

The Next Destin'd Post

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Interview with John Thorn

Protoball:

How is the job of Official Historian of Baseball different from what you imagined it might be? How is it the same as you expected?

John Thorn:

From day one, I knew I had the major assignment of chairing the origins committee. What this entailed was not set out for me, but early on I settled upon what I believed would be the most promising path to an illuminating official report. This would be not to look for as a spokesperson for the game's past and the more haystack needles in the 18th century but to see baseball's rise and flower as a sequence of serial beginnings, with interesting variations in many locales at many times. This meant more work for me, and for my esteemed colleagues and committee panelists, but it was highly rewarding work. Building out the memory lab website and populating the "our game" blog with origins reports was an unforeseen "assignment" but one I embraced. (fortunately I was untroubled by failed expectations as I came to the job with none in particular; in general my, my hope was that I would give good service to the game that has given me so much.

I confess to having been a bit surprised--and pleased--by the level of media interest in baseball's history and, by extension, its official historian. I believe I have settled in comfortably

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as a spokesperson for the game's past and the pleasures it holds for fans of any age.

Protoball:

Interesting; this sounds congruent with the small "local origins" project that sabr's origins group started a while back. In general terms, what are the new observations coming out of the MLB committee's work on the serial beginnings?

John Thorn:

The "local origins" or spread project was of course the inspiration for our committee's vision of serial beginnings (rather than one light-bulb moment). We extended from the SABR vision to inquire of the international baseball community, via the federation chiefs of more than a hundred nations, how baseball was believed to have begun in their

homelands. It would have been easier, of course, to offer up our own understanding of how baseball originated in, say, Japan or Venezuela,

Interview with John Thorn,

but that would have denied us access to locally embraced legends, which were generally more fact based than our own Doubleday tale.

Protoball:

Have you run into many people in the MLB orbit who are interested and knowledgeable about base ball before the pro era, which began in 1871?

John Thorn:

By and large, no. But memory lab has enticed many club representatives to take a localized interest in how baseball may have begun in their states or cities.

Protoball:

How is the memory lab at <http://mlb.mlb.com/memorylab/index.jsp> making out? It looks like there are already about 250 offerings there, including Commissioner Selig's . . . And yours.

John Thorn:

The memory lab campaign has been designed to enlist ordinary fans as well as baseball professionals to share their top personal memories of baseball has proven more present centered--the last decade or so, predominantly — than I might have anticipated. All the same, the effort has been worthwhile in conveying the message that an appreciation of baseball's

history, and our own within it, enhances our pleasure in the current game.

Protoball:

The report of your origins committee must be due out soon. Will it have any new things to say about the game's earliest years?

John Thorn:

We will have many surprises for the casual observer, if few for the devotee of the game's ancient days. The committee's objective was not to break new ground — although we will have done so, and it will be universally welcomed--but to consolidate the best current knowledge about how baseball began and spread across North America and the world.

Protoball:

What new findings might startle the casual baseball fan?

John Thorn:

I might point to the story of the polish workers playing ball at Jamestown in 1609, about which David Block wrote for the special origins issue of “base ball” (see <http://ourgame.mlblogs.com/?s=1609>). Even experts have been amazed that (a) Poles were at Jamestown and (b) that they played a bat and ball game that may be part of baseball's family tree (Pilka Palantowa). The bibliographic foundations for this revelation are, to put it mildly, shaky. However, this find led block to ruminate on the allied game of long ball, which bears further study.

Digger Updates

César Gonzáles Gómez

César introduced several new finds in his “March, Conquest, and Play Ball: The Game in the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848,” *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game*, volume 5, number 1 (Fall 2011), pp 13 – 22.

David Block

David, a member of the MLB Committee on Origins, worked with Committee chair John Thorn to establish a record of the spread of baseball to foreign countries. He continues to deepen his research on English base-ball from the 1740s to 1900. He has now amassed about 150 references to the game. He continues to doubt that a bat was uniformly used in early English base ball.

Priscilla Astifan

Priscilla is moving ahead on a manuscript on the history of baseball in Rochester NY. She has also joined colleagues to form the Rochester Baseball History Association, which is preparing an exhibit for the Rochester Public Library next April on local baseball history that will include material loaned by the HOF.

