

#### 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

## Chapter 1

# The Lowdown on Baseball

For people 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 old cat” (which was played with home plate and one base). 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 of 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

According to John Thorn, Major League Baseball's official historian, a game called "baseball" was documented in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1791 but was probably played in that state much earlier. A game called *baste* or *baste ball* — most likely the same game, was played at Princeton College in 1786.

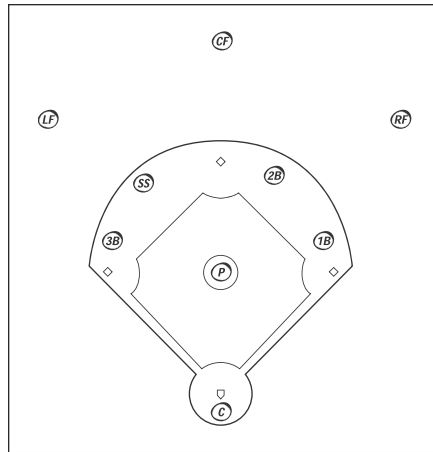
For many years, Abner Doubleday was considered the game's "Zeus," with baseball springing directly from his brain. Revisionist historians then shifted their credit to a bank teller named Alexander Cartwright, who was thought to have invented most of the rules in atavistic form. However, thanks to the research Thorn presented in his book, "Baseball in the Garden of Eden," we know three other men had more to do with baseball's rise than those two: William Rufus Wheaton, Daniel Lucius Adams, and Louis Fenn Wadsworth. Wheaton (not Cartwright) wrote the first baseball rules for a club called the Gothams and copied them, virtually unchanged, eight years later for the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of 1845. Adams (not Cartwright) positioned the base paths ninety feet apart, set the pitching distance at 45 feet (its distance from the late 1850s well into the era of professional league play, enduring until 1880) and created the position of shortstop around 1850. Wadsworth (not Cartwright) is responsible for setting the number of men to each side at nine, as well as the number of innings required to complete a game. In doing so, he bucked the majority of his fellow Knickerbockers, who preferred to play seven innings. The ancient Knicks achieved a semblance of validation when in 2020, Major League Baseball decided to limit the second game of doubleheaders to seven innings (though it discontinued this practice before the 2022 season).

## 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*

**TABLE 1-1**

## The Players

| Abbreviation | Position       |
|--------------|----------------|
| 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' Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hits a two-run homer off the Tiger starter. Toronto wins, 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 the 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 ends after nine full 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. However, in 2020, MLB introduced the extra-inning tiebreaker rule, in which a runner (also known as a *ghost runner*) is automatically placed on second base to begin each inning. The rule originally was introduced on a trial basis during the 60-game 2020 pandemic season as a way to shorten games and reduce the risk of injury after a pandemic-jerry-rigged spring-training shutdown and midsummer build-up period for pitchers. After retaining the rule on a temporary basis in 2021 and 2022, the rule was made permanent in 2023, much to the dismay of purists who felt that players should do *something* to earn their way on base. However, purists should be happy to know the rule applies only to regular season play. You won't see ghost runners used in postseason games.

## 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.

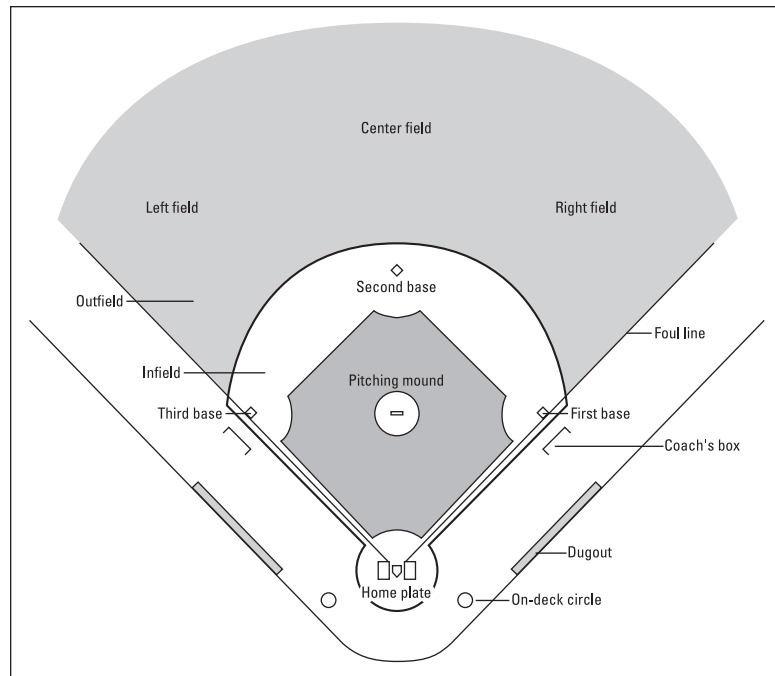
*Base lines* run from home plate to first base, as well as from home to third. Base lines also extend from first base to second and from second to third. However, only the base lines extending from home to first and home to third are marked by white chalk. The lanes connecting the bases are the base 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.

