

What in the World is Vintage Base Ball?

Vintage Base Ball (originally spelled with two words) is the national pastime played as it was in the mid 19th century, and as many say, the way it was intended. A typical vintage base ball game is an event where participants wear the old style clothing or uniforms and play base ball, typically by the rules of the 1860, demonstrating the early history of base ball as they do so. This is not only fun to play and watch but serves as an educational tool, as well.

Vintage base ball demonstrates the spirit and ideals of the early days of our national pastime as we show how the game was intended to be played, in the spirit of good sportsmanship and with manners and courtesy. The various clubs are generally sponsored by or associated with historical parks and museums, with uniforms either based on generic historical designs or on those worn by local ball clubs who played in the respective areas in the past.

The Agricultural Heritage Museum in Boerne has a team as part of their historical programs that portray the farmers and merchants recreational past time in the Texas Hill Country. The team is called the Boerne White Sox Vintage Base Ball Team and represents the style of uniform used by that team in Boerne around 1914. Over 20 members have signed up with the White Sox team to practice and play other vintage teams around the state including the Montgomery College Saw Dogs, The Richmond Giants, The Farmers Branch Mustangs, The Cedar Hill Cartwrights, The Buffalo Gap Chips and more.

Since it's start in August of 2007, the White Sox team has traveled to Richmond Texas to play in the Presidents Cup over Labor Day weekend. Most recently, Nov 13-14 we played at The Farmers Branch Historical Park. If you want to get a taste for the game, you'll have a chance to see it be played soon. We invite all of the public to come out and watch us play on November 10th as we host the Veteran's Cup in Boerne at the Agricultural Heritage Museum. The event is free of charge and will start about 1:00 pm and will go on all afternoon.

The players are enthusiastic about being involved and are finding it exciting to be on the team. Ages range from 11 to 64 years and the team is co-ed. Here are some quotes from a few of the ballists:

*"I have never hurt so bad and felt so good and had so much fun in all my life."
– Wayne "Knuckles" Speaker*

*"I have played high school and college baseball. I also currently play in a baseball league in San Antonio. However, there is something about the Vintage "Base Ball" that really just ... "resonates" ... in a way that is much different from the way baseball is played today. It is base ball - the way it was meant to be played."
– Johnny "Cha Cha" Miller*

“My interest in VBB is primarily twofold 1) I enjoy researching and celebrating local and Texas history. 2) I believe one way a community retains its identity and "Sense of Place" is by continually remembering and recognizing its heritage and traditions through constant public awareness and appreciation of its unique cultural heritage - for both multigenerational families and new residents alike. “

– Paul “Biscuit Pants” Barwick

While we strive to authentically portray the people and customs of the 1860s, we do not dwell on the strife and conflict that also marked that time in our history.

We should also note that baseball was not widely played in Texas until the end of the 1860s, largely brought south by returning Confederate soldiers who had seen the game played in the north or who had even played it, possibly in Union prison camps. And while we refer to the ‘gentlemen’ who play on our team, we do not restrict our membership to the masculine gender, nor do we impose any other restrictions that might have been in effect during those times. After all, we’re here not only to educate, but to have fun and to entertain, which are in keeping with the spirit of the original game.

We play the game by the rules adopted by the National Association of Base Ball Players in 1860, choosing this year because they retained the character of the game as it was played before the refinements of the following decades which led it to more closely resemble the modern game.

What Equipment is used?

When playing Vintage Base Ball, no gloves are used; the catcher and fielders play with bare hands. Such equipment didn’t make an appearance until the 1870s and still weren’t commonly used until the 1880s.

The vintage base ball is about 10” in circumference and is not wound as tightly as the modern 9” ball, thus making it a little softer. However, weighing approximately 6 ounces, it’s about one ounce heavier than the modern ball.

Also, the hide or cover is usually a single piece of leather stitched in a ‘lemon peel’ fashion rather than the two piece (modern) design more commonly used by the 1870s.

Vintage bats are generally heavier and have thicker handles than modern bats.

Though the thickness of the barrel was not to exceed two and one half inches, there were no restrictions on length until 1869 when length was limited to 42”.

How Does the Game of Vintage Base Ball Differ from the Modern Game?

