

British Baseball

How a Curious Version of the Game Survives in Parts of England and Wales

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A young man anxiously takes grip of a heavily taped bat that has seen better days, his eyes fixed on the pitcher in the sunlight of a summer evening. The ball comes toward him at a frightening speed. He swings. A hit. He runs, discarding the bat, desperate to reach first base amid the encouraging yells of supporters and teammates. He reaches out his left hand and slaps his palm against the post. He has scored his first run in adult baseball.

It may look and sound like a familiar scene, one that can be found in countless parks across America—except for that “post,” and the run awarded for reaching first base. That’s because this is not the United States, but Cardiff, Wales. And it’s not the familiar game of baseball but a curious alternate version, confined to core areas of just three cities in England and Wales.

America’s national pastime has been a part (usually a small part) of the British sporting scene for more than a century, and in the 1930s it came close to establishing itself as a genuine rival to Britain’s traditional summer bat-and-ball game, cricket.¹ Indeed, Britain remains in the record books as the winner of baseball’s inaugural World Cup in 1938, and the U.S. national pastime continues to be played at a minor level in the old country.

Less well known is Britain’s own indigenous version of baseball—a sport that has enjoyed and endured its own ups and downs and is now confined to parts of Cardiff and Newport in south Wales and to Liverpool in northwest England.

British baseball—often known as Welsh baseball—differs in several ways, including the number of players (11), scoring (one run for each base reached), pitching (underhand, as in softball), and the bat itself (shorter and with a flat surface).

As in cricket, there is no foul area, games have just

two innings, all 11 players on each team bat at least once in each inning, and the inning continues until all 11 are either out or stranded on base. Unlike cricket players, however, British baseball players wear soccer- or rugby-style uniforms, including colorful jerseys and shorts.

Today the sport is organized by the Welsh Baseball Union (WBU) in Cardiff and Newport and by the English Baseball Association (EBA) in Liverpool. Wales boasts a men’s league, knock-out cup competitions, and a thriving women’s scene as well as junior events. In Liverpool, on the other hand, just three adult teams survive in a small area of the city.

A common set of rules is determined by the grandly titled International Baseball Board (IBB), which was established in 1927 and involves representatives of both governing bodies.

Origins and development

Baseball has a long history in Britain. Literary references to it can be found in the eighteenth century and even earlier.² However, the name seems to have faded from use, and by the early nineteenth century “rounders” had become a popular bat-and-ball game, especially among children. Later that century, rounders was being played by men at a highly competitive level. There were teams in Scotland, in Gloucestershire (southwest England), south Wales, and northwest England, and probably elsewhere too. Liverpool appears to have been the most active rounders city and was home to *The Rounders Reporter*, a publication launched in 1885.

The name *baseball* for the indigenous British game was revived in 1892, when the Liverpool Rounders Association changed the name of its sport from *rounders* to *baseball*. Exactly why this happened is a matter for speculation. It is argued that the name *rounders* sug-

gested a children's game and did not reflect the manly sport played in these working-class areas.³ Inspiration for the name change may have come from recent visits to Britain by U.S. professional baseball teams—the Boston Red Stockings and Philadelphia Athletics in 1874 and the Chicago White Stockings and an All-America team in 1889. Both tours included games in the rounders hotbed of Liverpool.⁴

Following their Liverpool counterparts, the south Wales authorities renamed their game *baseball* in the summer of 1892, and since then this peculiar British sport has shared a name with its more famous American, and increasingly global, counterpart.

The British version of baseball has never managed to spread beyond its confines in south Wales and northwest England, although exhibition games have been played in the London area, and, during a boom period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was reported that the sport was becoming established in the English cities of Bristol and Coventry.⁵

British baseball never became a professional sport, but it did attract large crowds and was the premier summer sport in the poorer parts of its host cities for many years. Several top-level soccer and rugby players played baseball to maintain their fitness through the summer.

In addition to the elite clubs, there were the teams organized by local churches, stores, factories, and bars. Especially in the blue-collar neighborhoods of Cardiff, baseball was for many years the premier summer sport.

Exactly why baseball flourished in these particular cities is a mystery. Some suggest that residents of the poorer areas of Cardiff, Newport, and Liverpool turned to baseball because they lacked the space and expensive equipment to play cricket. But that does not explain why baseball was not embraced in working-class areas in other cities. In any case, baseball needs as much space as cricket, and working-class cricket teams were flourishing in the late nineteenth century, just when rounders was becoming baseball.⁶ It may be that this renamed version of rounders grew in Cardiff, Newport, and Liverpool because they were all major ports with significant Irish communities, and a version of rounders—similar to British baseball—remains a competitive adult game in Ireland.⁷

Periodic efforts have been made to “convert” these areas to the U.S. game, but the peculiar British variety survives into the twenty-first century. American and Japanese teams have even faced teams playing the British code from time to time.

