Chapter 1

What Is Baseball?

In This Chapter

- Uncovering the origins and objective of the game
- Plotting player positions and field layout
- Handing over hits and runs
- Delivering strikes and balls

For those of you who still believe that Abner Doubleday invented baseball in Cooperstown, New York, we bring you a line from the gangster movie *Donnie Brasco:* "Fuhgedaboudit!" Abner didn't invent nuttin'. No one person actually conceived of the sport. Baseball evolved from earlier bat and ball games including town ball, rounders, and one o'cat. Although there's no denying that the English game of cricket was also an influence, baseball is as singular an American art form as jazz. (Although during the early 1960s, the Soviet Union claimed baseball was a Russian creation. We should note, however, that Soviets were also taking credit back then for the invention of the telephone, the electric light, Wite-Out, and — well, you get the idea.)

The Roots of the Game

If anyone invented baseball, it was Alexander Joy Cartwright. This gentleman bank teller founded the New York Knickerbockers, America's first organized baseball team, in 1842. Three years after that, Cartwright formulated the sport's first codified rules (which included three strikes per out and three outs per half-inning). Cartwright's game included a pitching mound that was only 45 feet from home plate and base paths spaced 75 feet apart. Baseball's lawmakers have altered these distances while modifying other rules over the years.

The pitcher's mound is now 60 feet from home, and the bases now sit 90 feet apart. But the bank teller's guidelines remain the basis of the modern sport. If a time machine were to transport Cartwright to a present-day major-league ballpark, it would only take him an inning or two to acclimate himself to the action on the field. That's because the most fundamental aspects of the game haven't changed since Cartwright's Knickerbockers first suited up. Most importantly, the objective of a baseball game is still for a team to win its game by outscoring its opponent.

The Structure of the Game

In the major leagues, a game is divided into nine units of play called *innings*. (Almost all leagues play nine-inning games, except some youth leagues that play only five to seven innings.) An inning consists of a turn at-bat and three outs for each team. Visiting teams bat in the first half (called the *top*) of an inning; home teams bat in the second half (called the *bottom*) of the inning.

While one club (the offensive team) is at-bat, the other (the defensive team) plays in the field. Nine players compose each team's lineup. The defensive team consists of the pitcher, catcher, first baseman, second baseman, third baseman, shortstop, left fielder, center fielder, and right fielder. Check out Figure 1-1 of the playing field to see the basic positions for each of the defensive players. (Table 1-1 gives you the abbreviations for these players.)

Table 1-1 The Players

Abbreviation	*Player*
P	Pitcher
C	Catcher
1B	First baseman
2B	Second baseman
3B	Third baseman
SS	Shortstop
LF	Left fielder
CF	Center fielder
RF	Right fielder

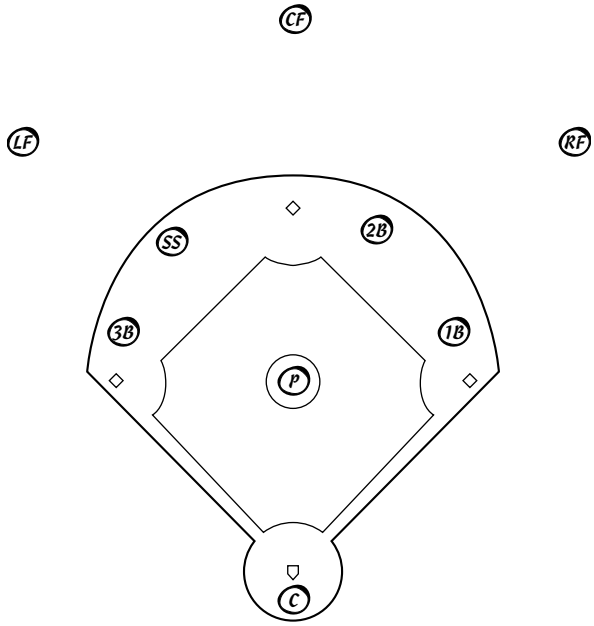

Figure 1-1: The playing field with its players.

