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## **STOOLBALL IS ALIVE AND WELL IN SUSSEX**

**Or, how a letter from Japan helped us discover an ancient English game**

*by Martin Hoerchner*

It amazes me sometimes how life dishes up treats and surprises, how things unexpectedly fall in place, how coincidences solve riddles, and how, as Ray Kinsella quotes Terence Mann "There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place, and the universe opens itself up..."

So it happened last June when I received a letter from Japan. It was from a SABR member named Kazuo Sayama, saying he was researching the origins of baseball. He asked if the games of rounders and stoolball were still played in Britain. It struck a special chord with me, because I've always considered the genealogy of baseball to be my speciality. So I composed a letter on my computer and stated that rounders was very common all over this island, but that stoolball, first mentioned in the middle ages, has been long extinct.

Both sports have a long history in Britain. Rounders is the sport that Robert W. Henderson, the prime genealogist of baseball, points to as the direct precedent of baseball, in his 1947 book "Bat, Ball, and Bishop: A History of Ball Games". Henderson compares the "The Boy's Own Book"

by William Clarke, published in London in 1829, with "The Book of Sports" by Robin Carver, published in Boston in 1834, where the rules of an English game called "rounders" and an American game called "base ball" are almost exactly the same. I've always questioned Henderson's conclusion that it means baseball was descended

mon ancestor to baseball and cricket. The common lore is that milk maids used their milking stools as both wicket (i.e. a target to throw at) and bat (with the legs removed). The first reference to the game by name is in 1450, but Henderson thinks it could date from at least 1330. There's a page for "stool-ball" in the "Little Pretty

Pocket Book" from 1744, a few pages over from the first illustration of a game named base-ball. In its earliest incarnation, the game was played by two people; one would throw a ball at a stool and the other would stand in front of it and try to hit the ball away from it with their open palm. The winner would be the one that hit the stool the most times. Modifications

like using a piece of wood to hit the ball, running between two or more stools, and having fielders to retrieve the batted ball, came later. It was the first game recorded as being played in the English colonies in America, in Massachusetts in 1621. And finally, in 1801, Joseph Strutt in his "Games and Pastimes of the People of England", writes of a variation where runners, after they have hit the ball, race around a course of stools set out in a circle. It is not difficult to see that the two-stool variety could be the progenitor of cricket while the multi-stool



from rounders; to me it only proves that rounders and baseball were once different names for the same sport. That's a very big distinction.

Rounders is still a very popular game in Britain. In fact, if anything has dampened British enthusiasm towards baseball, it's that a similar but lightweight game exists over here. Mention baseball to a native and they say "it's just a girl's game", or a "it's just a school game". I presume none of them has ever faced Randy Johnson in the batter's box.

As for stoolball, it's the game that Henderson defines as the com-

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# VIEW FROM THE CHAIR by Mike Ross

Each time another AGM is finished I feel a great weight ease off my mind. There have been eight AGM's and they don't get any easier. There is not as much preparation now because many more members are participating. In the beginning SABR UK was like a dog and pony act. Now organising on the day is the hard part. Standing up before you, I am more like a circus ringmaster than a SABR drenched fan. When SABR UK members gather as we do, for many the journey and the subsequent event is like a two week holiday. Seldom if ever during the year do UK members get the chance to sit down and rap on and on about baseball. (There are few if any "baseball wives" here - write in if you hear of one - in Britain; indeed baseball can be grounds for divorce).

Even those who live in central London cannot nip to the 7-eleven for some milk and talk last night's game. The AGM intermissions take on the atmosphere of Wall Street near closing bell time. At our meetings I clock-watch, I cut short, speed along, sit you down, beg for silence. As a result, one time - was it last year? - we had a walkout. So, it is no fun having to direct; for I would much rather stop playing Mr. "A Man and His Dog", and let things flow naturally. This year I got an idea. I looked around the room and decided who I would pick for a Sergeant-of-Arms to help keep order. Naturally I chose the biggest guy and came upon Stephen Laski, who may be big but is more on the soft spoken side and served me not at all. Stephen you're fired! Volunteers are welcome. Yes, at the meetings we have business to attend to, reports to be made, presentations presented, all-in-all mostly amusements to amuse. I still bear the shame of letting one meeting

wander for a bit, resulting in the loss of a Brian Williams world class trivia quiz.

All of which brings me to a point: more informal gatherings. We have a system in place whereby we can start to subsidise gatherings that constitute a local SABR meeting. I urge members to be the one to pick up the telephone, send an email and touch base. I mean stretch it to a triple! Meetings will become a lot easier for me. Yes, and we got everything in this year, but with less audio visual than



usual

Meanwhile it was good to see so many familiar faces, and of course the new ones such as my new neighbour, an unapologetic Yankee fan, Alan Weinstein who happens to be a weather expert. SABR UK didn't have a weather expert. And good to get our trivia master, Brian Williams, back after a long absence, although Tony Darkin filled in most admirably out of the bullpen. Details of the meeting will follow in The SABR UK Newsletter.

Next issue I hope to explore the Bernard Day story, and his visit to the realms of SABR UK. All too brief I fear. Members who attended SABR AGM VI and VII will remember his whirlwind arrival and presentations in which he regaled us with stories of extraordinary adventures into research with discoveries of many baseball treasures. We have only seen a photo or two and some Xerox copies of the items, but hopefully by next issue we will have concrete

proof that these many items do indeed exist in the flesh. The star of Day's collection centers around a trophy he was given, allegedly one of the original ones presented by Albert Spalding during the last decade of the nineteenth century. An enormous thing, sadly stripped of its baseball details, standing almost as high as a table.

Lastly we were honoured by a visit from Larry Gerlach, president of SABR (worldwide). He's the one in the photo with me. I took him to Lord's Cricket Ground where he was allowed a seat in the sanctified "Long Room". Accompanied by Stephen Green, Curator at MCC Lord's, we lunched upstairs and downed some righteous ale, while overlooking the wicket during a county match. Later Martin Hoerchner, Graham Winterbone and Jim Combs sat

around with him and talked baseball.

Larry must have the hardest job in all of baseball, that of looking after a vastly widespread organization of 7000 members with diversified interests and agendas. It must be thankless task with only two years to get everything done, and keep everyone happy. Nice going Larry; we will miss you.

The King is dead, long live the King. Congrats to new Prez Jim Riley.

*Note: Mike's new book, Fenway Saved, containing gorgeous photos of the classic ballpark, is now available at Sportspages London and Manchester, and at Dillon's Piccadilly. - ed.*

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# ILLUSTRIOUS TURNOUT FOR BASEBALL IN BRITAIN: 1918

by Stephen Green,  
Curator,  
Marylebone Cricket  
Club

*This is the first of hopefully many stories to come out of the Wilson Cross scrapbook, which was graciously loaned to SABR UK by Jim Montgomery, a baseball collector living in Miami. The scrapbook covers baseball in Britain during the First World War and the following decade, and contains a wealth of information. We are greatly indebted to Stephen Green, who is the Curator for the Marylebone Cricket Club at Lord's, for his analysis of articles and photographs relating to a match held on U.S. Independence Day in 1918.*  
- ed.