Jeff Kittel

“This Game of Games”, a snazzy website dedicated to the history of 19th century St. Louis baseball, is the creation of Jeff Kittel. See (<http://thisgameofgames.blogspot.com/>.) Jeff has agreed to help curate Protoball’s “Glossary of Games” feature, which is meant to serve as a registry for diverse baseball-like games, both those that precede our game and that appear to have later been derived from it (http://protoball.org/Glossary_of_Games). In that role he has helped write short accounts of evidence about town ball, the Massachusetts game, and English Rounders (<http://protoball.org/Essays>.) He has contributed essays to SABR’s Pioneer Project reports and to The Rank and File of 19th Century Major League Baseball. (<http://www.amazon.com/Rank-Century-Major-League-Baseball/dp/0786468904>) Jeff is currently working on an extensive monograph on baseball’s full history in St. Louis, in which he traces the roots of the game in the city back to the 18th century.

Bob Tholkes

Bob published “We Hope They Will Not be Disappoint,” A Survey of the New York Rules Base Ball Season of 1861,” in *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game*, volume 5, number 2 (Fall 2011), pp 5-12.

Brian Sheehy

"I can read all about variant games in books and on the net, but I find I don't really understand them until I play them," reports Brian Sheehy. Brian teaches "Sports of the Past" to upperclassmen at North Andover High School, north of Boston. Among the safe-haven games the students have studied (and played) are Knickerbocker rules base ball, the Massachusetts game, wicket, cricket, stoolball, and rounders. He is thinking about trying the ancient Russian game of lapta, and perhaps Irish rounders, in the spring.

The Ad Hoc "Spread of Baseball" Crew

Several people helped Larry McCray put together information on the domestic spread of base ball for the Thorn Committee, including Bruce Allardice, Richard Hershberger, Jeff Kittel, Marty Payne, Mark Brunke, Priscilla Astifan, John Ruoff, Rich Arpi, John Zinn, Bill Humber, Scott Fiesthumel, Greg Perkins, and Mike Vance.

Houston's Larry Dierker Chapter of SABR

"Houston's Larry Dierker Chapter of SABR is compiling Houston Baseball: The Early Years, which will include coverage of the Pre-professional era. Bob Dorrill (bdorrill@aol.com) is coordinating the effort, and Mike Vance is covering the arrival and diffusion of the NY game in the Houston area during the origins era (prior to 1871). Mike has also contributed Texas data to the MLB Origins Committee's fact-finding effort on the domestic spread of base ball.

Larry McCray

When not wrestling with the new Protoball website, Larry McCray has been attending once again to cutting into the backlog of information sent to the site for uploading. A member of the MLB Origins Committee, he coordinated an informal but spirited effort to gather and interpret new data on the spread of base ball across the United States.

The Story of George Thompson's 1823 Find

Twenty-five years ago or thereabouts, I was feeling bored and frustrated. The solution? Travel. But I was burdened by a job, and by having no money. (I know that Thoreau thought that having no money was liberating, but he was a crank.) The next-best solution? Time-travel. And so I set forth.

George Thompson's Startling 1823 Find, continued

My favorite destination was New York City in the 18th & 19th centuries. My vehicle, most of the time, was a newspaper. Sometimes I would travel by diary, or by a collection of letters, and occasionally through a novel. With experience, I came to prefer the period between 1750 and 1850.

One evening in the spring of 2001, when I had taken the National Advocate back to April, 1823, I came upon The Paragraph That Made Me Famous. The Paragraph was a letter to the editor, saying that the writer had just come from watching a group of active young men playing the manly and athletic game of base ball.

I supposed that this was an important find, and the next morning I called the Hall of Fame, and spoke to someone who assured me that indeed it was. Since the game had been played on what had been a rich guy's country estate, on the west side of Broadway, between Washington Place and 8th street, a spot that several hundred thousand New Yorkers pass every day -- it's true that many of them pass it underground, but still . . . -- I supposed that the New York Times would be interested.

I made a couple of ineffectual tries at getting the Times's attention, then gave the problem to the office of public relations where I was then working. Before long I was talking with a young reporter named Edward Wong. (A few years later, he was reporting from the field in Afghanistan -- there must have been days when he wished he was back in New York, talking with an addled old librarian about the prehistory of baseball. When he came to see me a second time, and then a third, I began to think that when the story came out, it would be more than what I had been hoping for, a paragraph or two somewhere on the pages of local news.

