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Origins of Baseball Revealed - Trying to Speed Up the Game

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The heat and humidity of late July is sending me slouching towards the Dog Days of August. The dread miasma is creeping in from the swamps and the vapors hang in the saturated night air. The tropics of Central Florida drain your energy and create hallucinatory conditions. Some days it's so bad that not a creature is stirring not even The Mouse.

Am I imagining things or have the last few weeks seen an extraordinary number of discoveries that could alter the History of Baseball?

Two weeks ago came the revelation that two newspaper references have been found that mention a game called "base ball" being played in Manhattan in April of 1823. This predates Alexander Cartwright's fete of writing down the rules of baseball in 1846. It also trumps the Abner Doubleday claims of Cooperstown invention.

This discovery was considered big news despite the fact that there are several references to "base ball" in writings from the 18th century. According to one account Washington's men played the game at Valley Forge. But then Columbus is credited with having "discovered" an America already populated by a substantial number of people he called "Indians."

This week brought more discovery news. The Wall Street Journal reported that two letters written by Abner Graves in 1905 have been found. Long assumed to have been lost, the letters were used by the notorious Mills Commission to support Albert Spalding's insistence that the Commission prove that baseball was invented in America.

I can now report that these letters are not actually from Abner Graves, but from Abner Alderson, who not only related in considerable detail the story of how Abner Doubleday went A.W.O.L. from West Point and was hiding out in Cooperstown, but that while in Cooperstown convinced James Fennimore Cooper to write down the rules of the game of baseball.

In an extended section of the second letter, Abner Alderson tells us of the concerns that Doubleday had about the pitch count in the new game of baseball. It appears that from the very beginning Doubleday realized that the length of the game might

become a problem if umpires did not call enough strikes. Doubleday recommended a close monitoring of the pitch count, and suggested that "strikes" as a coefficient of "pitches" be carefully accounted for in reference to "balls." This would then be "correlated with the mean of the length" of games involving the same plate umpire and then calculated for "X." None of this, noted Doubleday, would be done to "intimidate umpires" nor would any of the information derived from the study be used as "an evaluative tool" for umpires.

It would also appear that "The Three Abners" performed the National Anthem, before it was the national anthem, at a baseball game in Cooperstown on the Fourth of July in 1826, the same day that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson expired. Certainly this was a sign that God found special favor with both the new nation and the new game. The date of this game also trumps the claims of both Cartwright and Doubleday.

Is this discovery of these letters, coming in the same week as the Sandy Alderson Pitch Count Fiasco, simply a coincidence? Could this be the true explanation for the strange directive coming from the desk of the Director of Baseball Operations for major league baseball? Mr. Sandy Alderson could not be reached for comment on these possible connections and genetic influences, although Jon Entine will no doubt produce proof of the genetic links.

In an historical echo last week, Sandy Alderson, a descendant of Abner Alderson, issued a directive to major league umpires to reduce their pitch counts by calling more strikes. This seems to be part of the continuing quest by Bud's Brigade to reduce the length of games. Apparently there is believed to be some correlation between pitch count and game length, as well as number of strikes called and pitch count.

I know it's simplistic and unscientific, but let me suggest a few other alternatives to speed up the games. First, reduce the trips made by pitching coaches and managers to the mound, as well as catchers, infielders or outfielders. Recently Yankee broadcasters put the clock on pitching changes and found that they took an average of just over five minutes each. One game with ten changes saw an hour added to its length.

Second, cut back on the time between innings. Or, put another way, cut back on the amount of TV commercial time. A decrease of only one-minute would save upwards of twenty minutes per game.

Third, start enforcing the maximum time between pitches. That would save more minutes and make for sharper play by fielders who are not lulled into a comatose state by pitchers who resemble a human rain delay.

If none of this works, cut back to three balls and two strikes. Encourage batters to swing at the first pitch by making a called strike worth two strikes, and a swinging strike only one strike. When all else fails, order pitchers to throw more strikes.

Wisely Alderson, Sandy not Abner, retracted his directive once it came under both public and player association attack. Someone who has been around the game as long as Alderson certainly knows that the length of games is only minimally governed by umpire pitch counts. Clearly Mr. Alderson would only issue such an absurd directive under the influence of historical or genetic forces.

And now we have the smoking letters that explain it all.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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