The *Weekly Dispatch* for 7 July 1918 made the confident assertion that a recent event 'was the most momentous day in Anglo-American history'. In similar vein the paper said that by going on 4 July to the playing fields of Chelsea in South West London 'George V wiped out the blunder of George III.'

This may be pitching it a bit high but it is clear that tremendous efforts were made that day to promote the wartime alliance. This culminated in a baseball match at Stamford Bridge in which the US Navy defeated the US Army in front of 38,000 people.

King George V was there as with his wife (Queen Mary), his mother (Queen Alexandra), his daughter (Princess Mary, later the Princess Royal) and his aunt (Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll).

The Prime Minister attended

- he was the 'Welsh Wizard', David Lloyd George. In addition to his wife, two of his predecessors were there. They were AJ Balfour and HH Asquith. The latter was also accompanied by his wife.

Equally important was the presence of two future Prime Ministers, Arthur Bonar Law and Winston Churchill. The latter was to lead his country in an even more significant wartime alliance with the United States, his mother's native land.

Many of the Cabinet attended

Milner, the former British High Commissioner in that country.

One of the most famous present was Lord Grey of Falloden. He was the Foreign Secretary in 1914 who said 'the lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'

Possibly the most knowledgeable British spectator would have been Lord Desborough, the great sportsman and public figure.

Three high ranking military figures were present. Sir William

Robertson was the only Field Marshal in the British Army to have started his career as a private. Sir Henry Wilson was later to be murdered by Irish extremists. Major General Sir Francis and Lady Lloyd also were in the Royal Box.

Cricket

was repre-

sented by Lord Hawke, the famous former Yorkshire captain. He is said to have prayed that no professional would ever captain England. One wonders what he thought of the match.

The present writer is not competent to judge whether it was a great baseball game. In one respect, however, it was possibly the most distinguished sporting event ever held in England. The Royal Box was full of the most eminent representatives of the allied nations - the great and the good in fact.

One hopes that the VIPs were enlightened and entertained. For a few moments the leaders of the allied nations could forget the conflict. Thanks to the new Anglo-American alliance, the war mercifully had only four months more to run.



including Sir Eric Geddes (the First Lord of the Admiralty), ES Montagu (the Secretary of State for India), Walter Long (the Colonial Secretary) and the prominent politician, Austen Chamberlain. GN Barnes, a leading Labour Member of Parliament, was also in the Royal Box.

Two former Viceroy of India (Lord Curzon and Lord Hardinge) were present as well as that country's leading statesman, the Hon Sir SP Sinha. They were accompanied by the cricketer, the Maharaja of Patiala.

Leading figures from the Dominions included Sir Robert Borden and WF Lloyd from Canada, WM Hughes of Australia and WF Massey, the New Zealand leader. South Africa was represented by their great statesman, General Smuts, in addition to Lord

# WHO EXACTLY WAS ON FIRST?

The story behind the creation of the Abbott & Costello routine "Who's On First"

by Mike Ross,  
as told by Will Chance  
©1999

Baseball has provided American literature with several classics, none more enduring and popular than Who's on First. This is best known to the public as performed by the comic team of Abbott & Costello. The routine was first heard by a mass audience in the film *The Naughty Nineties* in 1945. Visitors to the baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, New York may find the routine shown on video in the public gallery.

Now it has emerged that what was thought to be purely a product of a fecund comic imagination is in fact based on reality. Here is a taste of the fabled jest that has come down to us through the years compliments of the zany comic duo:

*Costello: Hey Abbott tell me the names of the players on our baseball team so I can say hello to them.*

*Abbott: Sure. Who's on first; What's on second; I Don't Know's on third.*

*C: Wait a minute.*

*A: What's the matter?*

*C: I want to know the names of the players*

*A: I'm telling you. Who's on first; What's on Second, I Don't Know's on third.*

*C: Now wait a minute. What's the name of the first baseman?*

*A: No. What's the name of the second baseman.*

*C: I don't know.*

*A: He's the third baseman.*

*C: Let's start over.*

*A: Okay. Who's on first...*

*C: I'm asking YOU what's the name of the first baseman!*

The full roster of the Abbott & Costello squad reads as: Who, What, I Don't Know, Why, Yesterday, Tomorrow, Today, Because, and I Don't Give A Darn. One might contend that these are unlikely names even in late 19th century USA, with its burgeoning

immigrant population. That is, unless you spell the names correctly. The legendary fictitious "Who" of the text is, dear readers, none other than one Honus J. Hooeche, born in Rotterdam, Holland, nicknamed "The Dutchman". "Hooeche's on first?" That's right.

An impetuous researcher from the north of England, a Timothy ("call me Timmy") Watt, was researching his family tree and found a baseball player among the close knit Watt clan. Mr Watt



journeyed to the United States in search of one Archie Watt, his great grandfather, who emigrated soon after the birth of his first child, unable to take the strain of family life.

As a result, Watt inadvertently discovered the original box score from whence the origins of the Abbott & Costello routine emanated. Yes, the Today's, Who's and What's that sent fans and regular people alike into fits of mirth were real players with batting averages, wives and children, hobbies, fetishes, drinking problems and comic book addictions. In short: real life fiction turns to real life fact when characters' names exist as something other

than icons for an unlikely comic script - a rather elaborate form of professional assassination.

Armed with a Watt family scrapbook, Timmy Watt combed libraries and perused the small town newspaper archives across America, following the smallest clue. Fruitless journeys to Oregon, Texas and Louisiana maybe, but not fruitless when he landed in a town beginning with "P" in a state starting with "I". At last baseball fans can touch base with the likes Honus Hooeche, Tom Morrow and Isaiah Donough and the rest of this real life squad.

*Costello: Tell me the names of the players on our team.*

*Abbott: Sure. Hooeche's on first; Watt's on second; I. Donough's on third.*

*C: Wait a minute.*

*A: What's the matter?*

*C: I want to know the names of the players.*

*A: I'm telling you. Hooeche's on first; Watt's on second; I. Donough's on*

*third. [Not to be confused with his brother U. Donough.]*

So now picture if you will a cub reporter back in 1919 interviewing the manager of the town team. That reporter's inability to comprehend the manager - who was playing it up for the assembled mass - has allowed for a precise albeit innocent rendering by the precious talent of dear Lou Costello; not to deny Bud Abbott his due as an equally believable manager.

Watt's dig was strictly family research and, at first, utterly unconcerned with the crack of bat and baseball, and moreover, curtly if not rudely dismissive of the famed routine. Yet such naive efforts have led to the most significant baseball research discovery since the unearthing of Honus Wagner's lost plate appearance.