In 1933, the Liverpool Amateurs challenged a Japanese ship, the *Lima Maru*, to a game under American rules. This game reportedly drew an “unusually large crowd” and was won by the Japanese 12–9. However, a year later the Amateurs won the return game. A similar game had been played in the early 1920s against a Canadian ship, but there are no records of a result.⁸

On August 27, 1938, the Cardiff team Penylan faced the London Americans at Cardiff Arms Park. The contest saw one inning each under “Welsh” rules, followed by three innings under U.S. rules.

In July 1969, the Newport team Alexandra Old Boys met a U.S. Army team from a military base at Caerwent in south Wales for a game of softball—a contest that the locals won 26–12, thanks to 13 runs in the eighth inning.⁹

The international game

The showcase event each year is the “international” game between England (effectively Liverpool) and Wales (drawn from players in Cardiff and Newport), which alternates between venues in the two countries. The 2008 game, held at Llanrumney High School, Cardiff, in July, marked the centenary of the contest. Wales scored a comfortable victory—its tenth successive win.

Back in 1908, the first international match-up was played to a compromise set of rules. Most significantly,



The Wales national team and officials at the first international England–Wales game, in Cardiff 1908. This is the only known surviving photograph from the game.

COURTESY OF WELSH BASEBALL UNION



International captains **Norman Parselle of Wales, left**, and **Paul Hughes of England, right**, with referee **Peter James**, before the 2006 international game at Coronation Park, Newport.

the Welsh Baseball Association (as it was then known) conceded to having two umpires—one provided by each governing body. Batters were also permitted to move both feet while “at the plate,” but the English batters tended to use their accustomed one-handed tennis-style technique of swinging the bat.

The game took place on a public holiday, Monday, August 3, at the Harlequins Ground, also known as Cardiff Intermediate School Ground, where Wales captain Lew Lewis won the toss of the coin and chose to bat first. He opened the batting himself, facing England pitcher Fred Mack of the Marsh Lane club.

Wales finished the first inning with 102—such scores are achieved because a run is awarded for each base reached, all 11 players bat, and the inning continues until all 11 are either out or stranded on base. England started badly in reply, and had two men out for only five runs at one stage before being all-out with 57. Being more than 30 runs behind, England was forced to bat again—to “follow on,” as in cricket. The visitors did little better this time around, ending the second inning with 61, putting them just 16 runs ahead of Wales, who had yet to bat in their

half of the second and last inning. W. Allen was the star for England, scoring 20 of those 61 runs, but the English batting was generally poor: “The using of one hand in batting seemed to hamper them considerably, for their hitting was not as great as that of the Welsh side.”¹⁰

Wales went back in to bat, needing 17 runs to win—a target they reached with the loss of four men. Contemporary reports highlighted several problems with this initial encounter between the two national teams—the two-umpire game was a problem, and in a later account the officials are described as “two argumentative referees . . . who wasted a good deal of time coming to decisions.” Even the venue was not ideal, because it was too small and “it was not too difficult for burly Lew Lewis . . . and Fred Wreford from Newport, to hit the ball out of bounds—either over the railway embankment or into Newport Road over the house tops.”¹¹

No official attendance figures seem to have been published, but a report suggests that, despite other attractions on that public holiday, there were 2,000 people present half an hour before the start, and the crowd was still “steadily pouring in.”¹²

It took six years to arrange the second game between England and Wales. The teams met again in 1914 in Liverpool—when the English won in front of 4,000 people at Goodison Park, home of the famous Everton soccer club. Because of World War I, it was another six years before the teams met again, but since then—with the exception of the war years—the event has been played annually.

The international has visited some illustrious sporting venues over the years. As well as Goodison Park, it has been to Cardiff Arms Park, home of Welsh rugby, and to Sophia Gardens, Cardiff, now an international cricket stadium.

The 1924 international at Cardiff Arms Park drew 10,000 fans, while both the 1925 game at the Police Athletic Ground, Liverpool, and the 1926 edition, again at Cardiff Arms Park, attracted 12,000. It has often been suggested that the 1948 international game, played in the picturesque setting of Cardiff Castle, was seen by a record 16,000.¹³ Contemporary press reports give the attendance figure as 10,000—still a significant number for an amateur event.¹⁴ This was the first international since World War II, and local hero Ted Peterson—regarded as one of the sport’s all-time greats—defied doctor’s orders to lead Wales to victory.

