Notes on the History and Evolution of Stoolball

By David Block

The documented history of stoolball in Britain dates back nearly 600 years, and the game is often cited as a predecessor to both cricket and baseball. Today it enjoys ongoing popularity as an organized team sport in Sussex and other counties in the south of England. Yet many gaps remain in our understanding of stoolball's history and development. What follows is a short summation of stoolball's historical eras, as I perceive them, along with a few additional notes and comments. I realize this is nerdy brew even for the most ardent consumers of this newsletter, given that stoolball's influence on baseball's origins is murky at best, so abstainers are forgiven. For a deeper dive into stoolball's history, especially its ancient/romantic era, please see my 2005 book *Baseball before We Knew It.* I also recommend English historian Andrew Lusted's two pamphlets, *Girls Just Wanted to Have Fun,* and *The Glynde Butterflies Stoolball Team, 1866-1887.*

Stoolball in 1767, from wikipedia

First off, What is "Stoolball?"

Descriptions of stool-ball prior to 1867 exist, but give few details. (For 1867 and subsequent rules, see below)

1. In the 1660s, Francis Willughby described a game called stoolball that had similarities to trap-ball (see Protoball.org for trap-ball), but with the batter fungoing the ball rather than using a trap.

2. The poem “Stool-ball, or the Easter Diversion” in 1733 elaborately described a contest played in Wales that included use of a bat, pitching, but no base-running. 3. The stoolball poem in 1744’s “A Little Pretty Pocket-book” implies baserunning with its phrase “swift round his course the gamester flies.” But no bat.

4. Joseph Strutt in 1801 described two forms of stoolball, one a simple two-person game with no baserunning, and the second a multiple base game with multiple base-runners. All subsequent descriptions of stoolball appearing in the 19th century prior to 1867 were modeled on Strutt’s.

History of Stoolball

The history of stoolball can be divided roughly into two phases, pre-modern and modern, with the 1860s forming the dividing line between the two. The pre-modern period itself can be seen as comprised of two eras, the ancient/romantic and the early competitive.

Ancient/Romantic Era: This spans stoolball’s history from its earliest recorded presence in the 15th century through the early decades of the 18th century. This era is characterized by hundreds of references to stoolball in British literature and poetry. These references relate primarily to the game’s role in British popular culture, and secondarily to controversies over its legal standing (stoolball play was permitted, even on Sundays, by Anglican monarchs of the 1600s, an attitude that was bitterly opposed by Puritan authorities). Almost universally, the references to stoolball during these centuries omit particulars about how it was played. Instead, writers of the era, both literally and metaphorically, celebrated the game’s role in springtime courtship rituals, portraying stoolball as an activity where young men and young women could mingle freely, and thus provide opportunities for sexual engagement and romance. If any players during this era embraced the game as a means of serious athletic competition, no record of such activity survives. (Nor is there any evidence to support the venerable legend that stoolball originated when milkmaids laid down their stools to use as wickets for ball play).

Early Competitive Era: This period roughly spans the years 1740 to 1860. It marks the almost simultaneous decline of stoolball as a romantic emblem in British literature

and the emergence of a game with the identical name as a competitive sport in the southern England county of Sussex. The earliest sign of the latter is a 1747 Sussex newspaper report mentioning a stoolball match played by maidens in the village of Warbleton.

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Similar reports appeared occasionally in the British press toward the end of the 18th century and through the first six decades of the 19th. In nearly all of these reports, groups of women or girls in various Sussex locales formed teams to compete against each other, often at the same locale where male friends and family were playing cricket. There are no surviving rules or descriptions to inform us of how Sussex women and girls played stoolball during those years.

Stoolball at Horsham park, 1878

Modern Period: In the 1860s, the first organized stoolball clubs formed in Sussex, and in 1867, William de St Croix, a local vicar in the town of Glynde and the father of several players on the local town team, codified and published the first known set of standardized rules. These rules closely paralleled those of cricket, with several significant exceptions. Of note, a one-handed paddle was substituted for the heavy cricket bat, bowlers served balls underhanded and, instead of wickets, two wooden targets, each a foot square, were positioned atop stakes to serve as goals. Competitions between clubs of women and girls representing various Sussex villages proceeded until the end of the century. The game was revived again periodically in the 20th century, with clubs and associations coming in and out of existence over the decades. The current umbrella organization for the sport, the National Stoolball Association, was founded in 1979 and supervises numerous clubs in Sussex and

surrounding counties. It changed its name to Stoolball England in 2010.