Watt, while relating his tale to Will Chance, tended toward effusive verbosity, often vacuous and strangely reticent, albeit darn-right evasive. Persistence, how-



## WHO EXACTLY WAS ON FIRST? (con't)

ever, based on unbearable excitement, paid off.

Watt, despite his scant knowledge and little interest in baseball, suddenly became - once he knew he had struck gold - a veritable Mr. Baseball. And most painfully, he held firm to a journalistic credo previously foreign to him. "Sorry Will, but I cannot divulge my sources". He refused to name the town from whence came his sources, only that it began with a 'P' in a midwestern state starting with the letter 'I'. He said he would tell me more once his book was published. A serious researcher could come to hate this man.

Chance spent three long years gathering the information now in his possession. Chance spoke of how this Timmy character chipped off bits of his sanity, but satisfied his lifelong urge to understand carving in flint. Watt had spoken guardedly of how the story first spread, starting in 1919 in a tavern where a "beaver-like cub reporter" [Watt's mixed metaphor] was interviewing the manager. Among those watching the proceedings in the tavern in what was described as "the waning afternoon sun", were your archetypal booze hounds: a salesman on a good day, a woman practising the oldest profession, and not least, the actual town drunk himself, a raconteur who, with an obvious theatrical background, which suggests that he spread the story in the colourful telling of it.

As Chance relates, this flotsam and jetsam of local society, creased with suppressed laughter, spread the tale far and wide. It gathered momentum as it crossed state lines, much in the manner that folk tales do. The commercial potential soon became obvious.

What transpires is not fully known. That which is known can be questioned; and that which is questionable somehow makes sense. But, for all of Watt's maddening reticence, he was no mean researcher. Get this: Timmy Watt was apprehended on several occasions for various unlawful incursions into the Mutual Net-

work's basement archives and other secluded locations where he unearthed early radio scripts, learning of such facts as Nat Turley's early inclusion as "Naturally" - subsequently dropped from the version folks have come to know and love.

Here is the lineup in more detail:

Honus Hooche was indeed a Dutchman. Likewise Frank Archie Watt, the man without whose presence on the roster Timmy Watt would have been rendered purposeless, was also European born and indeed did play second base. Archie Watt made the big leagues as a late season callup with Washington in 1920. Watt is reckoned to be the only second baseman with a career batting average of 1.000 in the majors. His name does not appear in some reference books because he had only one turn at bat in which - legend has it - he doubled, giving him a slugging percentage of 2.000. The highest in major league history for a second baseman.

Isaiah (Ike) Donough, an Irishman and former railroad worker, Donough was the brother of Ulysses Donough. Both were born in county Wicklow, near Dublin, Ireland. The team manager in the original 'folk' version used the initial before the surname, reciting the name as it appeared in the box score. No artistic contrivances here. Simply more confusion for the already besotted Costello. When the name U. Donough came up in early versions of the skit, Costello exclaimed "I know I don't know, Abbott!" To which Abbott would have replied "What?" To which Costello, acquiescing to the inevitable, resignedly prompted "Yeah, I know. He's on second."

Herman (Donkey) Farr-Darne at shortstop was a tragic figure. A heavy drinker, the doomed Donkey was targeted for the major leagues, but died before realising his destiny ("unless," as Watt had boorishly prompted, "death was his destiny"). Donkey, as the story goes, downed a fifth of Kill-Devil on a bet and fell into the Ohio River while attempting to cross a trestle railroad bridge on foot.

The radio writers certainly indulged themselves, creating the famous "I Don't Give A Darn" from Farr-Darne. In the early versions Nat Turley was the shortstop. Watt unearthed records relating to Herman Donald Farr-Darne, whose parents were born in Yorkshire, England. Watt was so mean with his sources, he would only say "A place beginning with a W". There Joseph Farr met and married the winsome Marie Darne. They assumed for the good of their heirs, the double-barrelled Farr-Darne, as was, and is, quite the common practice in the Britain of today, especially among those of higher station, thus preserving collateral wealth.

This wealth was far greater than would ever be achieved by the fleet-footed Donkey. The poor chap was disinherited very early in his career for disgracing the names of Darne and Farr with his admittedly quaint monicker. Moose Skowron, former Yankee slugging first sacker, in later years acknowledged Farr-Darne's contribution. "Donkey was a great influence on me; he had the guts to support the animal kingdom which too few players do nowadays. I did the same because of him. He would have made it to the major leagues, I can tell you that much." Rabbit Maranville was also highly respectful of Donkey and said before his death: "Donkey had plenty of guts. And he could turn the double play too".

"Why" was the show business center fielder, who was based on the real Wee Willie (Wild Bill) Wye, who changed his name from Wyrostek. He was uncle to Barney Wyrostek who played 11 seasons in the National League.

Blitz "Baby Doll" Kauz became "Because" and was brother of Kiki Kauz who never made the A&C script. The Kauz brothers were from a town in Bavaria beginning with a 'V'.

Right field was the Swede, Jess Turdae, whose name was translated to the phonetically practical "Yesterday". Jess not surprisingly insisted on the original pronunciation, "out of respect for Papa" was his repeated expla-

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nation, hence the "J" spoken as "Y". The name Turdae (Sometimes "Turrhdae" or "Turrhdai") can still be found in Minnesota and Aroostok County phone books. Fairly common around Duluth, Minnesota and Caribou, Maine.

Tom Morrow, or "Tomorrow", the ace pitcher on the squad (still kept secret by our Timmy!), was in 1895 christened Custer Udo Thomas Morrow. He was known for a highly sophisticated sense of the absurd. "And he enjoyed a good joke as much as the next man. Often he signed himself C.U. Tom Morrow... He was a funny fella," said Watt who was obviously letting on less than he knew and was highly pretentious as to what he thought he knew: "Morrow threw a wicked curve taught to him by Candy Cummings when he was six years old." Watt spoke parrot-like in his recitation, ignorant of the true exploits of the great Cummings. "Oh how opposing hitters sucked for that sweet looking sugar-coated candied pitch tossed to them by the brilliant Candyman."

"Today" was none other than Leon Touhy ("Two") Day, a superstitious character. He came to the ball park suggesting to all within earshot, "Let's play two," indicating and immortalising his love for the game and his willingness to play double-headers, virtually heroic for a backstop in the days of wool flannel. The legend of Day's love of the game resulted in the

nickname "Two". A former teammate had - according to Watt - said: "You know how superstitious ballplayers can be. Well, one time ol' Two', he come out to the park and darn if he didn't forgot to say it, you know, 'Let's play two'. And would you believe it! He struck out four times, not even a loud foul ball; dropped an easy tag at the plate, then broke his thumb on a passed ball. Two Day never again forgot his P's and two's, I can tell you that."

