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Canadian Baseball: A Bit of History

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Last Saturday in Atlanta when the Canadian national anthem was sung before the start of the World Series, history was made. Never before had a team from outside the United States participated in the World Series. Tuesday for the first time a World Series game was played outside the United States.

What may not be as well known is that baseball has been a part of Canadian life from the early 19th century, and that the evolution of baseball in Canada, mirrored developments in the United State. Canadians might even have a claim as the inventors of baseball.

Although Alexander Cartwright of the New York Knickerbocker Club is often cited as the inventor of baseball, his role really is somewhat less. What Cartwright did in 1845 was produce the first written rules of baseball in its modern form.

In recent years sport historians, Bob Barney and Nancy Bouchier have uncovered a similar act by a Canadian in Beachville, Ontario, in 1838. A medical doctor by the name of Adam Enoch Ford writing in 1886 recalled a game played on June 4, 1838. Ford's game was much more like Cartwright's than either the Massachusetts Game or the New York Game which preceded Cartwright's version of baseball.

We know that baseball and its predecessors were being played in southwestern Ontario in the early 19th century and that Cartwright's version of baseball made its way into southwestern Ontario by the 1850s. This is neither remarkable nor odd as there was a great deal of movement across the border between the United States and Canada and those who settled brought their pastimes with them.

The first baseball club organized in Canada was in 1854 when the Hamilton Maple Leaf Club formed using the model created by Cartwright's Knickerbocker Club of New York. In 1856 a club was organized in London, in 1860 in Ingersoll and Woodstock, and clubs followed in Dundas, Guelph, Stratford, and St. Mary's. Baseball fever swept Ontario. Tournaments were held, and as competition sharpened the inevitable appearance of professionals resulted. Guelph had the first professional team in Canada, the Maple Leafs, organized in 1864. By the early 70s they were going south to compete with U.S. teams, and U.S. teams were coming north.

Canadian participation in professional leagues across the border began in 1877 when London and Guelph joined the International Association. The London Tecumsehs won the league championship in the inaugural season. From that point on Canadian participation in minor league baseball was established, and shortly after the turn of the century Canadian based teams held membership in four minor leagues, with the number growing to six in the 1920s and 30s. The sportspages in the major urban centers of Canada were devoting the more space to baseball than hockey.

Meanwhile baseball spread rapidly across Canada and by the 1880s it was firmly established in the West. Baseball was played in Winnipeg in the 1870s, and in the mid-eighties the first professional league on the Prairies was established, the Manitoba Baseball League. From its early history in the 1880s the town of Medicine Hat in the North-West Territories had a baseball team that attracted much interest and competed with other towns in the area like Lethbridge, Moose Jaw, and even far away Donald in British Columbia.

The best known and longest enduring of Canadian baseball franchises were the two in the International League. Montreal joined the league in 1898 with the Royals eventually becoming the premier Brooklyn Dodger farm team. As such the Royals became the host to Jackie Robinson who broke the color-line in baseball in 1946. The Toronto Maple Leafs were the other International League entry joining in 1897 and remaining in the league until 1966. This rich heritage of Canadian baseball set the stage for the coming of the major leagues.

In the National League expansion of 1969 the Montreal Expos were awarded a franchise, along with San Diego. The Expos played at Parc Jarry a 28,000 seat facility which featured a municipal swimming pool beyond the right field wall which became a target for National League left-handed power hitters. After the 1976 Olympics the Expos moved into their new stadium which has become a money eating legend in its own right. The Expos have been close and, but for Rick Monday of the Dodgers, might have been the first Canadian team to get to the World Series.

In 1977 Toronto joined the American League as an expansion franchise. From the beginning it has been a marketing success, and on the field the Blue Jays have built a strong farm system relying heavily on Latin players as an inexpensive way to development. The financial success of this franchise has been both symbolized and enhanced with the opening of Skydome, the

52,000 seat retractable domed stadium which has led to yearly sales of over 4M tickets. Previous frustration on the field led many to think that the Jays would never break through and get to the World Series. This year they did, and a country with a rich and long baseball tradition has been able to celebrate that tradition at the highest level.

Over 150 Canadians have played in the major leagues, and at least one, Ferguson Jenkins is in the Hall of Fame. And the movie that left everyone misty eyed over baseball, Field of Dreams, came from the creative imagination of Canadian writer W.P. Kinsella, a Braves fan from Alberta.

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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