The story appeared on Sunday, July 8, 2001, on the front page, and above the fold! "Above the fold" will mystify the youth of today, but back then, all newspapers put on the front page the stories the editor thought were the most interesting, to lure people into putting down their money and taking up the paper. But a broadsheet like the Times sits on the newsstand folded so that only the top half of the front page is visible, so for a story to be above the fold is an additional distinction. Do I need to explain to the youth of today what a newsstand used to be? I was looking at the paper in astonishment, over breakfast, when the telephone rang: a reporter from the United Press, to get their version of the story. Then a call from a local television station, then a radio station. I had to go to my library and meet a camera crew from a television station that wanted to show their viewers the actual microfilm reader I had found The Paragraph on. A sports-talk show from Cincinnati called. The broadcaster asked what newspaper had carried The Paragraph. I said, the National Advocate. He said, "Woa, the National Advocate? I've never even heard of the National Advocate!" I thought, you and 280 million other Americans. The BBC called, and not a sports-talk show, either, where Nigel calls to vent about his cricket team. They put me on hold until my time slot came up, and I heard the story that was the lead into my story: a discussion of the Kyoto Accord. Meanwhile, the Times distributed three versions of its original story to subscribers to its news service: the full original version, a shorter version, and a much shorter version. Between the Times's network and the United Press, the story reached a newspaper in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, among many others.

George Thompson's Startling 1823 Find, concluded

So I was famous for about 72 hours, before being allowed to sink back into obscurity. Actually, I was only present for the first 48 hours, having long had a ticket to fly to Iceland and Norway. On the airplane, the stewardesses passed out newspapers. I chose the International Herald Tribune. My story was on the front page, though I don't remember now whether it was above the fold. Meanwhile, back in New York, my son, who I was sharing an apartment with, took the last straggling telephone calls and impersonated me, giving interviews and explaining where it left Abner Doubleday.

An odd quirk to all this was that the spring evening when I found The Paragraph was probably the third time I had looked at that issue of the Advocate. A few years before I had written a book on the "African Theatre", an all-black theatre company active in New York between 1821 and 1823, and the Advocate had been by far the best source of information on it. So certainly I had gone through it once before, and probably twice, while researching the theatre. But then I learned that another small theatre had run into problems similar to ones that had helped break up the African Theatre, but its problems had landed in court, and the editor of the Advocate had testified. Surely, he must have reported on the trial, in detail. He hadn't, not a word, but in hunting through his paper for some mention, I came upon The Paragraph.

— George A. Thompson

That 1823 Paragraph

"I was last Saturday much pleased in witnessing a company of active young men playing the manly and athletic game of 'base ball' at the (Jones') Retreat in Broadway [on the west side of Broadway between what now is Washington Place and Eighth Street]. I am informed they are an organized association, and that a very interesting game will be played on Saturday next at the above place, to commence at half past 3 o'clock, P.M. Any person fond of witnessing this game may avail himself of seeing it played with consummate skill and wonderful dexterity.... It is surprising, and to be regretted that the young men of our city do not engage more in this manual sport; it is innocent amusement, and healthy exercise, attended with but little expense, and has no demoralizing tendency."

-- The National Advocate, April 25, 1823, page 2, column 4,

The New Protoball Website

The new website, created by the inventive Dave Anderson, is at <http://protoball.org/>. We are now able to make continuous updates, and there are some new features. We are very grateful to Dave Smith and Tom Ruane of Retrosheet for offering Protoball a corner of their server farm for the last 7 years. They have been gracious and thoughtful hosts, and in fact Retrosheet itself provided an organizational model for us in Protoball's infancy.

The “Spread of Baseball” Database

With the SABRpedia winding down, we are putting its 1,800-plus data entries on the Protoball site. The Spread Project started as a SABR Origins Committee effort and was given a big boost by John Thorn's MLB Origins Committee's extension of the data base. The all-time ace of Spread data is the prolific Bruce Allardice, who single-handedly changed our image of the origins of base ball in the US South and uncovered many, many local origins in the North, too.

New Features on the Website

Among the new and enhanced features of the website are:

- * A new site-search function, which allows logic searches and organizes results well.
- * A reorganized “glossary of 230-plus base-ball-like games”, at http://protoball.org/Glossary_of_Games, which is co-curated by Jeff Kittel.
- * Space for essays and presentations on origins at <http://protoball.org/Essays>.
- * A revamped section on origins “Diggers,” with several new faces, at <http://protoball.org/Diggers>.

Plans for a new “Pre-Pro Era Database”

Now in beta testing, we plan for a February opening of data base that incorporates club, game, player, and home grounds data, thus providing a common home for Craig Waff's 1680-game Games Tabulation 1.0 data (http://protoball.org/Games_Tabulation), the Spread of Base Ball data from SABR-Origins, material from the masterful books on Base Ball Pioneers by Peter Morris, et.al, etc.

Full PBall Chronology Data Displayed on MLB.com

see <http://mlb.mlb.com/memorylab/chronology/index.jsp?start=1826&end=1870>. MLB.com is also creating a mirror site for Protoball's Glossary of Games at http://protoball.org/Glossary_of_Games.