As with the Kauz family, (Ulysses) U. Donough, brother of Ike Donough, had to be satisfied with a utility role. Nathan (Nat) Turley, scratched totally from immortality, was born in Troy, Illinois, and was great uncle of former big league pitching star Bob Turley, a 20-game winner for the Yankees.

So when Costello asks "Have you got a pitcher on this team?" Abbot's reply should read on paper "Tom Morrow" and Costello says "You don't want to tell me now?" "I said I'd tell you: Tom Morrow." "What's wrong with today?" "Nothing; he [Two' Day] is a pretty good catcher." "Who's the catcher?" "No. Hooeh's the first baseman." "All right, what's the first baseman's name?" "No, Watt's the second baseman's name." So, a far fetched joke this is not. We fans have forever been in the dark and down a garden path. Costello's contention that "players have such strange names these days" is in-

supportable. The names are not that strange. Certainly not as examples of first generation American immigrants. Not bad for what is allegedly a semi-pro outfit.

*A: Look It's very simple:*

*C: I know it's simple. You got a pitcher Tomorrow. He throws the ball to Today. Today throws the ball to Who, he throws the ball to What. What throws the ball to I-Don't-Know, he's on third... and what's more, I Don't Give A Darn!*

*A: What's that?*

*C: I said I Don't Give A Darn.*

*A: Oh, he's our shortstop.*

So where do we go from here to find out the rest of the facts? Batting averages, on base percentages, earned run averages, and outfield assists; all these matters are of compelling interest. I, for my curiosity, am left with the last clue from Watt before he jumped off the Talahatchee Bridge (made famous in song years earlier by Bobbie Gentry) taking with him the last word; this coming after Chance grabbed him by the scruff of his maroon silk foulard scarfed neck and wrestled him to the ground. He agreed to eliminate Iowa and Indiana, for which he was greatly thanked. Chance spoke how he had been to Iowa, and managed to pass through Indiana unscathed. I personally am heading for Pocatello, Idaho next month, my first stop in my quest for verification. I got a good feeling about Pocatello.

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# BABE RUTH MAKES WAVES AT ARSENAL THAT REACH PARLIAMENT

by Mike Ross

*Mike got this story from the horse's mouth - from Wilf himself. We are currently trying to confirm the exact date of the Babe's visit to Britain - ed.*

A short time before his final illness, probably in late 1947 or early 1948, during a visit to Britain, Babe Ruth was responsible for instigating a mini player insurrection which may at the time have led to a transformation of labour relations in British sport. There was no doubt as to the universality of Ruth's popularity and influence; as with Muhammad Ali today, Ruth's appeal knew no borders or boundaries. Former star

footballer for Middlesbrough (The Boro) Wilf Mannion was greatly influenced by the words and thoughts of Ruth, so much so that he went on strike for higher wages. As a result he was close to being purchased by Oldham Athletic in a deal that fell through because of the high price tag on Mannion.

Wherever the Babe visited he was renown. "Even the kids in the seats knew him", soccer great Wilf Mannion recalled. "Everyone here talked about him for years and years and years." Ruth strolled down through the tunnel at the Arsenal Football Grounds in London to take a bow to the assembled crowd of 50,000 supporters, there for their Saturday soccer treat. On the way he was introduced to the great striker for Middlesbrough F.C., Wilf Mannion, who by the end of an illustrious career had earned a prodigious 26 international caps for England. In baseball terms a bit like having performed in 26 World Series games. In those days and up until the 1970s such stars as Mannion were earning £8-£10 per week. Not a bad whack for a working man. Meanwhile Ruth was on nearly £1000 per during his earlier heyday, a period well before Mannion's revolt took place. Many of Ruth's fellow big leaguers could have easily taken home ten times that of a top British soccer star at any time during Ruth's career.

When Ruth asked and was told what the wages were for the likes of such stars as Mannion, "He could not believe it", recalled Wilf, now in his early 80's. "He looked at the stadium and saw 50,000 fans at the Arsenal and said, 'I don't know any professional players hanging out for that kind of money. Why don't you guys get together?' What Babe meant by get together was for the players to 'hold out'. He couldn't understand why we didn't fight for our rights." So the pair talked. "He put a bit of something in me,"

Wilf admitted. So there was Babe Ruth at the head of what turned out to be a one-man insurrection. "I went out for nine months. No-one would do it. Only me. Not one of the others came out with me."

"[Judge] Shawcross took my case to Parliament. I went down to London but everything got spoiled. Of all the things to happen, I had to go back home because my son was being born while I was away. That killed it." And so Wilf was beaten, out of money and all at once with a child to support. He went back to work for the same £10 and was lucky to get it while saving Middlesbrough from impending relegation. But the Babe came close to possibly altering the course of labour relations in Britain.

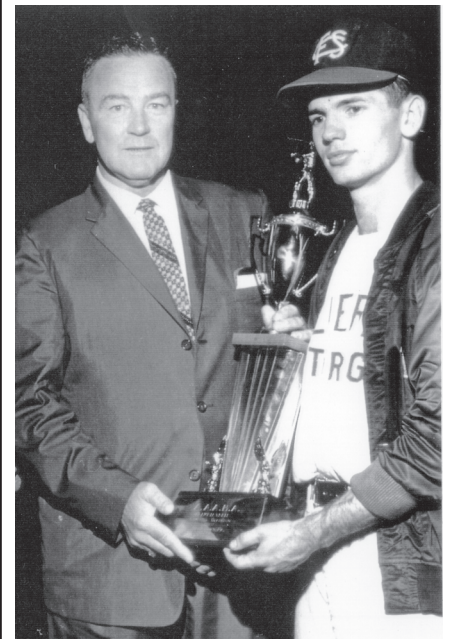
## Letters

- Actually only one to begin with. With this issue we're starting a "Letters" column, where we'll print research-related and Examiner-related letters. So get writing! In the meantime, we were very gratified to receive this acknowledgement from the SABR Publications Editor.

Dear Martin:

A very quick note (I'm being overawed by a gigantic stack of correspondence that piled up while I was away for a few weeks) to tell you how much I enjoyed the July issue of The SABR UK Examiner. I found Allan Synge's article on baseball and cricket fascinating, and I thought the whole production was terrific. Please pass on my compliments to Mike Ross, Graham Winterbone, Patrick Morley and everyone else involved, as well as to the whole membership for their enthusiasm and frequently fine research. Keep up the good work!

Mark Alvarez



## Jim Combs

Jim Combs has been named the new Chair of the British Baseball History Committee. Jim, who captained the "Federal Storage" team of the Clark Griffith League, is shown receiving the trophy for the All-American Amateur Baseball Association Championship held at Johnstown PA August 1960. Welcome aboard, Jim.



## STOOLBALL IS ALIVE AND WELL (con't)

variety could be the ancestor of baseball.

Yet as far as I knew, stoolball was dead as the proverbial dodo. So I had my mouse pointer hovering over the "print" button on my letter to Mr. Sayama...