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Modern Stoolball (from thisgirlcan.co.uk)

Comments/Opinions

1. Beginning in the 18th century and continuing into the 19th, several British newspaper articles mentioned matches of a game called “battle-board.” All of these involved female players from the county of Kent that borders Sussex to the east. In all likelihood battle-board was simply a local Kentish designation for stoolball. A possibly related term—bittle-battle—has been cited on occasion as another alternate name for stoolball. Baseball historian Robert W. Henderson and others have alleged the word battle-battle appeared in the Domesday book. This latter claim is unfounded, although there is at least one, verified use of the term bittle-battle, this being when a local newspaper in the Sussex town of Seaford reported on a game of that name in 1864.

2. Modern stoolball is played in a manner very similar to cricket. Its rules, as first codified in 1867, are plainly modeled after those of the more heralded sport. It may not be a coincidence that reports of women playing cricket in England first appeared in the 1740s, the same decade as the first known competitive stoolball match. And as they did in that stoolball contest, women from Sussex comprised the opposing sides in at least one of the cricket matches.

3. Then again, there is no hard evidence that stoolball assumed its cricket-like

essence as early as the 1740s. It is possible that when women in Sussex first began playing competitively they were practicing an earlier form of the game and only gravitated to the cricket model at some later date. It is equally uncertain when adoption of the one-handed racket and elevated targets came into use.

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Sussex historian Andrew Lusted maintains that women in his county had been playing this “modern” version of the game for at least several decades before Reverend de St Croix formalized its rules in 1867.

Since the end of the antique/romantic era of stoolball, the game appears to have been played predominantly by females, although there are ample examples of men and boys playing it on mixed teams There is also one anomalous example of two teams of men facing off at stoolball in the town of Sittingbourne in Kent in the year 1785, as reported by a local newspaper.

4. One additional dichotomy between the ancient/romantic era of stoolball versus the competitive and modern periods is where the game was played. During the three centuries prior to the 1740s, stoolball clearly enjoyed popularity throughout Britain. This is suggested by the hundreds of references to the game that appeared in literature, polemics and poetry, including in works written by celebrated authors from Shakespeare to Sir Walter Scott (Scott, of course, wrote in the 19th century, but his reference to stoolball appeared in his novel *Ivanhoe* which was set in the 12th century). By contrast, from 1747 onward when newspapers reported on actual stoolball matches, nearly all were played in Sussex, with isolated examples from Surrey and Kent (also in southeast England).

5. Stoolball’s distinction as predecessor game to cricket and baseball is based solely upon presumption, not actual proof. Yet, historian Joseph Strutt offered one intriguing description of stoolball suggestive of a possible relationship to baseball. In his iconic work *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, first published in 1801, Strutt presented the following as one of his two descriptions of stoolball:

“*A certain number of stools are set up in a circular form, and at a distance from each other, and every one of them is occupied by a single player; when the ball is struck, which is done as before with the hand, they are every one of them obliged to alter his situation, running in succession from stool to stool, and if he who threw the ball can regain it in time to strike any one of the players, before he reaches the stool to which he is running, he takes his place, and the person touched must throw the ball, until he can in like manner return to the circle.”* If you can overlook such minor discrepancies as the absence of a bat, the

employment of soaking, and the order of play after a baserunner has been retired, then perhaps you can just discern, as I do, a resemblance to a type of baseball where play begins with the bases already loaded. No? Well, eyes of the beholder, and all that.

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6. One other minor baseball comparison came to mind when I read a 1923 letter to the editor of a Sussex newspaper that was brought to my attention by Sussex historian Andrew Lusted. The correspondent was discussing a letter that he himself had received from a veteran stoolball player who recounted a controversy about stoolball's rules from the late 19th century. It seems that, at the time, players from East Sussex and West Sussex were in the midst of a spirited disagreement, with the former wanting, among other things, to shorten the bowling crease so that the bowler would be positioned mid-wicket. The West Sussex advocates derided this proposal, charging that their counterparts in East Sussex were simply unable to bowl wicket to wicket, and that the rule change was being offered "to cover their incapacity." While the two sides eventually reached a compromise, the dispute reminded me of a letter that had appeared in Porter's *Spirit of the Times* in December, 1856. In that one, an advocate for the Massachusetts game boasted about their use of fast "throwing," and averred that the type of soft, underhand pitching as practiced in the New York game is never utilized in New England "except by the most juvenile players." Baseball, too, worked out these differences, with the New York game becoming the standard, but with aspects of Massachusetts game, such as fast overhand pitching and the fly rule, eventually incorporated.