There are generally no called strikes or balls. Balls started to be called around 1863, though the number needed to award first base varied between three and

nine until 1889. The rules of 1860 did permit the umpire to begin calling strikes if he felt that the batter was deliberately failing to swing to delay the game or to bring about some unfair advantage for base runners but called strikes were common by the mid 1880s.

The pitcher throws underhand from 45'. Overhand pitching was not allowed until 1884. Because there is no specified strike zone, he is to pitch the ball in a way that the striker has a chance of hitting it.

Most early deliveries were slow pitch, but the fast pitch made its first appearance in 1858, though it was not widely used until a few years later. Overhand pitching was not allowed until 1884.

The distance to the pitching point was moved out to 50' in 1881, then to a spot 60', 6" from home plate in 1893. The pitcher's mound was added around 1904 and has undergone several changes in height over the years. Any fair or foul ball caught on the fly or on the first bounce is an out. The one bounce fly out in fair territory was eliminated in 1863, while the 'foul bound' out remained on the books until 1885

When a ball is caught 'on the fly', base runners must tag up or be put out (as with the modern version). By contrast, when the struck ball is caught after one bound, it is still in play, and although the batter is out, base runners have the option of attempting to advance without having to tag up. However, with no one running to first, a force is not in effect. *Some vintage base ball teams have enacted ground rules that consider a ball caught 'on the fly' as 'dead' and base runners who have attempted to advance are allowed to return safely.*

Whether a ball is fair or foul depends on where it strikes the ground first, not where it ends up. For example, a ball landing in fair territory that rolls or bounces foul is still a fair ball. The 'fair-foul rule' was done away with in 1876, but until then, many players specialized in such hits because balls hit into foul territory were often very hard to run down.

Fouls are not counted as strikes. That changed in 1901.

By the rules, foul balls are considered 'dead' until returned to the hands of the pitcher, (wherever he might be), but once he has it, runners who have not returned to their bases can be tagged out, and for this reason, spectators are asked not to touch a foul ball. *However, some team's ground rules might simply allow the runners a free return following any foul ball, mirroring the 1876 rule that determined that a foul ball was dead.*

By custom, the choice of first offense or defense is decided on the toss of a coin, and the winner of the toss can choose whether his team bats or takes the field first. Rules set in 1884 had the home team bat last.

The playing field is the same shape and size as the modern baseball diamond, with 90' base paths but bases are 12" square straw or sand filled canvas bags and the home plate and 'pitching point' are 9" to 12" white painted iron discs.

There should be a 12' line that runs across the pitching point that the pitcher stands behind, and he can actually stand 6' to either side of the center point. And instead of the modern batter's box, a 6' line runs across home plate and the batter should 'toe' this line. These dimensions and requirements underwent many changes over the next thirty five years.

The shortstop is allowed to play to either side of second base, depending on how the batter tends to hit. He may also play in the shallower parts of the infield or further into the outfield as needed.

There is only one umpire and he usually positions himself about 15' or 20' opposite the striker, or he might choose to move to a better position anywhere on or off the field to better observe the action (or to be in the shade). Additional umpires began to be added in the 1880s and 1890s.

The umpire loudly announces strikes, fouls, baulks and outs. He does not use hand signs or signals because those were not used until around the turn of the century.

The catcher might stand (not squat) anywhere from 5' to 25' behind the batter and often takes pitched balls on the bounce.

There is generally no bunting. That was something not commonly done until the 1870s.

If the batter overruns first base, he can be put out before returning. The overrun was finally allowed in 1870.

The regulation game is nine innings long unless a shorter game is agreed upon by both captains or declared by the umpire because of rain, darkness or other constraints. In any case, regardless of the score, an equal number of complete innings are to be played. A walk-off win is only done if agreed upon beforehand.

Old style ball grounds will not always have a fence or boundary, so home runs might be made simply by hitting the ball where it could not be returned before the striker makes his four bases. However, the two team captains of vintage base ball teams might agree on ground rules that a ball hit into an inaccessible area might simply be declared a single, double or triple, instead. Regarding the recording of a home run, in the early days, if a fielding error allowed a hitter to touch all the bases for a run, it was simply counted as a run and not reported as a home run.

No one may directly address the umpire without his permission, and only the team Captains are allowed to approach him to question his calls. By tradition, players who argue with the umpire might be subject to fines.