But I had other chores to deal with. I'm the editor the SABR UK Examiner, the research journal of the Bobby Thomson Chapter, the UK branch of SABR. I was working on the AGM report for the Examiner, and I had videotaped the meeting, and was going over the tape for my meeting report for the Examiner. This was an excellent meeting, including Allen Synge, a cricket writer and member of the Marylebone Cricket Club (the governing body of cricket), who presented an excellent piece entitled "Cricket and Baseball - Cross Currents". We all know about the proselytising missions that Albert Spalding sent to England in 1874 and via the world in 1888/1889, but Allen spoke about cricket tours aimed at the American market in 1859 and 1872. As an aside he said "And then there's stoolball. You should watch it, if only for the comely maidens who play it".

My mouth dropped open. Allen was talking about stoolball in the present tense. I was on the phone to him immediately, first to ask if I could publish his piece in the Examiner, to which he agreed, but then to ask him about this stoolball remark. "Oh yes", he said, "it's still being played. I know of a few matches coming up in Wisborough Green, in Sussex." He said he would check and come back to me with some dates.

I was dumfounded. I asked my wife, who is from Yorkshire, if she ever heard of a game called stoolball. She said she hadn't. I was very perplexed.

Allen got back to me with a few game dates, and July 1 seemed ideal. So we organised a road trip with Allen, me, and Mike Ross, the Chairman of SABR UK and the one who'd originally commissioned Allen to do the piece. Allen gave me the number of the head of the Wisborough Green Stoolball Club, Mrs. Denman. I phoned her and told her of our mission, and she was very helpful and gracious. She said the match started at 7.00 and we were more than welcome to attend.

In the meantime I thought I'd hit the internet and see if I could find any stoolball. I did - there's lots of it! All of it seemed to be in Sussex, except a reference in Alresford, Hampshire,

from Mrs. Stanbrook. It turns out she was originally from Sussex and imported the game. The web site also offered a booklet, published by the National Stoolball Association, containing the rules and history of stoolball. I contacted her, and eagerly awaited my booklet.

We set out from my home in Kent about an hour before the match started at 7.00. The weather was fine, and it was a lovely summer's evening as we drove through the Sussex countryside. This year had a generally rainy summer, and we'd lucked out today.

When we got to Wisborough Green the match had started. It was a lovely setting, a huge open town green surrounded by brick houses of vary-



ing age and design, most with gardens bursting with summer flowers. The obligatory pub was set off on one corner of the green, and the town church rose up on a hill just behind the green. A cricket sight screen was pushed off to the side of the green, and right behind it was a flag pole where the Union Jack fluttered proudly. Towards the edge of the green was a club house; obviously it was the headquarters for the local cricket club. It had a bar on the ground floor, and above it was a balcony where the score (runs, overs, and wickets) was displayed.

We parked and made our way towards the clubhouse. As we walked, our attention focused on the game. The two teams were indeed, as Allen mentioned, all female, although Mrs. Denman told us that mixed teams also exist. The home team was dressed in yellow and green, like the Oakland A's of the 70's, with a yellow top and green skirt. The away team from Steadham was dressed in maroon, like that other Philadelphia team of the late 70's and early 80's. The basic uniform consisted of a pullover shirt with a few buttons at the top, and a pleated skirt, which was fairly short, over shorts, like ladies tennis players. Some team members, more sensitive

to the cold, wore a sweatshirt and/or sweat pants in the same colour scheme, over or instead of the basic uniform.

The main action of the game was in the middle of a large circle drawn near the perimeter of a green, which I later learned was 90 yards feet in diameter. Stoolball has no foul territory. In the middle of the circle were set up two wickets, though not wickets in the cricket sense. They were wooden targets, about a foot square, set on a wooden pole about the height of the players' heads, supported on the ground by four short legs. It was a bit like a stop sign, only square and wooden. There were two of them, 16 yards apart. There were two batters, though they are called batsmen in stoolball, even though most of them are female. The stoolball bat bore no resemblance to a baseball bat, or even a cricket bat. It was more like an outsized ping pong paddle, though reinforced and with a lot more whack, as we later found out.

The pitcher, as we would call her, or the bowler (as called in stoolball and cricket) would pitch the ball underarm in the air from a distance of 10 yards, towards the wicket about head-high to the batsman. The batsman would try to hit the ball, and if she made contact, would run towards the other wicket. In the meantime the batsman at the other wicket would run towards her wicket. They would run back and forth as many times as possible before the ball was fielded and returned to the running crease, which is a line drawn from either side of the wicket. I immediately recognised it as a very similar game to cricket. The primary difference was that instead of bouncing the ball off the ground try to hit a wicket about 2 feet tall, as in cricket, the bowler threw the ball towards a wicket placed on a pole at about the same height as the batsman's head. Indeed, articles I later read called stoolball "cricket in the air".

We located Mrs. Denman, and she made us feel welcome while she explained the game to us. First she showed us the game equipment. The bat was a lot more substantial than a ping pong paddle; it was made of willow (the same wood as cricket bats are made) and very hefty. It was completely flat on one side (the hitting side) and rounded on the other (like a cricket bat). And it was heavy; you



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could really pack a wallop with this thing! The handle was wedged in the middle with a soft wood, for extra spring. But it was the ball that really delighted us. It was like a tiny baseball, white leather with red cross-stitching, but only about 2¼ inches in diameter. By contrast, a cricket ball is red with two hemispheres joined by stitching around the equator. This simple connection to baseball, the similarity of the game balls, really intrigued us.

Mrs. Denman then explain to us the rules of the game, which are very similar to cricket. There are eleven players on a team. It is organised into overs, which are six legitimate bowled balls in cricket and eight in stoolball. The number of overs is flexible and agreed before the match, usually from 15 to 20. There were many ways to score. If the batsman hits a ball that isn't fielded immediately, they have the option of running back and forth from wicket to wicket, scoring a run for each time they make the traverse. A hit ball that rolls over the boundary on the ground scores four runs, and one hit in the air that clears it scores six runs. There are four ways for the batsman to be out: 1) "caught", i.e. flied out; 2) "run out", having the ball get to the wicket the runner is heading towards before she reaches it, a bit like the force play; 3) "bowled out", in which the bowlers strikes the wicket with the ball, throwing it past the batsman untouched, and 4) "body before wicket (BBW)", similar to cricket's "leg before wicket", and which the umpire decides that the batsman would have been bowled out if she had not been standing directly in front of the wicket and deflected the ball. There are no free bases for HBP's in stoolball.

In studying the genealogy of ball games, one quickly learns that it is easy to find similarities, e.g. stoolball with cricket, or baseball with rounders, but proving ancestry is completely different. Stoolball has a lot of rules in common with cricket, for instance the 4-run and 6-run rules. But whether cricket got them from stoolball or stoolball got them from cricket is open to debate. It was my gut feeling on first viewing the game, and I can't prove this, that there was a lot of back-influence from cricket to the game of stoolball. In other words, cricket may have, and probably did, spring from stoolball, but cricket was codified much earlier, while stoolball remained a pastoral pastime with rules that varied from county to county, indeed village to village. When it was time to set down the official rules of stoolball,

which I later learned was 1881, I have no doubt that gaps or inconsistencies in the stoolball rules were filled in by cricket rules. A subject for further research.