A New Find from Tom Altherr

In a charming 1867 volume, *Winnie and Walter's Talks with Their Father about Old Times*, Times (Boston: J.E. Tilton and Company, 1867 [1860]), pp. 54-56), the father delivered an extended disquisition about ball games in his youth in New England. That was definitely before 1840 and more likely in the 1820s, or the 1830s at the latest. (The book had an 1860 copyright registration, so the author penned it in that year or in the 1850s). The detail of this recounting merits full excerpting:

"I think the boys used to play ball more when I was young than they do now. It was a great game at that time, not only among the boys, but with grown-up people. I know that playing ball is getting into fashion again, but I don't think it is as common even yet as it used to be. We had, I remember, a good many different kinds of ball. There was "barn-ball," when there were only two boys to play, one to throw the ball against the barn and make it bound back, and the other to strike at it with his club. Then there was "two-hold-cat," when there were four boys, two to be in and knock, and two to throw. Then there was "base-ball," when there were a good many to play. In base-ball we chose sides, and we might have as many as we pleased on each side -- five or fifty, or any other number.

"Then there was "wicket-ball," as we called it in the part of the country where I lived. In this game, two sticks, some five or six feet long, were laid on some little blocks near the ground, and the ball, which was a large one, was rolled on the ground, and the one that rolled it tried to knock off this stick, while the one that was in and had the bat or club, was to strike the ball and not let it knock the stick off. If the stick was struck off, then the one knocker was "out." Or if he hit the ball and raised it in the air, and any one on the other side caught it, he was "out." I find that ball-playing changes some, and is different in different parts of the country, but it was a very wide-awake sport, and there was no game in which I took more delight. On 'Lecture-day, as it was called, of which I have spoken before, all the boys and young men, and even men who were older, thought they must play ball. On town-meeting days and training days, this game was almost always going on."

Tom's Comments: Allowing for the somewhat "in-my-day" tone, there are few interesting items in this passage. Note the unusual spelling of two old cat or two o' cat. Was there some action of holding the ball, holding the bat, holding the runner that inspired the use of the word "hold?" The initial claim that ball play was more popular in his youth is at first a head-scratcher given the surge of popularity of baseball in the 1850s and 1860s. But what if he reckoning was accurate, if only for his part of New England? That would be interesting evidence for baseball historians trying to measure the trajectory of the game's development. Did what he called "base-ball" more resemble town-ball, or did the word "base-ball" have a wider currency that we have suspected? The description of wicket-ball seems slightly askew from other accounts --regional variation or memory lapse? Last, the civic holidays that ball play accompanied were not always in clement seasons. Training days tended to be during milder or hot weather, but town meeting and election days often occurred in March and November. The author's points about the importance of ball play may be stronger than at first glance, if the players did not let the prospect of foul weather discourage their zeal.

Bob Tholkes' Notes - Key Origins Posts on 19CBB

Baseball in the Sandwich Islands || Free-range baserunning.

Richard Hershberger posted an 1866 item from the *Philadelphia Sunday Mercury* about a base ball game in Hawaii where a base runner fled on horseback rather than be tagged out. Richard could not vouch for the item's veracity, but it led to a discussion about the origins of the game in Paradise. Richard later posted an item in the *Philadelphia City Item* also telling the story. Richard Puff and Monica Nucciarone provided information about Hawaiian sources that might provide corroboration.

"Pitching" does not mean "Underhand".

Bob Tholkes posted an 1864 item indicating the early rule requiring that balls "sent in" to batters be "pitched" rather than "thrown" did not equate to requiring an underhand delivery.

Is THIS where bunting started?

Bob Tholkes posted an 1864 item recounting a muffin match in Brooklyn where a batter deliberately tried to "hit the ball slightly so as to have it drop near the home base", possibly the earliest contemporary reference to a bunt attempt.

Corked Bats in 1859-- in Cricket

Bob Tholkes posted a quote from an 1859 article describing how the Boston Eleven used newly-invented corked bats in a cricket match. Richard Hershberger noted that cricket historically has permitted experimentation with materials for bats.

Early Lingo - "Steal" vs. "Theft"

Richard Hershberger, noting use of "steal to" in referring to the act of base stealing in an 1867 account, posited that its use to refer to advancing from one base to another was intended to have the meaning of moving stealthily from one to another, rather than a "theft" of a base. Bob Tholkes and John Thorn commented. Marcus Dickson provided examples, also in 1867, of references to steals favoring the "theft" interpretation. Richard concluded that the word was variously interpreted at the time.

John Brown's Body - Accounted For

Bob Tholkes posted an 1864 note that a Powhatan Club player from Brooklyn, John Brown, was reported missing in action with his Civil War regiment and asked if the fate of a player with such a common last name could be traced. John Zinn posted a link to a source listing the individual as later discharged due to disability.