Major club games have also attracted five-figure crowds, and for decades the sheer number of games played in city parks, especially in Cardiff—and to a lesser extent in Newport and Liverpool—ensured that baseball was a major sport in terms of spectators and participants.

In the 1970s and ’80s, BBC Wales even broadcast a highlights show on television the day after the international game. More recently, however, the game has been confined to more modest venues, such as public parks, and media interest has waned, as have attendances, which rarely reach as many as 2,000.

British baseball today

Fallen from its peaks of popularity, as a serious summer rival to cricket in some areas, British baseball is now a



Canton Cross versus Birchleaf at Heath Park, Cardiff, June 2007. British baseball survives in Cardiff and Newport in south Wales and in Liverpool in northwest England. The number of teams has declined since the height of the game’s popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, but the women’s league in Wales continues to grow, as does a smaller-scale junior program.

minor sport, even in the three cities where it survives. A serious decline in Liverpool, the only English city where the game is played, must put the future of the international game between England and Wales in doubt.

Even in the Welsh cities of Cardiff and Newport, the sport is a shadow of its former glory. In 2007 there were only 24 men’s teams from Cardiff and Newport playing in the three-division Welsh League, though a separate women’s league continues to grow, as does a smaller-scale junior program. This contrasts with the picture in 1938, for example, when there were 40 men’s teams in Cardiff alone,¹⁵ in addition to countless other recreational clubs.

On the other hand, the death of British baseball has been predicted for many years. Back in 1966, Les Aplin, chairman of the WBU, wrote: “Some pessimists have already declared baseball to be ‘dead’ and seem eager to bury the corpse. But I am certain their verdict is premature and [they] will find the ‘corpse’ to be very much alive in 1976.”¹⁶

British baseball was certainly still alive in 1976, and now in 2008—against all odds—the sport saw its centenary international game played in Cardiff in July. How much longer it will survive is a matter for debate, but it would be a brave person to bet against this unusual version of the sport continuing for many years. ■

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NOTES

1. The near-breakthrough of baseball in Britain in the 1930s has been explored in a number of articles and books. See: Daniel Bloyce, "John Moores and the 'Professional' Baseball Leagues in 1930s England," *Sport in History* 27, no. 1 (March 2007): 64–87; Josh Chetwynd and Brian A. Belton, *British Baseball and the West Ham Club: History of a Professional Team in East London* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007).
2. *A Pretty Little Pocket Book of 1744* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (published in 1818, but drafted between 1798 and 1799) are the best-known examples. For a superb bibliography of early baseball, see David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).
3. South Wales baseball administrator and historian Ivor Beynon and journalist Bob Evans suggest that the term *baseball* was seen as "more appropriate to the skilfull style of play being developed." Ivor Beynon and Bob Evans, *The Inside Story of Baseball* (Cardiff: publisher unknown, 1962).
4. For a British perspective on those international tours, see Daniel Bloyce, "That's Your Way of Playing Rounders, Isn't It? The Response of the English Press to American Baseball Tours to England 1874–1924," in *Sporting Traditions* 22, no. 1 (November 2005).
5. *South Wales Echo*, 16 August 1950.
6. For an examination of the rise of cricket in south Wales, including among working-class communities, see Andrew Hignell, *A 'Favourit' Game: Cricket in South Wales Before 1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).
7. For information on Irish rounders today, see <http://rounders.gaa.ie/index.html>.
8. See the Liverpool Trojans website, www.liverpooltrojansbaseball.co.uk/History%20Merseyside.htm (accessed 21 December 2007).
9. *South Wales Argus*, 21 July 1969.
10. *South Wales Daily News*, 4 August 1908.
11. Sid Rees, *Western Mail* journalist, who was at the 1908 game, writing in the program for the 1966 international.
12. *Western Mail*, 4 August 1908.
13. For example, Ivor Beynon and Bob Evans, *The Inside Story of Baseball* (Cardiff: publisher unknown, 1962), 25–26; Martin Johnes, "Poor Man's Cricket: Baseball, Class and Community in South Wales c. 1880–1950," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 17, no. 4 (December 2000); Andrew Weltch, "Ted Peterson: A Legend in Welsh Baseball," in *Cardiff Sporting Greats*, ed. Andrew Hignell and Gwyn Prescott (Stroud: Stadia, 2007).
14. *Western Mail*, 2 August 1948; *Cardiff Times*, 7 August 1948.
15. Martin Johnes, "Poor Man's Cricket: Baseball, Class and Community in South Wales c. 1880–1950," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 17, no. 4 (December 2000).
16. From an article published in the program for the 1966 international game.