

Stolen bases

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When did the practice of stealing bases enter into baseball? I believe that it was an ancient feature of the game, predating the Knickerbockers and the New York game. Some argue the contrary, that it was a comparatively late development. I make particular reference to the argument made in *Vintage Base Ball: Recapturing the National Pastime* by James R. Tootle, pp. 289-295. I will devote more space perhaps to this question than is strictly merited on account of this contrary argument. This essay will be in four parts: stealing in the 1850s; stealing under the 1845 Knickerbocker rules, stealing in pre-modern baseball; and stealing and vintage base ball

Stealing in the 1850s

Taking first things first, the earliest known direct reference to a steal (or, in this case, an attempted steal) is from a game between the Union Club of Morrisania (in the modern Bronx) and the Baltic Club of New York played July 31, 1856:

Mr. Valentine...made a good strike and reached the second base. He was followed by Mr. Abrams, a good and sure batter, and we felt certain that he would terminate the game in favor of the Union. Previous to his striking, however, Mr. Valentine run [sic] from the second to the third base, which he undoubtedly reached before being touched with the ball thrown to the guardian of that base; but the referee decided that he was "out," and from that decision there was no appeal. [New York Clipper August 9, 1856]

For a successful steal, we have to jump forward a year where we find two steals, of home no less, in a game between the Gotham Club of New York and the Atlantic Club of Brooklyn in game played September 31, 1857:

All [the Atlantics'] bases were admirably guarded, in spite of which, however, Messrs. Commerford and Johnson contrived to reach home base on two separate occasions, unobserved by the pitcher. [New York Clipper September 12, 1857]

Note also that the account is clear that these were indeed stolen bases. The claim is sometimes made that there was no stealing in this era, but rather that what appear to be stolen bases are actually cases of the runner advancing on a passed ball. Often the accounts aren't clear, but sometimes, as in this case, they are. If these runner had advanced on passed balls, it would make no difference how observant the pitcher was or was not. For true stolen bases—especially of home—the observational powers of the pitcher are very much relevant.

Thereafter reports of stolen bases and attempted steals and efforts to prevent steals become commonplace. We also begin to see the word "steal" applied to this strategy. Typical examples include:

[picked nines New York vs. Brooklyn 7/20/1858] Wright then took the bat, and Van Cott attempted to run to the second base. The ball being quickly passed down, he was headed

off, and made tracks again for the first base, but the ball was there before him; turned again toward the second, and was again headed off; and was thus kept between the two points, till, in their anxiety to put him out, the ball thrown to Holder on the second base was missed by him, and Van Cott, amidst tumultuous applause, reached that port in safety. Hoy, in the meantime, completed his run. [New York Sunday Mercury July 25, 1858]

Beard (catcher) acquitted himself in his usual style; in fact, surpassed himself on this occasion—more men were put out by his throwing the ball to the second base than we ever recollect seeing in any match game. [New York Sunday Mercury August 7, 1859]

[Atlantics vs. Eckfords 10/12/1859] Snyder had a narrow escape in running to the second base, the ball not having been thrown quite high enough by Boerum [the catcher] to Oliver. [New York Sunday Mercury October 16, 1859]

[Atlantics vs. Eckfords 10/12/1859] Oliver made the third base... Pidgeon [the pitcher] then happened to turn his back to the home base to survey the field, and Oliver took advantage of the opportunity to run in home. [New York Sunday Mercury October 16, 1859]

[Excelsior vs. Charter Oak 5/17/1860] Vanderhoef commenced his play with a fine hit to centre field, reaching the third base thereby, and made first run for the Charter Oaks by stealing home when Leggett and Creighton were off their guard. [New York Clipper May 26, 1860]

[Putnams vs. Eckfords, 6/13/60] McKinstry [of the Putnams] “made a steal” from the third base to home, in the second inning, in consequence of [Eckford pitcher] Grum paying more attention to the field than to the base. [New York Sunday Mercury June 17, 1860]

Along with this come various related plays. We have already seen the catcher throwing to the base to put the runner out. Some adjusted their play. Usually they positioned themselves well behind the batter, in order to allow fewer passed balls, to catch foul tips for outs, and out of self-preservation, protective equipment being as yet undreamt of. Some, however, moved up close behind the batter when a runner was on first base:

The catcher is expected to catch or stop all balls pitched or thrown home; he will, when a player is running from the first to second base, stand as near the batsman as possible, and take the ball before it bounds; as the man at the bat seldom strikes when another player is on the first, the catcher is better enabled to do so; the object of this is to shorten the distance to the second base, as he should throw there, in order that the baseman may put the player running to the second out. He should be prepared for foul balls, and tips, also keep a wide look-out over the game, and be able to throw a swift and true ball to the bases. [Porter's Spirit of the Times December 26, 1857]

As early as 1857 the short stop was instructed to back up the third baseman on such throws.

