HISTORYSOURCE

The Longest Game: Williams vs. Amherst

By Michael Beschloss
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The final score was 73-32. Almost four hours had elapsed before the struggle was over.

This first intercollegiate baseball game took place between Williams and Amherst 155 years ago this summer, in 1859. It was 12 years before America's first professional baseball league was started, and 44 years before the first World Series.

The showdown was definitely a grudge match. In 1821, the Williams president, the Rev. Zephaniah Swift Moore, citing "divine providence," had led a number of his students (known to later Williams generations as "the Defectors") from the rugged Berkshire mountain country of Williamstown, Mass., to found a new college in Amherst, which was closer to Boston.

Feeling stung, some of the Williams scholars who stayed behind spread the (apparently false) calumny that, as they fled, Moore's band of apostates also stole books from the college library.

(Full disclosure: I am a Williams alumnus, and my son Alex pitches for the current Williams baseball team.)

Against this bitter history of "ill blood" between their two schools, Amherst students in 1859 cordially challenged Williams to have it out on the baseball field. Accepting the dare, Williams stipulated that the game be paired with a chess match.

"BASE BALL and CHESS!" The Amherst Express proclaimed. "MUSCLE AND MIND!!"

On Friday, July 1, at 11 a.m., the two squads met on the neutral territory of the Base-Ball Club of Pittsfield, Mass. It was a fitting choice, it turns out, because in 1999, it was discovered that the city's 1791 bylaws referred to "Base ball" by name (banning the sport within 80 yards of a local church/meeting house "for the Preservation of the Windows"). This was perhaps the national pastime's first appearance on the printed record.

Nowadays known as the Lord Jeffs and the Ephs (honoring their colleges' namesakes, Lord Jeffery Amherst and Col. Ephraim Williams), the two opposing teams had each been selected by a vote of the students because neither college had an official baseball squad. The Adams (Mass.) Transcript reported that the Williams players "are younger and have evidently received less muscular training than their rivals."

The game was played under a version of "Massachusetts rules" (which later gave way to the more modern "New York" style of baseball). For instance, each team was allowed only one out per inning. In the manner of cricket, batters were allowed to hit the ball in any direction; there was no such thing as a foul ball. Basepaths were shorter than in modern college baseball, and the mound was closer to the batter's box.

The pitcher ("thrower" was the contemporaneous term) wore no glove; the same was true of the fielders, who could put a runner out by beaning ("soaking") him, so long as he was between bases, which were actually wooden stakes, four feet high. And the reason there were so many innings that day was that, under the agreed-upon rules, the game would conclude only after one side achieved 65 "tallies."

Modern-style baseball uniforms were not yet in vogue; the Williams players wore belts with their college's name emblazoned across the back.

Williams took an early lead, but so strong was the Amherst pitcher, Henry Hyde, that some spectators whispered that he must actually be a professional blacksmith whose services had been rented for the day.

As the final inning unfolded (primary sources from that day call it the 26th inning), a surge of runs by Amherst gave it the win. (With no mercy rule, the victors kept going, even though their score surpassed 65.)

Thus began the oldest, still-vibrant intercollegiate rivalry in baseball. That evening, the two teams genteelly had a "glorious time" dining together at a Pittsfield hotel, with toasts and generous speeches. The next day, Amherst also won the chess tournament.

In 2009, however, when Amherst and Williams alumni met in Pittsfield to stage a 150th anniversary re-enactment of their big game (employing a modified form of the original rules), the Ephs settled at least a few scores. They edged out the Jeffs, 19-17, as did the regular Williams varsity team when it faced Amherst immediately afterward, by 8-5.

Not long after the milestone game of 1859, college baseball was moving toward more consistent regulations and uniforms. In the summer of 1865, when Williams was about to face Harvard, whose players adorned their chests with what were described as "magenta" decorations, the sister and the cousin of one of the Williams players, Eugene Jerome, aspired to boost the Williams team's mettle by sewing up rosettes for them (see the accompanying photograph). The royal purple of the rosettes became Williams's official color, later inspiring its mascot, the Purple Cow.

The cousin's name was Jennie Jerome, and this was not the last time she was historically connected to pugnacity. In 1874, by then married to an English nobleman, Jennie bore a son, who was called Winston Churchill.

A correction was made on Oct. 3, 2014*: An earlier version of a picture caption with this article overstated what is known about the photograph of the Williams College baseball players. Though the caption for the picture, which is undated, noted that the time frame is "thought to be shortly after the Civil War," further research shows that the photograph was taken closer to 1885, based on a comparison of dated pictures showing a similar style of dress. No evidence could be found that it was taken closer to the Civil War.*

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