By some customs, it is acceptable for the umpire to ask for the opinion of players or even spectators if he cannot tell how a play went. It is understood that gentlemen and ladies will answer honestly.

Traditionally, players will report their runs to the scorekeeper at his table, and some teams will have the runners accompany this by striking or ringing a 'tally bell', although this might not have been done by the 1860s or '70s.

Ungentlemanly behavior such as spitting and cursing is not only discouraged, but often subject to a fine. Nicknames are common, even encouraged for players of Vintage Base Ball.

Players might good naturedly jeer their opponents, but will still often congratulate a particularly good play made by an opponent.

Vintage Base Ball players and participants demonstrate the customs of the times, wear old style clothing and use figures of speech and phrases common to the period. Hand shaking, back slapping and doffing caps in salute were the standard show of appreciation of good plays and runs scored. High fives were not!

Prior to a game, an announcer will give a short talk to the spectators, outlining most of the differences in the rules and customs, and during the game, he will again point out plays and calls that differ from the modern version.

Following the game, opposing teams will congratulate each other with rounds of huzzahs for a well played contest and then pass by each other in lines shaking hands. Afterwards, they might meet and dine together.

Attn: Ben, This following list could go into a side bar

Commonly Used Vintage Base Ball Jargon or Phrases

Match or Contest: Game

Grounds: Ball field

Club or Nine: Team

The Line (as in "Striker to the line"): Batter's box

Pitching Point: Forty five feet in front of home plate

Ace or Tally: A run or score

Apple, Pill, Horsehide, Onion: The base ball

Ballist or Baller: Ball player

Artist: Proficient player

Hurler, Bowler, Thrower, Feeder: Pitcher

Striker or Batsman: Batter
Behind: Catcher
Scouts: Fielders
Midfielder: Center fielder
Short Scout or Rover: Shortstop
Base Tenders or Defenders: Basemen
Blind Tom: Umpire
Hand: Offensive player or member of the team at bat
Hand out or Dead: Batter or runner put out
Side out or All out: Three outs
Make your first, Made his second, Took his third, etc: Phrases that refer to advancing or bases taken following a hit. (The terms Single, Double and Triple did not appear until the 1880s.)
Four Baser: Home run
Bloop or Banjo hit: Weak fly ball
Muff: Error
Boodler: Ungentlemanly maneuver
First Nine: The nine best players on a team or club
Second Nine: The next best players
Muffins: Players who are used as a last resort
Whitewash or Blind: Hold a team scoreless in an at-bat
Stinger: Hard hit ball
Dew Drop: Slow pitch
Daisy Cutter: Ground ball
Sky ball: High fly
Dead ball: Not in play, following a foul or fly-out.
Live ball: In play or following its return to the pitcher
Willow, Ash, Lumber, Timber or Wagon tongue: The bat
Spectators or Audience: Fans (a term not used until much later)
Cranks: Later 19th century term for fans
Brace or Chafe: Argue
Ginger, Grit or Pluck: Enthusiasm, determination or fine play
Hunkey Dorey: Great or fabulous
Bully: Great or special
Leg it!: Run hard
Stir your stumps!: Run faster or hustle
Show some ginger!: Play harder or smarter
Huzzah!, Well struck, sir! or Well caught, sir!: Cheers or compliments for a good game or a well made play. (These are terms that were used before, "Cool!", "Oh yeeeaah!", "Allriiight!" or "Hooh, hooh, hooh!".)
Tallykeeper: Scorekeeper
Soaking or Plugging: Putting a runner out by hitting him with the ball. This was done away with in 1845.

Don't miss it!

The Veteran's Cup

Vintage Base Ball Games

At the Agricultural Heritage Museum

102 City Park Road in Boerne

Saturday, Nov 10th

Call Kristy Watson for more information 210-445-1080

www.agmuseum.org

For more information on Vintage Base Ball Teams in Texas, go to www.vbbtexas.org

Fans or "Crankers" as we call them, are encouraged to dress in vintage clothing (suspenders or an old style hat would be fine and dandy.)

Attendance is free of charge.

This information was assembled by Kristy Watson, manager for the Boerne White Sox, with the help of Wendel Dickason, umpire and team leader for the Cedar Hill Cartwrights.