The short stop duties are to stop all balls from the bat that come within his reach, and throw them to whatever base the batsman may be striving to make (probably the first), to assist the pitcher, and, should occasion require, to cover in behind the third base when the catcher throws to it; also the second and third, when the ball comes in from the field. [Porter's Spirit of the Times December 26, 1857]

Another play related to stealing is the pick off throw. Pitchers were evaluated on their ability to hold the runners:

Mr. M. O'Brien pitched finely, and permitted none of this adversaries to steal bases. [New York Mercury June 20, 1858]

Powell (pitcher) played in that position in a masterly manner, and kept a very sharp look-out for the bases. [New York Sunday Mercury August 7, 1859]

[Excelsior vs. Star 6/28/1860] In their 4th innings, T. Morris hit a good ball to left field, and made his 1st base, but was caught napping there by Creighton and Pearsall [first baseman], who play into each others hands in style in their positions. [New York Clipper July 7, 1860]

We also see the throw to short on a double steal, already in 1860 described as an "old point" of the game:

[Eagle vs. Gotham 7/10/1860] Schwab got to his third base, when he was nicely caught napping by an old "point" of the Gothams. Commerford had made his first base, and ran for his second, when Cohen threw the ball to the 2d base apparently, seeing which Schwab ran for home, but Cohen had placed short field just where he wanted him, and the ball was stopped by short and thrown back to Cohen before Schwab could get home, the play eliciting considerable laughter and applause. [New York Clipper July 21, 1860]

There are several reasons why we should not conclude that steals originated in 1856 and took a couple of years to catch on.

Game accounts before 1856 were sparse, typically a paragraph or two stating who played, some general observations, and a rudimentary box score. The account of the Union and Baltic game in 1856 is one of the first detailed inning-by-inning accounts we have. The first report of an attempted steal occurs simultaneously with the first game accounts including this level of detail. This is not evidence that steals were new. Quite the opposite, it suggests that they had been occurring all along, but that earlier newspaper reports were too crude to record them.

Neither do these accounts give any hint that steals were a novelty. One constant throughout baseball history is that any change is met by complaints. Here, by way of example,

is the earliest known complaint that baseball is no longer being played the right way:

Ball-Playing has become an institution. It is no longer a healthful recreation in which persons of sedentary habits engage for needful relaxation and exercise; but it is now an actual institution. Young men associate for this object, organize themselves into an association, with constitution and laws to control them, and then plunge into the amusement with a sort of "Young America" fanaticism. In almost every town throughout all this region there is one of these regularly formed and inaugurated ball-clubs, the members of which meet frequently to practice the art, for the sake of being able to worst some neighboring club whom they challenge, or by whom they are challenged, to a hot contest. The matter has become a sort of mania, and on this account we speak of it. In itself a game at ball is an innocent and excellent recreation but when the sport is carried so far as it is at the present time, it becomes a public nuisance.

...

For these reasons we class ball-clubs, as now existing, with circus exhibitions, military musters, pugilistic feats, cock-fighting, &c; all of which are nuisances in no small degree. [The Happy Home and Parlor Magazine December 1, 1858]

We have seen how the potential for steals affected the roles of various players, especially the pitcher and the catcher (in the latter case, with some physical peril). In no instance is there any claim that this is new, nor is there any complaint about it. Discussions of potential rules amendments are well documented from 1856 onward. Nowhere is there any suggestion that the steal should be outlawed. This is not plausible, if stealing were a novelty. The evidence shows that stealing was a universally accepted part of the game.

Tootle puts forth as a reasonable argument that "there was no base stealing in the game's early years, and that it was not a part of the game until the 1860 era and after." This is simply factually incorrect. Base stealing is directly documented to 1856, and as a routine element of the game thereafter.

Stealing under the Knickerbocker rules

A runner cannot be put out in making one base, when a balk is made by the pitcher. [Rule 19 of the Knickerbocker rules of 1845]

Rule 19 of the 1845 Knickerbocker rules provides for base runners advancing on a balk by the pitcher. This is conventionally held to show that stealing was already a feature of the game, since the whole point of the balk rule is to facilitate stealing.