When nine isn't really nine

Many baseball games are finished before the completion of nine full innings. If the home team leads after the top of the ninth, it wins the game without taking its turn at-bat in the bottom of that inning. The home team can also win the game in less than nine if it scores the winning run during the final frame. For example, the New York Mets come to bat in the bottom of the ninth inning of a game against the Florida Marlins. The Marlins lead 3–2. With two men out, Mets second baseman Jose Reyes hits a two-run homer off Marlins starter Josh Beckett. New York wins 4–3. The game is over even though the two teams combined for only 8⅔ innings. (Remember, a team doesn't complete an inning until it makes the third out.)

This example illustrates a difference between baseball and other major team sports. Either team can win a game that ends in regulation time in football (four quarters), basketball (four quarters), and hockey (three periods). In baseball, the home team can never win any game that lasts the full nine innings (except in the event of a forfeit).

Extra innings

Games that are tied after nine innings go into *extra innings.* The two opponents play until they complete an extra inning with the visiting team ahead or until the home team scores the winning run.

The Playing Field

Baseball is played on a level field divided into an infield and an outfield. The infield (also known as the *diamond*) must be a square 90 feet (27.45 meters) on each side. Home plate sits at one corner of the square, and the three bases rest at the other corners. Moving counterclockwise from home, you see first base, second base, and third base.

Base lines run from home plate to first base, as well as from home to third. Base lines also extend from first base to second and from second to third. However, only the base lines extending from home to first and home to third are marked by white chalk. The lanes connecting the bases are the base paths. Runners must stay within them while traveling around the diamond. Should a runner step out of the base path to elude a tag, the umpire can call him out.

Foul lines extend from the first-base and third-base lines and run straight to the outfield walls. The section of the outfield beyond first base is called *right field,* the outfield section behind second base and shortstop is *center field,* and the outfield section beyond third base is *left field.*

Coaches pass on advice to players from the *coach's boxes,* the chalk rectangles in foul territory near first and third. When the players are not on the field, they sit in shelters in foul territory called *dugouts.* Between the dugout and home plate is the *on-deck circle,* where the next hitter awaits his turn at-bat. (See Figure 1-2.)

Major league rules require the distance from home plate to the nearest fence or wall in fair territory to be at least 250 feet (76 meters). Home plate must be a 17-inch (43-centimeter) square with two of its corners removed to leave a 17-inch edge, two 8½-inch (21.5-centimeter) adjacent sides, and two 12-inch (30.5-centimeter) sides angled to a point. The result is a five-sided slab of white rubber. A regulation pitching rubber is a 24-x-6-inch (61-x-15.5-centimeter) rectangle made of white rubber, set in the middle of the diamond 60 feet, 6 inches (18.4 meters) from the rear of home plate. (See Figure 1-3.)