We watched the game from a long while, taking photographs and video, and then the clouds moved in, and the late evening sun moved towards evening twilight. Soon night would fall, and we felt it was the time to move on. But we had one more errand to run. Allen asked if we could stop by the church on the hill that overlooked the town green. It turned out his parents were buried there; evidently Allen's roots in this area were deeper than I thought.

I gave him his privacy at his parent's resting places; my attention had been captured by a duck pond just below the church. There was a mother duck with a long string of baby ducks, paddling around the pond. As I watched them I reflected upon the great circle of life and death, with a group of baby ducks below and a churchyard above, and an ancient game with ancestors very much alive, still being played in the Sussex countryside.

Of course I excitedly reported all this back to Japan, to Mr. Sayama. We immediately wrote back and said he would be visiting England to watch this ancient game! He also sent me his c.v. He had written numerous books and articles on both Japanese and American baseball, as well as Japanese translations of books such as "The Boys of Summer" and Satchel Paige's "Maybe I'll Pitch Forever". It also seems he has been interested in stoolball for many years, because he also sent me a copy of a photograph of him playing stoolball at Plimouth Plantation. Plimouth Plantation is a recreation of the original English colonial settlement of Plymouth, Massachusetts, complete with actors in period costume. The photo shows Kazuo bowling toward a batsman stationed in front of a stool, with everyone but him dressed as the original Pilgrim settlers. Stoolball was the first game reported to have been played in the Americas, by the Massachusetts colonists in 1621.

About that time the National Stoolball Association booklet arrived. The rules were pretty much what I had learned so far, in addition to such facts as the names of the fielding positions, e.g. the bowler, wicket keeper, mid wicket on, slip on, slip off, mid wicket off, deep mid wicket off, deep over off, deep mid on/off, deep mid cover on/square leg area, and deep mid wicket on. The booklet ad-

vised "The bowler should try several different deliveries to unsettle the batsman". I read about a certain delivery called the "donkey drop", which is a high and slow ball that drops just on or behind the wicket. The book says "This delivery fools many batsmen and they have difficulty making a stroke".

The booklet also contained a copy of a fascinating article from "The Sussex County Magazine" from July, 1928. It gave an account of the history of the game. The seminal character in twentieth-century stoolball history was Major W. W. Grantham of Balneath Manor, Sussex, who was responsible for the stoolball revival in 1917. The article waggishly asks the question "Did Major Grantham revive the Sussex round frock, or smock, as a suitable garment in which to disport himself at stoolball, or did he revive stoolball in order to show off his fine smock?" The article then gives a few references to stoolball going back to 1450, in which the game was forbidden to be played in churchyards.

One reference that particularly interested me was "About 1630 a Puritan records that 'Maidstone was formerly a very profane town, where stoolball and other games were practised on the Lord's Day'". The first reference to baseball yet uncovered has been dated 1700 in every book I've read. It was written by the Reverend Thomas Wilson of Maidstone, Kent, who wrote in dismay "I have seen Morris-dancing, cudgel-playing, baseball and crickets, and many other sports on the Lord's Day." If this is the same reference, maybe a much earlier date is possible. A subject for further research. The article goes on to say that Major Grantham was convinced that "stoolball in some form or other was the progenitor of cricket, rounders, and baseball". This was long before Henderson wrote his words in agreement.

Stoolball never completely died out. Indeed, Major Grantham played the game as a youth. There exists a beautiful illustration of a stoolball match in Horsham Park in Sussex, between Horsham Park and the Foresters, two female teams, in 1878. This match was played by cricket rules, except that the batsman had to tap the wicket after every ball, and was out if the wicket keeper touched the face of the wicket with the ball first. It was noted that "the match was spoiled by one incident. Miss Florrie Lucas, of Horsham Park, managed to edge the ball so that it curled round and lodged in her hair, of which she had quite a lot. She asked the wicket

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keeper to take it out, which was done, but the Rev. C. Hodgson, one of the umpires, gave her out 'caught', without having been appealed to. This broke their hearts and led to 'remarks', which nearly ended in play being stopped for good."

Major Grantham revived the sport in July 1917. At the time the First World War was raging, and Major Grantham was serving on the Military Tribunal. His eldest son had been badly wounded in France, and the Major was moved to provide some sport for the "battered heroes of the war in our military hospitals". Cricket and tennis were deemed to strenuous for those who had lost limbs or otherwise handicapped; stoolball seemed to be the ideal game. A seminal match was played that year on the Sussex County Cricket Ground, between soldiers from the Pavilion Hospital "damaged by wounds" and a team of ancient lawyers, including Major Grantham, "damaged by age". The soldiers won.

Major Grantham, besides being a tireless champion of stoolball, was also an excellent chronicler of the sport. He wrote two books on the sport and his copious scrapbooks, notes, and artefacts still reside in the Sussex County Archives in Lewes. The game grew and thrived, and started being played in Japan, France, Canada, Africa, Australia, and other countries. The 1917 revival led to the institution, in 1923, of the Stoolball Association for Great Britain.

The Stoolball Association ceased to exist in 1946, after the Second World War and the death of Major Grantham dampened enthusiasm. But the game still continued to be played, and in 1979 the present National Stoolball Association was formed, and has been going strong ever since.

The N.S.A. booklet had a note "For further information contact: Mrs. K.R. Price, Secretary". I was interested in finding out how widely played the game was, so I gave her a call. She was a gold mine of information. Stoolball is very popular not only in Sussex, but also in nearby counties. For instance, Surrey has 25 teams in a league and Kent has 12-15 teams. Sussex, however, has 60 teams that are part of a league. In the Eastbourne area alone are 10 leagues.

Plus there are lots of non-league teams. In Sussex every village has a team. I talked for quite a while to Kay and her husband John, the Vice-President of the N.S.A. They were both very aware of stoolball's long history, and very keen to make sure that the history would continue. John mentioned to me some upcoming tournaments, including the Sussex County Championship in Seaford on August 9, which pitted the top five teams from each league against each other. The "Rest of League Tournament" was the weekend after in Plumpton Green, in which the next five teams from each league would square off against each other. In ad-



dition, there would be the "Day of Stoolball", at Wivelsfield Green on September 9, an informal event where stoolballers from all over would meet, be arranged in pickup teams, and play their sport all day long.