Tootle proposes an alternative interpretation. He suggests that there was a rule—unwritten, but universally understood—that a runner could not leave his base until the ball was hit, with the penalty—again, not included in the written rules—that he would be out should he leave the base prematurely. The pitcher, Tootle goes on, might attempt to trick the runner into leaving early by feinting a pitch and stopping suddenly. The Knickerbockers would not countenance such an ungentlemanly stratagem, and instituted the balk rule to prevent it.

This is an imaginative interpretation. It is also certainly wrong. We might wonder why

the balk trick would work, when the runner could not run before the batter made contact, but this turns out to be the least of the problems. With the Knickerbocker balk rule we find, on closer examination, a rare instance where the conventional wisdom turns out to be entirely correct.

The notion of unwritten rules is not itself implausible. To the contrary, the Knickerbocker rules clearly required unwritten rules. The position of the pitcher, for example, is completely unspecified. They did not need to state that the pitcher was in the infield more or less on the line between home and second base: this was how the game was played and everyone knew it. The notion of unwritten rules does not, however, give free rein to invent any rule convenient to the argument at hand.

The unwritten assumptions in the Knickerbocker rules were gradually made explicit. So what happened to this purported unwritten assumption? There are three basic ways a player can be put out: he can strike out, be caught out, and be put out running the bases. (The modern rules have various more or less rare and exotic additional ways a player can manage to get himself out, but the three given here cover the vast majority of outs.) Tootle proposes a fourth way to get out: by leaving the base before the ball is hit. There is not an iota of documentary evidence for this. Worse, there is no evidence for its being changed. On the other hand, there is copious evidence of this purported rule being violated, remarkably enough without provoking so much as a murmur of protest.

Recall the attempted steal in the game of July 31, 1856. When Mr. Valentine of the Union Club took off from second base to third in 1856, the fielding side's response was to throw the ball to the third baseman, who tagged him. The only disagreement resulting was whether Valentine reached the base before the tag.

This play makes perfect sense to the modern reader (apart from Valentine foolishly running into the third out at third). The umpire's call might have been a grave injustice, if he were really safe, but that's baseball.

Under the unwritten rule proposed by Tootle, this play is complete gibberish. Valentine would be out the instant he left second base. The throw to the third baseman would be pointless, and there would be no need to tag the runner, and no discussion over this tag. This universally understood unwritten rule was violated with no one noticing.

The following winter a convention of baseball clubs was convened to revise the rules. Numerous topics were discussed, including the first attempt at defining a balk. Base stealing was entirely absent from these discussions. As we have seen, the following years saw stealing as a routine part of the game. The purported rule, so widely understood as to not require its being put into writing, disappears without a peep. In the meantime, the balk rule seamlessly is repurposed, from being a rule entirely about the illegality of base stealing into a rule entirely about making base stealing easier. This argument simply is not credible.

Stealing in pre-modern baseball

Baseball was an old English game, brought to American by colonists as part of the English cultural package. Pre-modern sports characteristically exist in innumerable local variants. The rise of standardized rules is a feature of the evolution into a modern sport. The direct ancestor of modern baseball is a version that arose in New York City around 1840, adapted to club play by adults. In the previous section I argued that base stealing was a feature of this “New York game” as codified in the Knickerbocker rules. Here I will argue that base stealing was not a peculiarity of the New York game, but rather was a general feature of pre-modern baseball.

Consider the underlying logic of base stealing. The runner is free to run any time he wishes, except when the ball is dead. This liberty is obscured by the practical consideration that much of the time it would be imprudent for him to take off. In practice he will usually only do so at fairly standard moments of the game. This is not a requirement. Ty Cobb once stole home from third base when an argument broke out at the plate. The players gathered around. Cobb noted that time had not been called, so he wended his way through the crowd and stepped on the plate. This would be perfectly legal today, in the unlikely event that no umpire thought to call time. The question that follows is what circumstances cause the ball to be dead? There are two major ones. We have already mentioned the umpire calling time. The second is if a foul ball is hit and not caught.

This logic has several implications. One is that we should not expect a rule affirmatively allowing the runner to steal a base. Rather, we should expect the rules to state when he can’t steal a base. Tootle emphasizes that the Knickerbocker rules lack a rule allowing stolen bases. He overlooks that neither do the modern rules, or the rules in between. Several modern rules mention stealing incidentally, and the scoring rules provide for recording stolen bases, but no rule explicitly and affirmatively allows for them. Those modern versions that prohibit stealing have to insert rules to do this. Legal stealing is the default.