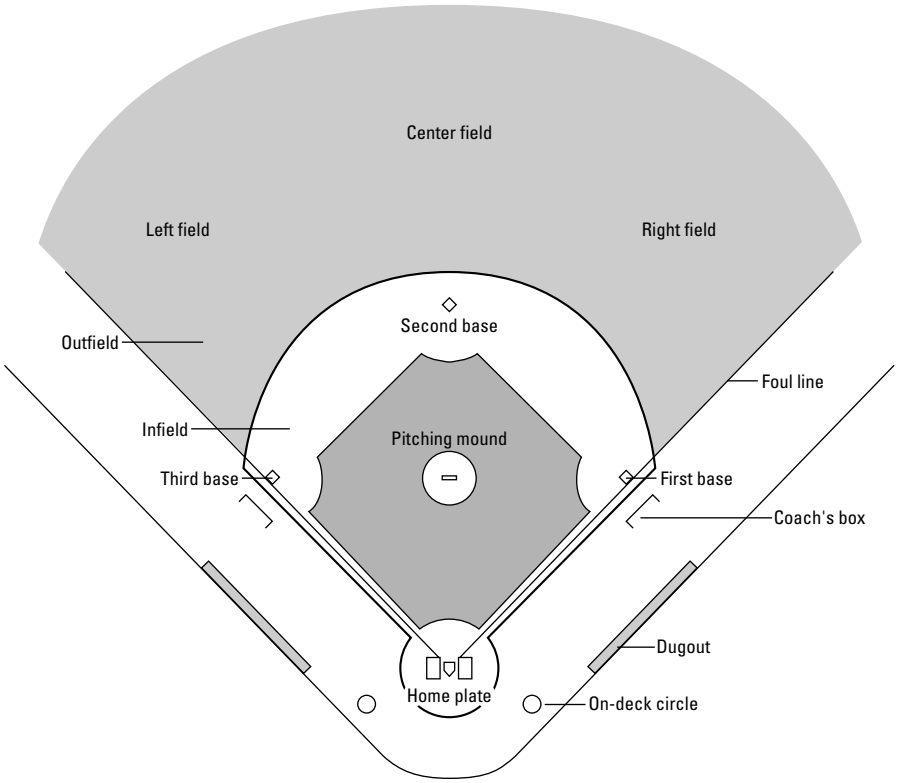

Figure 1-2: The structure of the playing field.

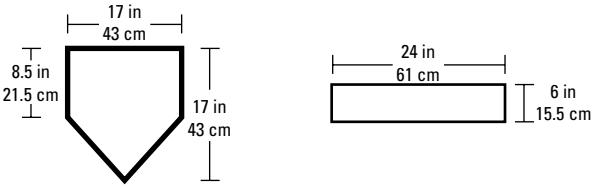

Figure 1-3: Home plate and the pitching rubber.

The Action of Play

The pitcher is the player who stands at the middle of the infield diamond on the hill called the *mound,* where the pitching rubber is located. He throws the baseball toward the catcher, a teammate who squats behind home plate. When the pitcher throws the ball to the batter at home plate, he is said to be *delivering a pitch.*

Each batter comes to the plate according to a specific order (the batting order or *lineup*) designated by the manager or head coach. The opposing team's batter (hitter) stands in one of two batter's boxes on either side of home plate. If he's right-handed, he stands in the box to the left of the plate (as viewed from behind). If he's left-handed, he stands in the box to the right of the plate. As the ball reaches the home plate area, the batter tries to hit it with a club called a *bat.* The batter tries to hit the ball into *fair territory* — that part of the playing field between the first- and third-base lines, from home base to the outfield fences — where it is either *fielded* (caught) for an out or drops in safely for a *base hit.* (We describe the various ways a batter makes an out or reaches base safely in Chapter 3.) A hit can take four forms:

- A *single* delivers the batter to first base.
- A *double* is hit far enough that the batter reaches second base.
- A *triple* gets the batter to third base.
- A *home run* means the batter circles all three bases and touches home plate for a run.

  Home runs usually travel over the outfield fence in fair territory. If a batter hits a ball that stays on the field, but he is able to circle the bases and touch home before he can be called out, he has hit an *inside-the-park home run.*

Coming Home (Eventually)

Players score runs by getting on base and then moving around (and tagging) all three bases in order before crossing home plate. They must reach home before the offensive team tallies three outs in its half of the inning. When a club's hitters make three outs, its half-inning ends. Then it takes the field (moves to defense) and the opposing team comes to bat. (Chapter 3 has all the details on how an out is made.)

Game called because of . . .

Umpires can *call* (end) games because of inclement weather, power outages, earthquakes (don't laugh — a tremor postponed the 1989 World Series between Oakland and San Francisco), a disciplinary action (a mob of fans runs on the field and refuses to vacate; no matter which team is ahead, the umpire forfeits the game in favor of the visiting club), or some other event that renders play impossible or dangerous. To be an *official game* (one that counts as a win or a loss in the league standings), the two teams must play at least five full innings. Exceptions to this rule occur whenever the top of the fifth concludes with the home team ahead or if the home team scores the winning run during that fifth frame.

