

The Old Rules Apply as Williams Tops Amherst

By Joshua Robinson

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PITTSFIELD, Mass. In his 14 years as just another baseball journeyman, Rich Thompson pitched in more than 500 games from Taiwan to Puerto Rico. He took the mound in every state except Idaho. He even spent parts of three seasons in the majors with the Cleveland Indians and the Montreal Expos. And no matter where he played during those years of motels and duffel bags, his job description was always the same.

Strike out the guy standing 60 feet 6 inches away. Whip the ball across the plate and make him miss. Simple as that.

But on Sunday when Thompson pulled on the colors of Amherst, his alma mater, for a re-enactment of the first college baseball game, between Amherst and Williams 150 years ago, his instructions were different. Then again, he was no longer a pitcher. In his short-billed cap and long-sleeved jersey, he was playing the role of a hurler from 1859.



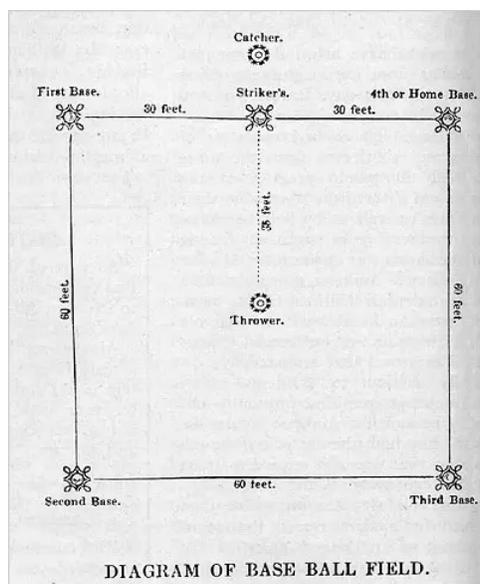
Left, two balls from the 1859 meeting of Amherst and Williams in the first college baseball game. The rules were much different then.

Amherst College

The single umpire in the bowler hat, waistcoat and tails explained that he was supposed to feed the ball, underhanded from 35 feet away, so that the striker could hit it. By the end of the third inning, Thompson had served up seven runs to Williams.

“I was used to getting hit like that, though,” he said after a team of Williams baseball alumni defeated a squad of former Amherst players, 19-17, in six innings at Waconah Stadium, a few blocks from the site of the original game. After the re-enactment, the Williams varsity team beat Amherst, 8-5, in a New England Small College Athletic Conference game.

Williams has won three replays of that first game in the last 50 years, going some way to avenging its defeat in 1859, when it was trounced by Amherst, 73-32, in 25 innings. Adding to its shame that weekend, Williams also lost the simultaneous intercollegiate chess match to Amherst.

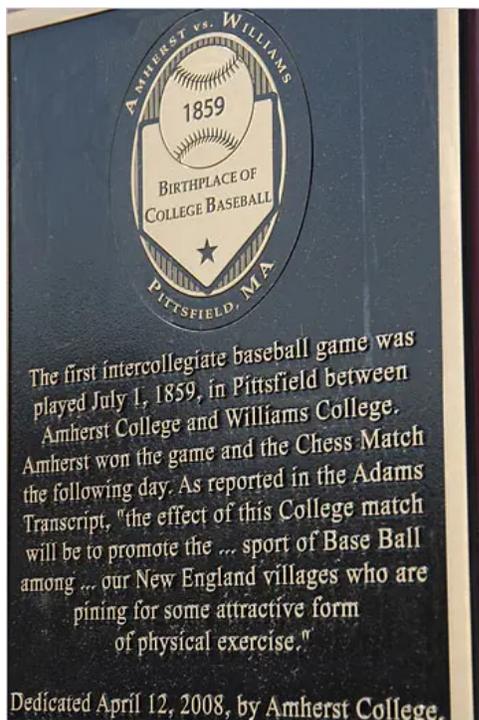


Amherst College

“They were well trained,” the local newspaper, *The Adams Transcript*, wrote of the Amherst baseball players at the time, “much better than the Williams boys, and were under the complete control of their captain, who understood his business and guided his men with admirable skill.”

On Sunday, the players had a much harder time understanding their business under the 1859 laws of the game. One-out innings on a rectangular infield with four four-foot poles for bases set 60 feet apart created more than enough confusion. Playing without gloves and a heavier ball blended in a healthy dose of sloppiness, too.

And with the batter standing halfway between home and first, it took the small group of spectators a while to even figure out what constituted a run. Still, with first base only 30 feet away, it did not mean there could not be close plays. Stephan Rapaglia of Amherst proved that when he chopped a dribbler up the line, then lunged to the pole.



Amherst beat Williams, 73-32, in the 1859 game, which lasted 25 innings.
Nancy Palmieri for The New York Times

“I got thrown out by getting hit in the butt at first base,” he said after learning the hard way that, under the old rules, pegging base runners was legal. “So that was a new experience.”

But the Amherst graduate Bill Pozefsky had witnessed the spectacle before. He sat in the stands clutching a stack of fading black-and-white photographs from the 1959 centennial game. Staring at them with rheumy eyes, he pointed himself out. He was one of the players in suspenders who had grown a waxed mustache and sideburns for the occasion.

The manager of the Williams team, Jim Briggs, was there 50 years ago, too. The grandson of Walter O. Briggs, who once owned the Detroit Tigers, Jim Briggs spent 28 years in the Williams baseball fold as a player he graduated in 1960 and as a coach. During that time, he watched his alma mater win the game in 1959 and coached the Ephs to another victory in 1976, when the teams got together in honor of the bicentennial.

Wearing a top hat, tails and white bow tie borrowed from the university’s theater department, he matched the feat Sunday with a team of players who had all known him as their manager in the 1980s. And, as he did then, Briggs warned them that nothing but a win would do.

“If we lose this, we’re 2-2,” he told them, “and the rubber game is in 50 years. I expect you all to be back because I’ll be there.”