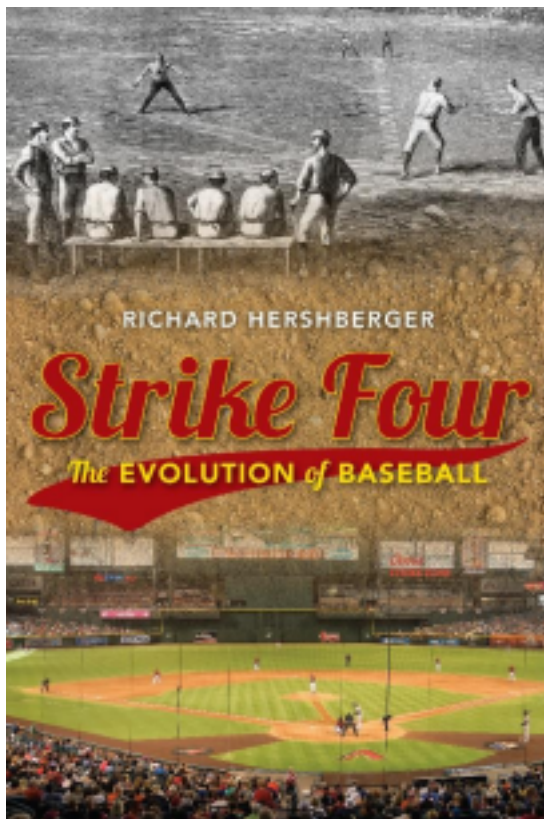


Protoball Interview with Richard Hershberger

Note: Richard Hershberger is the author of Strike Four: The Evolution of Baseball (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). A frequent (and exacting) contributor to SABR's 19CCB list-serve, he is also one of Protoball's leading data donors, supplying hundreds of summaries of early baseball clubs to the PrePro data base, and submitting his collection of 19C news clips, including over 2000 clips from the Origins Era, to Protoball's News Clips collection -- and it has even more clips for later 19C years.



Protoball: *Many of us Origins Sleuthlings wandered into the field in a fog of idle curiosity. You seem to have arrived with a pre-fabricated mission of reading primary baseball material, year-by-year. What do you now see as the strengths and weaknesses of that approach?*

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My entry was nothing so systematic. When I first became interested in early baseball I focused on the late 1870s and early 1880s. I was fascinated by the interregnum—the period when there was no major league ball in either New York City or Philadelphia. I was not especially interested on baseball's origins until David Block's book, *Baseball Before We Knew It* [2005] came out. With that I was hooked. So now you know who to

blame.

I also fell by accident into my program of systematic reading. If you look at the better books on early baseball written in the late 20th century you can tell that there were a handful of major baseball newspapers from the 1850s, with the various iterations of *Spirit of the Times* and the [New York] *Clipper* frequently cited. There were also mentions of the New York *Sunday Mercury*, but no citations from it. It clearly was a major paper, but known only by references in other papers. It turned out that the *Sunday Mercury* was not lost. Copies are extant for 1853 onward, except for 1856 and 1857 (topping my wish list). The problem was that they were scattered, difficult and inconvenient to locate, so no one had done this. Enter Bob Tholkes. He took up the project to track down and scan everything up through the Civil War—the *Sunday Mercury* and the others as well. You will get to blame Bob as well.

At this point I realized that it is entirely doable to read essentially all the newspaper coverage through the end of the Civil War. It isn't all that much. You could do it in your spare time over a month or so. So I did, taking lots of notes in electronic form. Then I wasn't bright enough to know to stop. With the postwar baseball boom the newspaper coverage soon becomes too much to read literally everything. I was forced to be selective. In practice this means reading the sporting weeklies and a selection of dailies from the major cities. I have been working my way forward, currently up to 1892.

The dual strengths of this approach are that it brings out what they thought was important at the time, and reveals nuggets that are buried in larger items.

For example, Erastus Wiman's lawsuit against the AA [American Association] in late 1885 arguably is one of the most important legal cases in the history of baseball, or even sports in general. It forced the owners to think in terms of a league franchise as a property right with value. It took them a while to work through the implications, but in the end this concept is absolutely foundational to professional team sports. Yet this case is nearly entirely forgotten today. There are entirely understandable reasons for this. Its importance is not as legal precedent, so it flies under the radar of legal historians. Similarly for the historians of the business of baseball, since the idea that a franchise is a property right seems so obvious as not to require explanation. But at the

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time they thought it was important and had good reasons to think it. These reasons are readily apparent in a systematic read-through, while easily overlooked in a more targeted research strategy.