You can advance on the bases (move from first to second, second to third, or third to home) at any time, but you do so at your own peril. If you're off base when a member of the defensive team (a *fielder*) tags you with the ball, you are out. The exception to this occurs when the umpire calls "Time" (timeout). At that moment, the ball is considered dead. You may step off base without being put out, but you may not advance. Umpires may call time at the request of either team, when an injury occurs, or if some circumstance threatens the flow of the game (for instance, a cat running across the field).

The People in Charge

In professional baseball, *managers* are the team leaders. (At some other levels, such as college baseball, this person may be referred to as the head coach.) Managers plot strategy and decide which team members play which positions. They also determine a club's batting order.

Managers have assistants, called *coaches,* who help them train and discipline the team. Managers also use the first- and third-base coaches to pass along instructions to players through a series of signs. In recent years it has become fashionable for managers to employ a dugout coach. This coach is usually a savvy baseball veteran with whom the manager plots strategy throughout the game.

Umpires and Official Scorers

On-field officials known as *umpires* enforce the rules of play. In the Major Leagues, four umpires — one for each base and home plate — are assigned to each game. They decide whether a batted ball is fair or foul and whether a player is safe or out. The home-plate umpire also calls balls and strikes during the pitcher-batter confrontation. Umpires have complete authority over the game. They can eject anyone from the field who violates the rules of conduct. (See Chapter 13 for more information about umpires.) All professional games also have *official scorers.* The league hires these people to record on a scorecard all the events that take place on the field during a game. (See Chapter 16 for scoring information.) Scorers can't overrule an umpire, nor can they affect the outcome of a game. They do, however, often rule on whether a batted ball should be labeled a hit or an error for the official record. (In high school and college games, the home team provides a scorer, who usually consults with the visiting team scorekeeper on a close call.)

Baseball's Hall of Fame

To learn more about the history and evolution of this great game, there's only one place to visit: the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York. The museum has over 6,500 artifacts, including examples of the earliest bats, balls, and gloves. Many of the exhibits are interactive. The Hall's library and archives boast the world's most comprehensive collection of printed baseball matter, including box scores from the late 1800s.

The Hall of Fame gallery is this institution's Valhalla, the place where baseball's immortals are commemorated in bronze. Members of the Baseball Writers Association of America elect honorees from a list of players with ten years or more of major-league service. All candidates must be retired from baseball for at least five years before they can be considered for induction. Every two years, the Hall of Fame Veterans Committee votes for managers, pioneers of the sport, baseball executives, umpires, players from the Negro Leagues, and players who missed election their first time through the Baseball Writers Association of America voting process. A candidate must collect 75 percent of all ballots cast by either the writers or the Veterans Committee to earn a plaque in the gallery.

The Hall reserves the right to exclude anyone who is on baseball's ineligible list — for example, Pete Rose or Joe Jackson — from its ballots. Players on the ineligible list are disqualified from holding jobs with any major-league teams. Rose was ruled ineligible because he bet on baseball games. Though deceased, Jackson's name remains on the ineligible list because he actively participated in a conspiracy with gamblers and seven Chicago White Sox teammates to deliberately lose the 1919 World Series.

At various times of the year, the Hall of Fame also showcases special temporary exhibits. Recently it opened the Barry Halper Gallery, a showcase for a vast array of memorabilia — it includes such rare items as a camelhair overcoat formerly

worn by one George Herman (Babe) Ruth — that Mr. Halper had previously displayed in the basement of his New Jersey home. The gallery also hosts traveling exhibits on a revolving schedule. You can get ticket, schedule, and exhibit information for the Hall by calling 607-547-7200 or visiting its Web site at `www.baseballhalloffame.org`.

The Strike Zone

Pitchers try to throw the ball through a *strike zone,* an imaginary box that, according to the rules, is the width of home plate and extends from the bottom of the batter's kneecap to the uniform letters across his chest (see Figure 1-4). Any pitch that passes through the strike zone without being struck by the batter is a strike — provided that the umpire calls it a strike, that is. (See the nearby sidebar "Baseball's strike zone controversy.")