*Illustration by Wiley, Composition Services Graphics*

Major League rules required the distance from home plate to the nearest fence or wall in fair territory for stadiums built before June 1, 1958 to be at least 250 feet (76 meters). The required distance for stadiums built after that date is 325 feet (99.06 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 1-3:**  
Home plate and  
the pitching  
rubber.

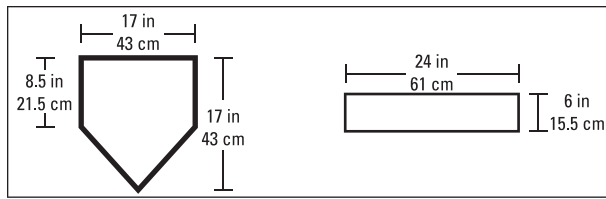


Illustration by Wiley, Composition Services Graphics

## Getting into the Action of Play



**BASEBALL  
SPEAK**

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*.



**BASEBALL  
SPEAK**

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*.

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.)



BASEBALL  
SPEAK

## GAME CALLED BECAUSE OF . . .

Umpires can *call* (end) games because of inclement weather, power outages, earthquakes (don't laugh — a seismic 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.



HEADS UP

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 if you overrun first base on a single without turning to take an extra base. The fielder cannot tag you out as you return to first. Another exception occurs after 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 bench 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 (in some minor leagues, only two or three umpires preside over each game). Umpires have complete authority. They can eject anyone from the field who violates the rules of conduct. 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, although that age-old power dynamic may change. (See the nearby sidebar, “The ABS system: MLB’s robo-cops.”)

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 may provide a scorer, who usually consults with the visiting team scorekeeper on a close call.)

## THE ABS SYSTEM: MLB’S ROBO-COPS

Perhaps nothing raises more controversy among baseball aficionados than the proposed introduction of a computer system that uses high-speed camera technology to call balls and strikes. This system was first bruited in 2019 in the independent Atlantic League, and then used in the minor leagues as part of MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred’s plan to create a faster-paced game. It employs an automated ball-strike system (ABS), which tracks pitches using a dozen ultra-high-speed cameras, processes the result and delivers it into an earpiece worn by the home-plate umpire in the half a second it takes a pitch to cross home plate.

In the early stages of ABS, human umpires still made ball-and-strike calls, but the pitcher, catcher, and batter could appeal the umpire’s call to the ABS. Each team receives three appeals in Challenge Games, with successful appeals retained for future use. To some witnesses, the challenge system gave birth to an entire new level of strategy with managers teaching players the most optimal manner to use the challenges — avoiding frivolous challenges and protecting the team from egregious ball-strike call mistakes in pivotal moments.

In 2024, the ABS system was introduced in all minor-league ballparks, and is expected to eventually enter the big leagues in some form (with or without the challenges).

## 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 houses tens of thousands of 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.



*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. The Hall of Fame Era Committees, formerly known as the Veterans Committee, annually 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 Era Committees to earn a plaque in the gallery.

The Hall reserves the right to exclude anyone on baseball's ineligible list from its ballots. Players on the ineligible list also are disqualified from holding jobs with any MLB teams.

(continued)

(continued)

Pete Rose was ruled ineligible because he bet on baseball games while serving as manager of the Cincinnati Reds. Major league baseball banned Shoeless Joe Jackson after he participated in a conspiracy with gamblers and seven Chicago White Sox teammates to deliberately lose the 1919 World Series. When a banned player dies, MLB removes his name from the ineligible list. Both Jackson and Rose, however, remain ineligible for Hall of Fame consideration despite their sterling credentials. As a spokesman for the institution has explained, “This (ineligible) designation remains in place after an individual’s passing.”

The Hall also features permanent exhibits such as *Chasing the Dream* (about the legendary Hank Aaron’s career), *The Look Magazine Collection*, which features thousands of iconic baseball photos, and *One for the Books*, a showcase for baseball’s records and the stories behind them. Throughout the museum, you’ll find pieces from the Barry Halper Collection, which includes such rare items as a camel hair overcoat formerly worn by one George Herman (Babe) Ruth that Mr. Halper had previously displayed in the basement of his New Jersey home. At various times of the year, the Hall of Fame also presents special temporary exhibits.

You may visit the museum as a walk-in, book a private tour for a group, or, for the ultimate HOF experience, reserve a *Private Collections Showcase*, which will give you and your group the opportunity to view select items from the museum and library. As a bonus, you can ask the Hall to include artifacts from your favorite team.

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