology³ is approaching 2000 entries, and some more specialized**
39 **collections are also available.**

40 **Some examples:**

- 41 • **A search for "Maine" yields 27 Chronology hits from 1720-1865**
- 42 • **A search for "RI" yields 18 Chronology hits from to 1770-1866**
- 43 • **A search for "Boston" yields 138 Chronology hits from 1700-1870**
- 44 • **A search for "within 23 miles of [Hartford]" yields 9 Chron. hits**
- 45 • **A search for "round ball" yields 20 hits, 15 in MA, two in ME and VT**
- 46 • **A search for "Civil War" yields nearly 400 Chronology hits**
- 47 • **A search for "Civil War AND CT" yields 8 hits for 1862-1864.**

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49 **B. Protoball's Prett- Darn-Good Site-Search Page**

50 **Protoball's data bases don't make for coherent reading. Most users start**
51 **their sessions at the "enhanced search" page at**
52 **<https://protoball.org/Special:EnhancedSearch>. To find things within your**
53 **zones of interest, play around on that page. Search results are formatted**
54 **such that you can cut/paste results in a separate document.**

55 ***Note:* If you find Protoball data to be incomplete or inaccurate, tell us so**
56 **that we can avoid misleading later users.**

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² Note: Tens of New England ballgames in Bob Tholkes' Registry of Interclub Matches are not yet searchable on Protoball. To inspect his spreadsheet, go to https://protoball.org/Bob_Tholkes_RIM_Tabulation

³ This effort was inspired by a superb 71-item list of earliest base ball events compiled by John Thorn and Tom Heitz.

58 **C. Some Things We Wish We Knew**

59 **Here is an initial scattershot list of things we wish we understood better.**
60 **Many take the form of desired pattern recognition that can't be done with**
61 **currently available historical data.**

- 62 • **Did modern base ball spread from east to west in New England, or from**
63 **large population centers to smaller towns, or what? Can we explain**
64 **those areas where it took hold only slowly?**
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- 66 • **Was the spread of the game affected by ethnic factors, by busy**
67 **channels of commerce, by the rise of the sporting press, or other**
68 **factors?**
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- 70 • **Was the Massachusetts Game played throughout New England,**
71 **including western CT and northern VT and ME, prior to the Civil War?**
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- 73 • **Was the Mass Game a direct consequence of the evolution of simpler**
74 **baserunning games like round ball, barn ball, goal ball, etc.? Or was it**
75 **invented in the Boston area in the mid-1850s?**
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- 77 • **Over what geographical area was the traditional American game of**
78 **wicket played? Can we explain why it seemed to be especially popular**
79 **in central MA and northeastern CT?**
- 80
- 81 • **Was the phenomenon of late-1860's "Base Ball Fever," replete with**
82 **sunrise and sunset play, profuse local company teams, etc., found**
83 **throughout New England? If not, can we explain which areas seemed**
84 **immune to base ball's seductive charms?**
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- 86 • **Early baserunning games tended to have some rules – overhand**
87 **deliveries to batters, the plugging of baserunners, the fly rule – that**
88 **were at first resisted by adherents of the New York game. Can we**
89 **really explain why?**
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- 91 • **In the England of the late Middle Ages and beyond, women are known**
92 **to have played stoolball and other athletic pastimes. Did English**
93 **emigrants fail to bring such tastes to America, or was female play here**
94 **common but largely unreported?**

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- **Is there evidence that English rounders was a direct precursor of base ball in New England?**