As for buried nuggets, my history of the evolution of the rules would have been

impossible with a targeted strategy. A rule is changed because there is a problem to be solved. These problems turn up in day-to-day game play. Sometimes there is a year end wrap-up discussion of problems and proposals to solve them, but you can't count on this. Even when these discussions are printed, the context can be obscure. There is no substitute for the systematic, plodding approach. As a single example, the infield fly rule is traditionally dated to either 1893 (or 1890 for the Players' League). It turns out in fact to date from the 1870s. The 1893 rule was the culmination of a twenty-year-long discussion, both what the rule should be and how to express it. The previous twenty years were overlooked by modern researchers because the language of the rule was obscure—even at the time, which is why they changed it. But read game accounts and we can find infield fly situations and discussions of how the umpire should interpret the rules.

The weaknesses to this approach are that it is massively time consuming and easy to get bogged down in minutiae. Indeed, it is pretty much necessary to get bogged down in minutiae. It often is not obvious what will be important, so better to take more notes than fewer. I only recommend it for someone with lots of spare time and mental energy to devote to it. But I absolutely wish someone would. I have made just the first pass through the material. There certainly are nuggets that I overlooked.

Protoball: *The word is that daytimes you have worked as para-legal. Is it a mere coincidence that your first book, the clever and informative Strike Four, was about the evolution of what were once called the "Laws of Base Ball?" Did the book generally turn out the way you thought it would?*

A lawyer once told me that I think like a lawyer. I responded that I knew she meant it as a compliment, so I would take it that way. But seriously, a lot of what "thinking like a lawyer" really means is simply keeping straight in your mind what it is you are arguing. This is no different from good scholarship. Decades back I considered becoming an academic but decided against it. I don't regret that decision. I don't have to grade undergraduate term papers, nor attend department meetings and sit on committees. I call that a win. But I have the academic itch. Writing about early baseball is how I scratch it. I eventually fell backwards into the legal field, where I found my skill set worked well. So while my hobby and professional interests are not unrelated, the relationship is indirect.

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The impetus for the book was purely historical interest. I see the purpose of the study of history to be answering the question "How did we get here?" This is why 19th century baseball fascinates me. They had to figure everything out. Once you get to the 20th century most of the foundational parts of baseball as an institution were understood.

The implications still have to play out, but it is a different discussion. This process of figuring it out worked in various ways. As cultural history, they had to through the idea of forming clubs to play a game: was this a reasonable, or even commendable, thing for grown men to do? Once you get into the professional era the question moves to how clubs will interact with one another, first joining in a league, and then how multiple leagues can coexist. There was no precedent for any of this, and these were not easy questions. How they worked this out is the history of professional baseball from about 1870 to the NL-AL peace of 1903. Then there are the rules themselves. Baseball was a schoolyard game adapted for genteel intramural club play. Then in the mid-1850s it was thrust into a competitive cauldron of clubs playing against other clubs, and taking any edge they could find. The instability of the 19th century rules is the response: a half-century of tweaking the rules to adjust for whatever it was that clubs had come up with since the previous tweak.

I see these as facets of the same question: How did we get here? The decision to write the rules book first was an accident of editorial interest. I am currently writing a second book, for University of Missouri Press, on the rise of baseball up to 1871. That is much more cultural history. I hope eventually to take the story through 1903. That will be more an organizational history: the development of the business of baseball.

Protoball: *The last decade of digital technology has opened doors to much factual material for us to process -- will people still be interested in early baseball history in a decade?*

Absolutely! We are in a period with the digital revolution making a large body of sources available all at once. This is an exciting time to be working the field. But the surge of interest came before the widespread availability of these sources. When I started it was still a matter of tracking down microfilm and bound volumes and taking notes. It still is, to a large extent. Far from everything has been digitized. This will still be true in ten years. And even with the material that has been digitized, the vagaries of OCR, the conversion of the image to text, is such that this material will still turn up nuggets the old fashioned way. In other words, you can't assume that you can search on "base ball" in a text and assume that everything there is to be found will turn up. The current interest is not merely based on the recent finds