

Playin' ball, 1860's style

Old-time baseball comes to Brunswick

BY ERIC MAXIM

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SUNRISE'S PETER DOUCETTE rips a line drive to right field on Saturday. The Sunrise Base Ball Club faced the Mudville Base Ball Club this past weekend at Crimmins Field in Brunswick. utilizing the rules of baseball from the 1860s. No gloves were used in the game. ERIC MAXIM / THE TIMES RECORD BRUNSWICK

When most of us played baseball while growing up, we'd get a bunch of kids together, a few bats, gloves, and if we're lucky, more than one ball. We played by the rules that govern the national pastime still today.

But in 1860, the rules were quite different.

This past weekend, the area Sunrise Base Ball Club hosted the Mudville Base Ball Club from Holliston, Mass., in a pair of baseball games, playing by 1860 rules at Crimmins Field.



MUDVILLE'S JOHN "CHOO-CHOO" SHANNAHAN (top photo) and Sunrise's John Coray do the "bat toss" to determine who is home team. ERIC MAXIM / THE TIMES RECORD

"Some of these rules were archaic, and you see why some of them went away," said Sunrise captain John Coray.

During this time period, local men played the game once they got out of work at their jobs. There were no gloves and typically one bat was shared between both teams. Some of the "hassles" of the 1860 rules have a direct result in some of the rules we have today. Like in today's game, base paths were 90 feet in length, there were still three "hands" (outs were called hands), and nine innings were played. A lot of minor differences changed the game to the way we know it today.

sides of the war played the game and once the war was over, they took their knowledge back home and professional teams and leagues were formed in 1868-69," Coray explained.

To determine the home team, the two managers came together at home plate with a bat and did a bat toss, catching the bat and then alternating each other's hand up the wooden barrel until one reached the top.

Pitchers stood 45 feet away, tossing underhand to the batter. The umpire, usually done up in a suit or even a tuxedo, facilitated the game from behind the catcher.

"You could see as a sport in 1860, it was kind of immature. During the Civil War, soldiers took their games to the battle fields, playing it with other soldiers. Both



In the top photo, Tim Masse connects on a pitch as Sunrise teammates John Coray (left) and Toby McGrath (right) look on. The teams played at Crimmins Field in Brunswick on Saturday. ERIC MAXIM / THE TIMES RECORD

No one argued with the umpire, as this was considered a gentlemen's game. If the umpire was unsure of a play/call, he would turn around and ask the spectators for assistance.

Balls and strikes started accumulating once the umpire gave a warning. A warning to the pitcher was given after he had thrown unhittable pitches, after that, four balls were counted for a walk. A warning to the batter came after he did not swing at a hittable pitch. Again, once the warning was given, strikes were counted and the batter could strike out after three strikes.

Once a hitter puts the ball into play, a couple things can happen that don't occur today. For instance, a fielder can record an out catching a ball after one hop. The skill set of the players in 1860 were at a low level as the game was new. These players didn't grow up as kids swinging bats and throwing accurately. Catching the ball without gloves was challenging and being able to get a ball off a hop was just as much of a problem until the skills became better.

It was evident on this day between Sunrise and Mudville that the skills of today's players are far more advanced. This resulted in several outs recorded after a ball bounced just once into someone's hands before reaching the ground a second time. And there were pop ups and ground ball shots. A lot of outs were recorded this way.



MUDVILLE BASE BALL CLUB'S DAVID ROBINSON gears up for a pitch to hit this past weekend at Crimmins Field in Brunswick. ERIC MAXIM / THE TIMES RECORD



SUNRISE'S MIKE DOUCETTE can't quite catch the ball with his outstretched arms. ERIC MAXIM / THE TIMES RECORD

The first documented game in Maine was the Sunrise Club of Brunswick facing the Bowdoin College seniors on October 10, 1860 at the Topsham Fairgrounds. The town team beat the seniors, 46-42.

"Typically scores were a lot higher back then. The players didn't have the skill set to make the plays so there was a lot of mishandled balls early on, resulting in a lot runs. It was nothing to have a game end 50-45 or somewhere around that," Coray added.

Over the years, as skills got better, fielders started playing for the hops rather than catching it outright. These players were call "muffins." Frustrated hitters became happy once the rules changed to catching it in the air.

"The one hop outs happen quick, especially the ones behind the plate. You could be out just like that after one pitch," said Jeff Starke of Sunrise.

This also played havoc on the bases. If a ball was caught on the bounce, a runner could advance without tagging. The defense can get the runner out but not before getting the ball back to the pitcher first before throwing to a base. A runner could not advance on a foul ball that was caught on one hop.

Occasionally, at least on this day, if hitters didn't hit the ball square, it often fouled backwards, bounced, and the catcher had the opportunity to make the catch for the out before the ball hit the ground again.

"You can see, some of the rules were changed because they were just flat out stupid," Coray mentioned.

A ball that hit fair, then bounced foul, even before reaching the bags at first and third, was considered a fair ball. This helped the hitters that pulled balls down the baseline, hitting the ground in fair territory before bouncing

down the line foul. Also, while running to first after a hit, base runner was not permitted to run through the bag like in today's game. They had to stop (or slide) on the bag or they'd be tagged out.

Sunrise BBC vs. Mudville BBC

The Mudville team traveled to Maine for the weekend to take on Sunrise. Both teams play in various exhibitions and tournaments throughout the summer and fall.

"We've played all over the country. For example two weeks ago we played in a festival in Gettysburg (Pennsylvania) and played four games. Out in the middle of a field on a farm," said Mudville captain John "Choo-Choo" Shannahan. "We've been doing this team since 2003, a lot of us have been together since then."

As it is with both squads, these are men that love baseball and simplicities that it brings. The Sunrise Club boasts on their website that "Today's Sunrise Club team is made up of men who enjoy baseball history and love to play the sport as it was originally conceived."

"If I didn't love baseball, I wouldn't be here," said Sunrise shortstop Tim Masse.

"I think it's just fantastic to play with other guys who love baseball. It's fun to play in different areas and meet different folks. In most cases, the people we play with out here in games like this would most likely be close friends of ours because of our like interests," said Mudville player David Robinson. "You can't beat the camaraderie."

As the Sunrise players arrived, uniforms that consisted of a long-sleeved jerseys and dungarees were put on, minus cleats or any other modern amenities. Some had played together in either modern baseball in various leagues and some, like myself, were playing vintage baseball for the first time. Two father-son sets competed for Sunrise, bringing in an influx of younger players to help create more interest and grow the team for future generations.

The scheduled nine-inning affair showcased some highly-skilled play on both sides, tightening the reins on defense, only plating eight runs between the two teams. Mudville edged Sunrise, 5-3 for the victory.

Since time permitted, and the weather was outstanding, the two clubs agreed to play another seven-inning game. The second game provided a little more offense, with the visitors spoiling Sunrise's chance for a split by scoring three runs in the bottom of the seventh for an 8-7 win.

"Win or lose, it's all about coming out and having fun," Coray said.

Sunrise players will continue to play in the upcoming months against other local vintage teams, while Mudville spent the night in Maine and traveled south to play another Maine team, the Dirigo Vintage Base Ball Club on Sunday.

For more information on the Sunrise Base Ball Club, visit www.mainewoodsbaseball.com. For the Mudville team, check out www.mudvillebaseballclub.com



THE SUNRISE AND MUDVILLE Base Ball Clubs join together for a team photo after Saturday's games. SUBMITTED PHOTO