



Baseball Fever: Early Baseball in Michigan

Peter Morris

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Baseball seems tailor-made for the historian, yet even today, after almost a century and a half of organized play, baseball's origins remain unclear. Most accounts focus on Eastern teams and the advent of professionals, but how the game spread across a predominantly rural America to become our national pastime is a question still largely unresolved.

In this well-researched study of Michigan baseball from the 1830s to the 1870s, baseball scholar Peter Morris offers many answers. Drawing on such sources as personal memoirs, period photographs, and an extensive, often hilarious variety of newspaper accounts, he paints a vivid portrait of a game that was widely---if erratically---played well before the Civil War and gradually evolved from an informal amusement into an activity for local groups of young men and finally into a serious, organized sport.

Baseball began with pick-up "raisin" games---so called because they took place after rural roof-raisings---played purely for fun by any number of participants, with myriad local variations. The first amateur clubs appeared in the 1850s and were often ridiculed for playing a child's game---"baseball fever" was then a term of mockery---but as they persevered and issued challenges to other teams from nearby towns, rivalries developed, rules began to conform, and a tradition started to take shape.

Tournaments, often connected with county fairs, and increased newspaper coverage gave the game new momentum after the Civil War, and what had been sociable matches became serious contests, sometimes marred by bad blood. Enclosed grounds changed the nature of the game--most notably with respect to home runs--and allowed teams to charge admission, which introduced a new element of commercialism, community involvement, and a heightened sense of competition. Ultimately, it brought about a level of play that made the best "amateur" clubs able to challenge professional teams from the East when they toured the country.

As he traces the exploits of clubs like the Excelsiors, the Wahoos, and the Unknowns, season by season and often game by game, Morris adds a wealth of new detail to the story of baseball's early days, showing how decades of at least nominally amateur play prepared the way for the advent of the National League in the 1870s, and with it the true beginnings of the professional sport we know today. In the process, he also paints a fascinating portrait of the attitudes, values, and lives of rural Americans in the mid-nineteenth century.

Peter Morris, a former English instructor at Michigan State University, is a specialist in nineteenth-century baseball and an active member of the Society for American Baseball Research.

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