August 9 dawned semi-overcast, but as we got nearer to the English Channel, the clouds broke and it turned into a gloriously sunny Sunday. The quaint antique-print scene in Wisborough Green did nothing to prepare me for the spectacle at Seaford. The playing field was monstrous, and it seemed like multitudes of stoolballers stretched to the horizon. At Wisborough Green I saw two teams; here were 25 teams, and this was only the cream of the crop. I finally started to get an inkling of the game's popularity. I stood, open-mouthed, at the perimeter for a few moments, and then we made our way toward the action. There was a total of four stoolball pitches (playing circles) laid out in close proximity, staggered like the Olympic rings, with four concurrent matches taking place. In addition there were throngs of relatives, friends and interested parties watching the play from the edges. We approached the small clubhouse and my wife said "Martin, I'm going to the

bathroom". Almost immediately a genial-looking man in his 60's walked up and said to me "Are you Martin Hoerchner?", even pronouncing my surname correctly, which you normally wouldn't do from the spelling. I was flummoxed; had my fame preceded me? It turned out to be John Price of the N.S.A. He welcomed us heartily and introduced us to his wife Kay, who I had talked to on the phone.

John was acting as officiator of the tournament - I don't know his exact title, but he basically ran it. He had a desk set up where the scores were kept and results tabulated, and the area around him was a beehive of activity. Players would come up to him at regular intervals reported scores - Burwash beat Graftonham 119-79; Ringmer beat Maresfield 100-64. He would mark them on a chart and the winner would proceed to the next round. He would get on the P.A. and summon Geebro and Adastra to pitch three in five minutes. Kay seemed to be disappearing and reappearing with lightning speed, going here and there on varying errands. They worked together like

a well-oiled machine.

Despite his duties John was very gracious and helpful in supplying stoolball knowledge. He explained the layout of the tournament, and pointed out some of the teams. They seemed to be generally not from larger towns, but from small villages with exotic names like Sidley, Ditching, Mountfield, Newick, and Angmering. He also explained how the rules varied from regular stoolball, in that there were only eight players on a team instead of eleven and the number of overs is reduced. He said tournament stoolball is a lot faster than town stoolball, and many runs are scored. In fact, he offered so much information I couldn't keep up with him, being without notebook or tape recorder.

Duty called him back to the desk, so we took off and walked around the pitches, taking photos and shooting video. Here a tall blonde in blue and yellow bowls a wicked underarm ball to a cowering girl in green and white. There a confident batsman holds her place as the ball comes in, waiting a final moment, and giving the ball an affirmative whack! On a far pitch fielders scramble after a ball hit far, retrieving it just before it reaches the perimeter and returning it as run-



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ners chase each other back and forth from wicket to wicket. It was like a three-ring circus, only there were four rings. It was an incredible spectacle, under a very uncharacteristic English bright sunny summer's day. And in the background, if you walked to the far end of the playing field, rose huge chalk cliffs, which the south coast of England is famous for. Picture postcard stuff - it's on the cover of the Examiner.

The spectators clustered around the edges of the four circular pitches. Some had lawn chairs, some had deck chairs, some were spread out on blankets, and many brought ice chests full of food and drinks for picnicking. Some were engaged in mortal combat with beach umbrellas in the wind. I saw a small boy swinging a cricket bat on the sidelines as his father bowled him a ball. He hit it with authority and it went rolling down the well-manicured lawn. The father shouted "That's a real daisy cutter!". I was amazed to hear that term, which describes a fast ground ball, because the only time I had ever come across it was in an explanation of baseball terms from the 1880's. What goes around comes around, as they say. The great circle once again.

We walked the whole circuit of the playing field and came back to John and Kay. Noting the incredibly fine weather, I asked him if the tournament had ever been cancelled due to poor weather. He said no; in 27 years, it had always been completed. He said once in a while it had started in a drizzle, and with the enthusiasm of the players been completed in a driving rain, but had never been cancelled.

John then gave me the chance to hit a stoolball ball with a stoolball bat. He went into a duffle bag and dug out a few stoolball bats, of varying weights. I chose one of the heavier ones, and my wife pitched the ball, and I whacked it with the bat, which now felt a lot more substantial than a ping pong paddle, and the ball soared into the air. I not only felt the thrill of Barry Bonds hitting one over the fences, I also felt the thrill of a 15th century milk maid hitting one into the next cow pasture! He gave me a stoolball ball, which I'd come to admire as a miniature baseball. John also gave me a ball used in indoor stoolball, a derivation of the game invented for those long rainy English winters. It's also white with red stitches. This ball was actually an official rounders ball; it's about half-way the size between a stoolball ball

and a baseball. From stoolball to rounders to baseball, the ball grows larger as the game progresses. Though I would say that the rounders ball seemed to be the softest, with the stoolball next and the baseball the hardest.

In talking to John and Kay, it turned out that they had a keen knowledge and appreciation of the long history of stoolball, which I found gratifying. I asked if they had ever held a match in old style costumes, and John said they had, in 1997, to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Sussex vs. Kent match, on Rusthall Common. [Photo on page 10.] In fact, the National Stoolball Association is planning to recreate the 1878 Horsham Park match previously described for the Millenium celebrations, in the original location and in full costume. John and Kay are actually from Horsham, and they said the setting exists pretty much as it did in the illustration.

John and Kay were once more called to duty, and we thanked them and moved on, as we had a long drive home to make. Before we left we took a short stroll along the shingle beach, and I walked along the pebbles still in awe of the scale of the support for stoolball in Sussex.

Of course I reported all this back to Mr. Sayama. He wrote back that he was coming over to England with his wife, but couldn't make it until September. He was concerned about coming too late for the stoolball season, but he was in luck. September 9 would be the "Day of Stoolball", an informal tournament which originally celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Queen's accession, which would be held at Wivelsfield Green in Sussex. So we made plans to meet there.

In the flurry of letters exchanged between Japan and England, Mr. Sayama once enclosed a photocopy from a book entitled "The Man Who Invented Baseball" by Harold Petersen. It mentioned the ancient game of trap ball, stating "Trap ball is still played, usually by men and particularly in Kent". I live in Kent and Mr. Sayama wondered if I knew anything about trap ball being played currently. To make a long story short, it was John Price who discovered the game had been played as a pub game in the south of England fairly recently, and discovered at least one pub (in Gillingham, Kent) where the game is still being played. The season starts on May 18 this year and they play on Wednesday nights, on the grass behind the pub. Someday soon

I expect to report on a live brontosaurus lumbering around the southern English countryside.

September 9, the Day of Stoolball, dawned wet and blustery. The Seaford weather couldn't be duplicated. I took off in a driving rain, and once it became so intense I couldn't drive and had to pull over while it abated. It stopped raining by the time I got to Wivelsfield Green, but the sky was still angry and the wind was still strong.

The signs lead me to town, but before I got there this playing field appeared. This must be the place! It was just on the outskirts. I pulled into the parking lot on the edge of the field; just to the left were some brick buildings, including a meeting hall and a small club house. The scene before me was very different from either Wisborough Green or Seaford. There were three pitches. And the atmosphere was very subdued, most likely due to the perilous nature of the weather. The stoolballers were not dressed in uniform, like I'd seen before.

