

# Chapter 1

## The Lowdown on Baseball

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### *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
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**F**or people who still believe that Abner Doubleday invented baseball in Cooperstown, New York, we bring you a line from the gangster movie *Donnie Brasco*: “Fuhgedaboutit!” 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 and the electric light.)

This chapter gives you a quick overview to America’s pastime. Whether you’ve been a fan your entire life or just started showing an interest in the sport, this chapter can help you start.

### *Tapping into 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.

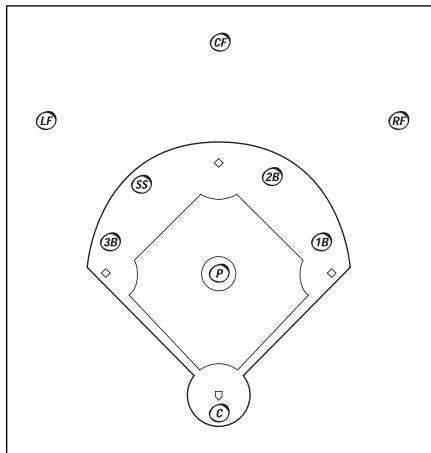
The pitcher's mound is now 60 feet, 6 inches, from home, and the bases now sit 90 feet apart. But the bank teller's guidelines remain the basis of the modern sport. If a time machine were to transport Cartwright to a present-day Major-League ballpark, it would only take him an inning or two to acclimate 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.

## Understanding the Game's Structure



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.)



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

Illustration by Wiley, Composition Services Graphics

<b>Table 1-1</b>	<b>The Players</b>
<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Player</i>
P	Pitcher
C	Catcher
1B	First baseman
2B	Second baseman
3B	Third baseman
SS	Shortstop
LF	Left fielder
CF	Center fielder
RF	Right fielder

## *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 innings if it scores the winning run during the last inning before the third out. For example, the Toronto Blue Jays come to bat in the bottom of the ninth inning of a game against the Detroit Tigers. The Tigers lead 3–2. With two men out, Blue Jays' Jose Reyes hits a two-run homer off Tiger starter Justin Verlander. Toronto won 4–3. The game is over even though the two teams combined for only  $8\frac{2}{3}$  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).

## *Going 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.



## Introducing the Playing Field



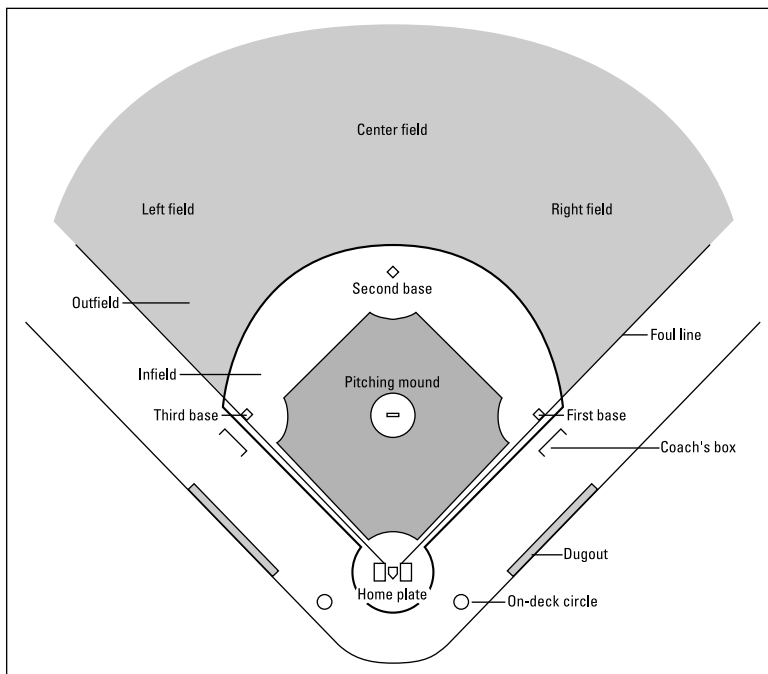
Baseball is played on a level field divided into an infield and an outfield. The infield (also known as the *diamond*) must be a square 90 feet (27.45 meters) on each side. Home plate sits at one corner of the square, and the three bases rest at the other corners. Moving counterclockwise from home, you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



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

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 (refer to Figure 1-3).

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

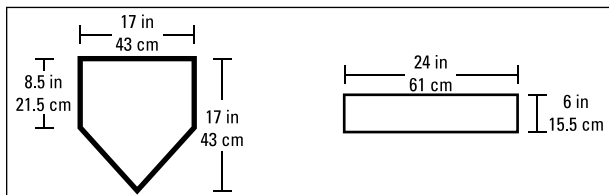


Illustration by Wiley, Composition Services Graphics

## Getting into 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*.



## 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.

## Coming Home (Eventually)

Players score runs by getting on base and then moving around (and touching) 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.)



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).

## Knowing Who Is in Charge

In professional baseball, *managers* are the team leaders. (At some other levels, such as college and high school 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. Most importantly, they decide which players to put on the field in the first place. In essence, they're *personnel* managers.

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.

## *Enforcing and Scoring: 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. (Lower levels may have only two or three umpires.) (See Chapter 15 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. 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.)

### **More than history: Baseball's Hall of Fame**

To discover 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 more than 6,500 artifacts, including examples of the earliest bats,

balls, and gloves (see the following figure of historic baseballs). 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.

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Photo courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, N. Y.

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 while serving as manager of the Cincinnati Reds. 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.

The Hall features permanent exhibits such as *Viva Baseball* (tracing Latin American contributions to the game), *Chasing the Dream* (about the legendary Hank Aaron's career), and *One for the Books* (baseball's records and the stories behind them). At various times of the year, the Hall of Fame also showcases special temporary exhibits. It has the Barry Halper Gallery, a showcase for a vast array of memorabilia, which 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, such as a 2011 show exploring the historic connection between cricket and baseball. The Hall of Fame also features online exhibits.

You can get ticket, schedule, and exhibit information for the Hall by calling 888-425-5633 or visiting its website at [www.baseballhall.org](http://www.baseballhall.org).