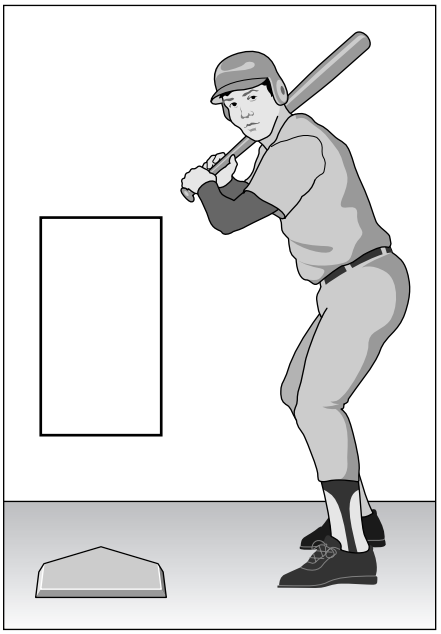

Figure 1-4: The strike zone.

Pitches outside the strike zone are called *balls,* as long as a batter doesn't swing at them. If a batter does swing at a ball outside the strike zone and misses it, he registers a strike, regardless of where the pitcher threw the ball.

Baseball's strike zone controversy

Major league baseball's official rule book defines the strike zone as "that area over home plate, the upper limit of which is a horizontal line at the midpoint between the top of the shoulders and the top of the uniform pants, and the lower level is a line at the hollow beneath the knee cap. The strike zone shall be determined from the batter's stance as the batter is prepared to swing at the pitched ball." Seems pretty clear, doesn't it? If a pitch is over the plate and arrives between a batter's knees and the team letters across his chest, it should be a strike, right? Only if the umpire enforces the rule as it's written, which few arbiters do. Almost every umpire in the big leagues brings his own interpretation of the strike zone to each game. So-called "pitcher's umps" call strikes on pitches that barely share the same zip code as home plate. Other umps demonstrate a clear bias toward the hitter.

As long as these arbiters consistently call the same zone for both sides, pitchers and hitters can function. However, some umpires have elastic zones that seem to change from batter to batter. It's impossible to adapt to their idiosyncrasies.

In 1999, Sandy Alderson, major-league baseball's director of operations, tried to create a uniform strike zone by issuing a directive that required all umpires to call balls and strikes by the rule book. In his memo, Alderson declared, "the upper limit of the strike zone will extend *two inches above the top of the uniform pants.*" Alderson's interpretation further confused matters because it clearly contradicted the existing rules. Though some umpires altered their strike zones, most of them refused to follow the directive; they continued to call balls and strikes as they had in the past. The disagreement over what constitutes balls and strikes heightened the long-standing tensions between team owners and the umpires union. The strike zone continues to be a hot debate, and it might not be resolved for many seasons to come.

Hitters and pitchers who are extremely disciplined can influence an umpire by demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the strike zone. Because umpires realize that players like Barry Bonds, Jason Giambi, Jamie Moyer, and Greg Maddux know the zone so well, they tend to concentrate more whenever one of these craftsmen is at work. However, if a pitcher is consistently wild or a batter comes to the plate swinging at anything, umpires generally call the close pitches against that player.

During an at-bat, if a batter tallies three strikes before the pitcher throws four balls, the umpire declares the batter out. If the pitcher throws four balls (which the batter doesn't swing at) before registering three strikes, the umpire awards the batter a *walk* — a trip to first base.

If a batter hits a pitch into foul territory (no matter where the batter makes contact with the ball, in or out of the strike zone), it counts as a strike against him. The only exception to this rule occurs when a batter has tallied two strikes; at that point, he can foul balls off indefinitely without any of them counting as third strikes. (Just to make things more confusing, the foul tip rule is an exception to this exception; check Appendix A for an explanation of the foul tip rule.)