I'd come on my own, so I parked the car and set out to find Mr. Sayama, John and Kay Price, Mike Ross, Allen Synge, or any combination of the above. When I made it to the club house I came across both Prices and Mr. Sayama. It turned out that he had made contract with the Prices on his arrival in Britain; they were already on a first-name basis. Mr. Sayama, I learned, was referred to as "Kaz", and his wife Sedtz was referred to as "Setts". We exchanged hearty greetings after having had such a lively correspondence. Almost as soon as we made contact, Mike and Allen showed up, and we soon were engaged in lively conversation. Kaz, who is in his 60's, talked about watching Satchel Paige pitch in San Francisco. He told how he would load the bases and then strike out the side, confirming a story that had been only legend to me. I asked Kaz if Satchel would also call in the outfield and then either strike out the side or make them ground out, and he said he saw that too. It was baseball history coming alive to me.

I had my own bombshell that set the baseball people buzzing. I checked the internet that morning, which was September 9, and the previous night in the States, which would have been early morning U.K. time, Mark McGwire hit his 62rd home run of the season, breaking one of baseball's most cherished records. Kaz was dumbfounded, and drew a circle in

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the air. We all knew what he meant. It was the great circle again. On a day that we viewed a game at least half a millennium old, a milestone was reached in a game that was the child, or grandchild, or great-grandchild of that same game. The past and present came together in one moment. It was an auspicious day indeed to watch stoolball.

The tournament consisted of stoolballers organised into six pickup teams. In previous years they were given the letters "A" through "F", but this year they thought to make things a bit more human by giving the teams names, conveniently starting with the letters from A to F - the Amazons, Braves, Cobras, Dragons, Elks and Falcons. John made me laugh when he said the "E" was at first going to be the Elephants, but then someone mentioned the fact that very few women would want to be known as an "elephant". Good point, but I can't image many women wanting to be a dragon, either. They would play a knockout tournament and the final two teams would play for the championship.

Soon after we arrived there was a break for lunch. The players and friends retired to the meeting hall, where a light meal was presented. John Price made a brief speech, where he described the meaning of the "Day of Stoolball". Besides the official reason, he said that this day was one where stoolballers from all over could play and meet each other, and come in contact with stoolball legends as Barbie Jenner or Barbie Weir. The stoolball community seems to be very tightknit, and successful players over the years attain legendary status without recourse to mass media, but only through their reputations spread by word of mouth.

John then introduced us, Kaz and Allen and Mike and myself, as the "International Sporting Press". Kaz spoke and told us that after the war had ended in 1945 - he was 9 - that three things came together: peace, democracy, and baseball, and he would always associate those them together. Baseball had been popular in Japan since 1874, but had been suppressed during World War II as a foreign influence. But after the war baseball was allowed to blossom again, and Japan soon became only the second country to support professional baseball.

Chapter Chairman Mike Ross then spoke a few words of greeting, and posed two research questions to the crowd: has anyone heard of the game of trap ball being played in

recent memory, and has anyone heard of "tansy cakes"? Tansy cakes were mentioned by Joseph Strutt and later Robert Henderson as being the prize offering to victorious ball teams in Easter festivities, and traced back to Biblical times. This question later brought forth a response - a recipe in an old English book "The Compleat Housewife (or Accomplished Gentlewomen's Companion)" by Eliza Smith, first published in 1758. After Mike's speech Setts Sayama was presented with a lovely basket of flowers, and Kaz was presented with, as if bringing "coals to Newcastle", John Price said, a bottle of sake. Both gifts were heartily appreciated.

Afterwards the food was served and the cooks were thanked with a round of applause. Play resumed after the meal; unfortunately the weather hadn't improved in the least. At one point players and spectators were scattered by a particularly fierce shower, but it was short and the stoolballers were back to their game in no time. As we watched the game, John had time to explain to me some of the finer points of the game. Earlier he showed me coloured practice cones that were used to help batsmen place their hits between fielders. He pointed out that bowling is always underarm, with no allowed wrist snap, but it still can get very fast. The game has the fly rule, and balls have to be caught on the fly for the batsman/runner to be out. In fact batsmen are encouraged to hit the ball down, so it won't be caught and they at least have a chance of making it to the other wicket. As in all bat and ball games, the fielders get to know the batters and where they hit and position themselves accordingly. Also, the bowlers know how the batsman hits and they try to cross them up. We watched one woman who had a very unorthodox stroke - she hit the ball directly behind her! John said such a tactic would be very effective, usually making a definite four runs, until the fielders got wind of it, and positioned themselves correspondingly. He used two terms that had always confused me in cricket, hitting toward the "on" or the "off". I asked and the answer was simple - the "on" was what in baseball would be called "pull hitting", and the "off" would be called "hitting to the opposite side". Actually, the cricket/stoolball terms seemed to make more sense! That explains terms like "mid-off", but I'll never understand why cricket has a fielding position called "silly mid-off". Later on I saw an example of a runner being "run out".

The fielders were hurrying a ball towards a wicket to get there in front of a runner; it was a close contest. They threw the ball at the wicket, the square wooden bit, before the runner touched her bat to it, and she was out. I asked why the fielder didn't hold the ball in her hand when she touched and wicket, and John said it was for two reasons: 1), if the fingers got between the bat and the wicket it could get quite painful, and 2), if the fielder was holding the ball you couldn't tell if the ball had actually touched the wicket ahead of the bat. Fair enough, I thought, if it was crucial that the ball and not just the hand holding the ball touches the wicket first.

The final match was played between the Elks and the Falcons. The sun broke through as they took the field, and that lovely late afternoon light broke through the clouds to bathe the players. In the end the Elks triumphed, and almost immediately followed a presentation, in which the victorious stoolballers queued up while John Price presented them with prizes. The queue stretched as the other players joined in, and it seemed that everyone got something. This event was about fellowship, not competition. Towards the end of the presentations I moved further back to take in the scene of lines of stoolballers queuing up to received recognition for their efforts in keeping an ancient ball game alive. I finally realised I was watching the last hurrah of maybe the 549<sup>th</sup> season that stoolball has been played in England. The National League at 123 years is a mere child in comparison.

I finally found myself at the edge of the parking lot, and thought I'd make a discreet exit. But before I got into my car, I turned around once more to take in the scene. The dark clouds were turning day into dusk as the stoolball crowd started breaking up; the great circle was once again in force. I turned for one last look and saw summer turning into autumn, and another stoolball season going into the record books and into history.

That's okay, because spring comes soon, and within months on village greens all over Sussex and Kent and Surrey we'll hear the thwack of bat against ball and the activity of fielders scurrying to return a ball to the next wicket. So will another season start in the sixth or seventh century that stoolball has been played in this fair isle.

As for me, I can hardly wait for opening day.