

### Pre-Modernity and Modernity in Baseball and Football

A very common perception in sports culture today is that the idyllic and contemplative characteristics that baseball possesses make it a pre-modern game, while football's urban and driven style makes it very modern. In reality, this perception that most fans tend to have is only partially accurate because the specialization and quantification in baseball make it a relatively modern sport, while the war-like, team-oriented sport of football can be seen as partially pre-modern. The classifications of these two sports can be attributed to their origins, which also played a part in determining the roles that race and class have on these sports.

Nearly four years ago on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, I had the privilege of attending a historic baseball game that precisely demonstrated the mixture of pre-modern and modern attributes that coexist in baseball. The game was between the Chicago White Sox and the Tampa Bay Rays at U.S. Cellular Field, and Mark Buehrle was the starting pitcher for the White Sox. Even though Buehrle was not overly dominant, he started the game off pitching well. Those of us who were knowledgeable about the game and paying close attention knew that he was in the process of pitching a perfect game. This simple observation about Buehrle's performance created a significant amount of superstition, one of the most pre-modern qualities of baseball, to become very apparent. In the stands, everyone who was aware that this was going on knew that they could not mention that Buehrle was pitching a perfect game, or else it would jinx him. This pre-modern characteristic, which is also part of the language of baseball, carried over onto the field. White Sox players began to intentionally avoid Buehrle, also in an effort to prevent themselves

from jinxing him. As the game went on, there was an aura of tension in the stadium, which caused some spectators that were not very knowledgeable to ask what was happening, but most fans refused to answer because of their superstition, continuing to display the significance of the language of baseball in the process. In fact, no other sport has entered the vernacular as much as baseball and we use the terminology associated with not only while watching the game, but also in our everyday lives (Markovits 4 Feb). The language of baseball, which includes superstition, highlights the pre-modern elements of the game, but there are still significant aspects that can be considered highly modern.

The events that transpired in the top of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning showed baseball in a different light, showing that it is not just a pre-modern sport, but that it also has characteristics of a modern sport. Just before the inning began, White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen substituted DeWayne Wise in for Scott Podsednik as a defensive replacement. This decision highlighted the immense amount of specialization that is present in baseball today. Wise's role on the team was to come into the end of games for defensive purposes because he was a talented outfielder who merely provided value on defense, but was generally a lackluster hitter. This is an example of an aspect of baseball that is highly modern and it is a relatively recent change that was shown by Benjamin Rader in his book *American Sports* when he stated, "By the 1980s teams were beginning to develop relief specialists. In the eighth or ninth inning, regardless of how well the earlier pitch had been doing, managers brought in their bullpen kings—"the closers"" (Rader 264)<sup>1</sup>. In similar fashion to a closer, DeWayne Wise entered the game to fulfill his specialized role and did his job by making a remarkable catch, robbing a home run to preserve the perfect game. At this point,

---

<sup>1</sup> Rader, Benjamin G. *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983. Print.

Buehrle was two outs away from completing his perfect game and upon completing it, the high modern aspect of quantification in baseball became very apparent.

After the celebration that took place, a flurry of statistics and records began getting mentioned because of how prevalent numbers are in baseball. In his book *A Whole New Ball Game*, Allen Guttman shows this modern aspect of baseball stating, “While records, in the sense of an unsurpassed quantified achievement, characterize every modern sport, baseball seems to have a greater variety of them” (Guttman 54)<sup>2</sup>. ESPN and other news stations, as well as Gene Honda, the public address announcer at the field, began providing records and facts about the event including that Buehrle threw the 18<sup>th</sup> perfect game in baseball’s history, he was one of six pitchers to have pitched both a perfect game and a no hitter on separate occasions and he completed the game in two hours and three minutes. Even though these were just a few of the facts mentioned, this was all in addition to the traditional box score of the game’s numerous statistics. The mention of time was somewhat ironic because baseball’s lack of a time limit is typically a primary factor in people viewing baseball as a pre-modern sport, however, at the same time, the lengths of games are documented, signifying just how quantified and modern baseball actually is. This obsession with statistics “requires not literacy, which might have limited its appeal; rather, it demands what Patricia Cline Cohen and other historians of science refer to as numeracy” (Guttman 54)<sup>2</sup>. While baseball has modern aspects that contradict the typical viewpoint of baseball being a pre-modern sport, football also has an aspect that makes it partially pre-modern, and even slightly post-modern.

---

<sup>2</sup> Guttman, Allen. *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988. Print.