This extends to pre-modern versions as well. If they prohibited stealing, we would expect a rule stating this. Our knowledge of pre-modern versions is far from complete, but we do have the formal rules of the “Massachusetts game” from 1858, a small number of sets of club rules, and some descriptions of play (some contemporary with the games described, others later reminiscences). There were in particular competitive communities in Philadelphia and Cincinnati that left behind reasonably detailed accounts. In none of these is there any record of a ban on stealing. The record is not so nearly complete that it is impossible that such a rule existed but was lost to the historical record, but it is more likely that there was no such rule to record.

The other possibility is that there was no rule prohibiting stealing, but no one thought of it until late. This suggestion is not absurd on its face. We need not suppose that the first time a game recognizable as baseball was played, the participants thought to steal bases. The question is whether this flash of genius occurred early or late?

We saw in the last section that it is implausible to suppose that Mr. Valentine of the Union Club invented the technique that day in 1856. It is scarcely any less plausible to suppose

that this flash occurred at any but an early date.

One reason to believe that stealing was a feature of pre-modern baseball was that as the New York game spread across the country, there was no record of new players being confused by stealing. The major baseball newspapers regularly carried columns of questions and answers. We can tell what aspects of the game were considered difficult by reference to what questions were asked. Some features that seem straightforward today caused surprising levels of confusion. Force plays are an example, with frequent questions about the most basic situations. A typical example is this question, from a member of the Syracuse Base Ball Club:

The three bases are occupied. The ball is struck fair, but falls very near home base. The ball is fielded, and held on home base:

Question.—Is the player occupying the third base—that should make home base—out without being touched by the ball? and can the ball be passed to third base, putting out the player occupying the second base in the same way, and so round until players reach the bases they are entitled to?

...

We think Sec. 18 of the Rules very clearly answers the first question of our correspondent: “When a fair ball is struck, and not caught flying, or on the first bound, the first base must be vacated, as also the second and third bases, if they are occupied at the same time. Players may be put out, upon any base, under these circumstances, in the same manner as the striker, when running to the first base,” that is to say, by basing the ball in advance of the runner. The rule, as will be seen, gives authority for putting out all the players in the manner described by our correspondent. [New York Sunday Mercury June 19, 1859]

Such questions arose when the feature in question—in this case the force play—didn’t have an analogue in the familiar pre-modern version of baseball. Foul balls were another frequent topic of questions, as most pre-modern versions of baseball had no such concept:

So what of stealing? This did not cause any similar confusion, or if it did, questions about it did not make their way into the baseball newspapers. It would be quite remarkable for this new-found freedom to run the bases were readily understood where force plays were a dark mystery.

Consider next the Knickerbockers’ balk rule once again. We saw in the previous section that the most plausible interpretation is that it existed to make stealing easier. Why was this rule necessary? It is possible in principle to allow stealing while not having a balk rule. The pitcher will reach a point in his delivery where it is physically impossible for him to stop the pitch and instead make a pick off throw. The explanation for the balk rule is that without it, stealing bases becomes largely impractical. Even with it, stealing in the modern game is a difficult and perilous undertaking. Without it, stealing would disappear from the game except under exceptional circumstances. The rule serves to push the point of no return earlier in the pitcher’s delivery. Once he has reach this point he is committed to complete the pitch, even if he is physically capable of halting it. This in turn allows the base runner to commit to the steal at that earlier point in the delivery, improving his chances of completing it successfully.

The balk is a difficult rule. A pick off move is met by cries from the stands of “balk!” as the umpires stand impassively by, while an actual balk seems to come out of the blue. It was no better in 1845. We have seen how the convention of 1857 attempted to clarify what exactly was a balk. This clarification was imperfect, and set off a process of nearly three decades of refining until the rules arrived at essentially the modern rule with the pitcher’s hands coming to a halt while in the set position.

The Knickerbocker balk rule was unique. There is no record of any similar rule in any other version of baseball, and the balk would subsequently be one of the standard subjects of question-and-answer columns. Why did the Knickerbockers institute this difficult rule of obscure application, imposing a burden on the umpire to interpret it? If we suppose stealing to also have been a Knickerbocker innovation, then we are forced to conclude that they came up with the idea of stealing, experimented with it and found it impractical, and instead of dropping the idea they further complicated the situation with an unwieldy balk rule.

A more likely explanation is suggested by early baseball historian David Block’s observation that the New York game had unusually long base paths. In most versions they were shorter, in some cases much shorter. The version codified as the “Massachusetts game” had 60 foot base paths, while the version played in Philadelphia had bases under 20 feet apart. With these shorter versions, stealing would have been practical without a balk rule. As the base paths lengthened, stealing became unduly difficult. The balk rule was instituted to compensate, restoring the balance.

