

Baseball's Timeless Appeal

By Clark C. Griffith

Baseball's timeless appeal captures the minds of fans who are enthralled by a game that, like the "Odyssey," tells a story of the human condition, of confronting enemies, helping friends, and, of course, getting home safely. This appeal applies to softball and Little League baseball as well as to the Major Leagues. In other games, teams of equal size battle from one end of a court, arena, or field to the other. In these "back and forth games," success is measured by crossing a line or placing an object in a goal. Not so in baseball, where the batter competes against nine opponents and success is measured by a player's ability to overcome the odds by safely moving from base to base so that he or she gets home safely.

Baseball is played on the largest field in team sports not involving a horse, even larger than cricket. Its field is distinguished from those of the back and forth games, which are all rectangles covered with lines, circles, and dots, by its simplicity, with two lines diverging at 90 degrees from a single point to define both the infield and the outfield. At the point of intersection is home plate, an oddly shaped five-sided figure, smaller than a basketball hoop, where all action begins and ends. The infield is a ninety foot square that is tipped on its end to form a diamond with the outfield beyond. There are three 15 inch bases positioned on the corners of the 90 foot square. The pitcher's mound rises 10 inches above the infield, 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate. All infields have this perfect symmetry, while the outfields vary widely.

The story unfolds as the batter stands in the batter's box facing his nemesis, the pitcher. The batter is surrounded by seven fielders and the pitcher in front with the catcher behind. The pitcher starts the action by pitching the ball over or just near home plate. The ball is leather bound and moves at lethal velocity. Fear is the first emotion that the player must overcome to play the game well. Many young players drop out when they can hear the ball in flight, are knocked down by an errant fast ball, or fooled by a curve into falling away, swinging weakly--insulted, stripped of all dignity, and humiliated, as courage and skill are shown to be lacking.

The pitcher attempts to put the batter out by using his extensive arsenal of pitches to cause the batter to strike out or hit the ball so it is caught in the air or on the ground to an infielder who throws him out. The pitchers can use any combination of speed or spin to defeat

the batter, including illegal spit balls that sink precipitously, or scuffed and cut balls that spin viciously. Pitchers succeed in putting batters out nearly 75% percent of the time.

If the batter hits a fair ball that is not caught, he becomes a runner and begins an odyssey around the bases. This must be done carefully, but speedily, as he moves from the sanctuary of one base to another. The sanctuary of the base is available to one runner at a time, and a runner is compelled to leave the sanctuary when the batter becomes a runner and there is no empty base between them. When a runner is forced to leave the base to go to the next base, he can be forced out merely by having a fielder touch the next base while holding the ball. Otherwise, the runner is safe while touching the base, but is subject to being put out anytime a fielder touches an “off base” runner with the ball. For Odysseus and his crew, the ship was the base and sanctuary and Odysseus tied himself to a mast to be safe from the Sirens’ pitch. Fielders, like Scylla, Cyclops and Circe, can use any form of deception, guile, misdirection, feints, hidden-ball tricks, and pick-off plays, all aimed at putting a vulnerable runner out. The runner is bound to stay on the straight and narrow base path while his enemies plot his end. He, like Odysseus, only wants to get home safely, and to do so, he must take risks, and be crafty, careful, and fleet of foot, and he usually needs a little help from his friends. Like Odysseus, the runner often finds home blocked by the catcher, armored like a Greek warrior in mask, breast plate, and greaves, who is the last barrier to success.

The runner’s fate is determined by umpires, who are the ultimate judges of safe and out, or life and death, which they signal with single swipe of a hand, thumb extended for “out” or both hands outstretched palms down for “safe,” which means “nothing notable happened, let’s keep going.” The “nothing” that happened is no out was made and baseball keeps time with outs.

Baseball’s most prestigious feat is the home run. However, it only accounts for one run, plus one for each runner on base, whereas in cricket a ball hit over the boundary on the fly counts for six runs. The home run derives its prestige from the act of driving the hostile pitch out of the field of play in a showing of complete victory. It is the ultimate show of dominance, like Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian Knot. A home run allows the batter to trot regally, with

impunity, in an ostentatiously slow, plodding, sometimes taunting pace, while the fielders must stand and watch, incapable of action, mute.

Baseball tells a story that relates to the human condition. The game requires great physical and mental skill in hitting a pitched ball, fielding, throwing, running, and taking risks to advance through the dangers of the infield. It is unique in its imagery and its appeal is the story of players alone in the wilderness, relying on friends for help, and being alert to dangers, while focusing on the single goal of reaching home safely. For a baseball player, like the rest of us, this occurs everyday. The story played out is like life itself, and that is the appeal of the game that has enraptured its fans for more than 150 years.

Clark Griffith is a lawyer and arbitrator in Minneapolis. He grew up with four uncles who played in the Major Leagues, Clark Griffith, for whom he is named, Joe Cronin, Joe Haynes and Sherrard Robertson. His great uncle Clark and Joe Cronin are in the Hall of Fame. He learned a lot about baseball from these uncles, but it was his mother, Natalie, who taught him the majesty of the game just as she had learned it from her father.

Mr. Griffith was an executive with the Minnesota Twins, and Chairman of Major League Baseball Properties before becoming a lawyer. He attends games on a very regular basis and still scouts every game he sees, including amateur and professional games, especially those of the Northern League, where he is Commissioner. Mr. Griffith grew up in Washington, D.C., mainly at Griffith Stadium, graduated from Dartmouth College and the William Mitchell College of Law.

This article can be found online at <http://web.baseballhalloffame.org/museum/appeal.jsp>.