To review the previous three sections, I have started with concrete direct evidence and moved to indirect argument. Base stealing is directly attested in the record from 1856 onward, and common from 1858 onward. It is not directly attested from 1845 to 1855, but the existence of the balk rule argues strongly for its existence. It also is not directly attested in pre-modern forms of baseball, but the absence of difficulty with base stealing as players switched from pre-modern forms to the New York game, and the need for the balk rule perceived by the Knickerbockers, argues that stealing was already an established feature of the game, and had been long enough to be widespread.

Stealing and vintage base ball

Tootle makes an additional argument against base stealing, based on the experience of vintage base ball clubs. He describes a game played in which stealing was allowed. The runners went wild on the bases. The catchers were unable to throw any out, and the batters routinely refused to swing at pitches until any runners had advanced. He argues based on this that stealing is too easy to be allowed with slow pitching.

As we have already seen, base stealing is directly attested from 1856 onward. Most vintage clubs play under the 1860 rules or later. If they can’t figure out how to defend against stealing, this shows that their reenactment of the period game is imperfect.

Tootle is right to look to the pitching. Most vintage pitchers make soft lobbs to the plate, akin to slow pitch softball. Very early pitching often is compared with slow pitch softball. This, however, should not be overstated. Softball serves as a point of comparison. When describing early baseball to a fan used to Tom Glavine or Araldis Chapman, describing early pitching as akin to slow pitch softball is a convenient comparison that will be easily understood. It is not meant to be taken literally. Slow pitch softball rules regulate the arc of the pitched ball, requiring that it arc at least three feet and no more than ten. There is a large area between this and a true fastball.

“Swift” pitching is attested as early as 1855:

[Columbia of Brooklyn vs. Pioneer of Jersey City 9/19/1855] Law, Jr., as pitcher [of the Columbia], sends a swift ball, which not only wearies the batter but himself long before the game is finished. ... Jordan [of the Pioneer], as pitcher, needs practice, and by his endeavor to pitch swift balls loses by pitching wild ones... [New York Clipper September 29, 1855]

What pitchers were doing in the meantime, from 1845 to 1855, is not wholly clear. Some have argued that they were attempting to throw fastballs all along. Even if this is not true, we should not suppose that they were merely lobbing the ball softly.

The other point that should not be overlooked is that the consequences Tootle describes in the vintage game with stealing, of many steals and batters stalling, are precisely what appears in the historical record. Runners weren't stealing quite so frequently as in that vintage game, but stolen bases were far more common than in the modern game.

In the modern game a player is expected to get on base. At that point the responsibility for advancing him around the bases largely lies with the subsequent batters. If he can steal a base, that is all the better. But if he is stranded at first, or is the first out of a double play, no one blames him for failing to advance himself. The blame is assigned to the later batters who couldn't bring him home. The attitude was different in the early game. The player was expected not only to get on base, but to work his way around the bases:

[Atlantic vs. Eckford 10/12/1859] Pierce and Smith struck in succession, neither getting past the first base on their strike; but Pierce, who had worked his way round to the third base, ran home, in consequence of another ball passing Brown [catcher]. [New York Sunday Mercury October 16, 1859]

The point of the batter refusing to swing at good pitches was to give the runner the opportunity to do just this. This was called the “waiting game.” This tactic was controversial because it was boring:

[Harlem vs. Charter Oak 8/22/1860] We regret to add that this game was marked with some unpleasantness toward the close, growing out of mutual dissatisfaction at the mode of striking which each club adopted—namely: waiting until the previous striker had

worked his way around to the third base. The Charter Oaks began this style of business, and the Harlem followed suit. It is not a kind of game, however, which any club of the character and standing of either of the contestants should countenance. [New York Sunday Mercury August 26, 1860]

This tactic was considered a problem to be solved. The eventual solution was called strikes and balls. In theory called strikes were instituted in 1858 and balls in 1864. In practice it took many years after that to persuade players and umpires to accept this new regime.

What should vintage clubs do? That depends on their priorities. If authentic historical reenactment, warts and all, is the goal, then the waiting game goes with the territory. If it is considered more important to keep the game moving (an entirely defensible position), then strictly enforcing the called strike rule (and balls, if playing under the 1864 or later rules) is a solution. Where this was a strange and new idea at the time, modern players and umpires are used to it. Finally, and this is my ultimate point on the subject, if banning stealing is judged to be the best accommodation to the realities of vintage ball playing then it is perfectly reasonable to enact this ban. What is not reasonable—indeed, is indefensible—is to pretend that this is anything other than an ahistoric accommodation, misinforming both participants and spectators about it.