In having played and watched football for the majority of my life, it is not hard to see why football is traditionally viewed as being highly modern. One of the primary aspects of this is the rationalization of football, with its standardized equipment and constantly changing rules and regulations. Elliot Gorn and Warren Goldstein demonstrate this in their book *A Brief History of American Sports* when they write, “The reorganization of industrial production, mirrored in Walter Camp’s restructuring of football from virtually continuous play to a series of downs, produced a different rhythm of life in the early twentieth century, one presided over by the importance of measured time” (Goldstein and Gorn 160)<sup>3</sup>. This characteristic is not only precisely the opposite of baseball, but one that makes football a highly modern sport because of the way it has adapted. Additionally, the bureaucratization of football, namely through the Super Bowl, which “became an unofficial national holiday, one that was more rigorously observed in many circles than Washington’s Birthday, Independence Day, or even tippling on New Year’s Eve” has become arguably the most modern aspect of all of sports (Rader 259)<sup>4</sup>. Even though football is probably the most modern of the four sports that occupy the sports space in the United States, simultaneously, the substance of the game itself can be seen as being relatively pre-modern because of its war-like nature. Gorn and Goldstein describe this by stating, “For young men, football was a means of defining and testing physical and psychological masculinity, a kind of initiation ritual. Though football carried fewer risks than military combat, players invested it with many of the same feelings” (Goldstein and Gorn 163)<sup>3</sup>. This mentality of football led to extreme violence and even deaths in the early years of the game, which made it very similar to a battlefield. Even though increased safety measures and altered rules and regulations have made

---

<sup>3</sup> Gorn, Elliott J., Warren Goldstein, and Eric Foner. *A Brief History of American Sports*. [New York, N.Y.]: Hill and Wang, 1993. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Rader, Benjamin G. *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983. Print.

football a safer sport today, injuries still occur and the violent substance of the sport is still very present. Guttman also describes this by writing, “The yard-markers follow the ball up and down the field as if in parody of the movement of markers on a military map. The goal is defend with the determination of men who stand between ravaging foe and their homeland” (Guttman 121)<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, football possesses a characteristic that makes it relatively post-modern. For example, while football has the largest following amongst professional sports in the United States, very few Americans have actually played the game. In fact, the distance between touch football and the NFL is far greater than the distance between pick up basketball and the NBA (Markovits 18 Feb).

These partially correct notions of these two sports can arguably be attributed to the way in which these sports originated, which also determined the race and class structures of the games. The actual origins of baseball itself are not entirely clear, but Allen Guttman describes the origin of baseball in America stating, “Middle-class Americans of British descent invented and first played the game, but they were not to be its mainstay (...) Baseball [became] popular with the poor whites (and blacks) of the South, and British-American players” (Guttman 59)<sup>6</sup>. The game was established in a highly urban area and not a rural area like it is portrayed to be (Markovits 4 Feb). Unlike football, baseball became very professional early on, which made it a lower class game. This allowed lower class men of Northern European descent like Honus Wagner and Lou Gehrig, to experience upward mobility and success in America (Markovits 6 Feb). At the same time, baseball was also very different from football because it did not experience desegregation until 1947, and full integration was not until 1958, so African-

---

<sup>5</sup> Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Guttman, Allen. *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988. Print.

Americans were virtually not represented in the sport with the exception of the Negro Leagues. Today there is still a relatively small proportion of African-Americans in the MLB, and it has continued to be a sport for people in poverty to experience social mobility. The disappearance of black players in the MLB can be linked to the growth in Latino players, as well as baseball becoming very suburban and organized (Markovits 11 Feb). Amateur baseball is rarely noted, as players who are drafted out of either high school or college are placed in the minor leagues instead of having an immediate impact as professionals. Since football originated as a college game, amateurism in football is significantly more important to fans who religiously follow the NFL Draft and the combine leading up to it, and football possesses different qualities in terms of race and class.

While baseball had very urban origins, football was started in colleges who played variations of rugby football games. This evolution from rugby led to the game we see today, however, the professional game did not become as relevant as quickly as it did in baseball. With the start of football being more popular on the amateur level, amateurism in football is highly regarded because players who are drafted into the NFL can become immediate stars. The game that was played on the east coast in the 1880s became the cultural good of the upper-middle class (Markovits 13 Feb). Over a century later with the NFL being the most popular professional sport, the game is not limited to the upper-middle class, and like baseball, it is as a way for people of poor upbringing to experience upward mobility. Also unlike baseball, football was not as segregated, but still experienced its own issues with racism, including Georgia Tech refusing to play Michigan if Willis Ward, an African-American player, took the field. Today we see precisely the opposite as African-Americans make up the majority of the NFL, however, less than 1% of NFL is made up of non-American players (Markovits 18 Feb).

In our modern world of professional sports it is very easy to see why baseball is viewed as being pre-modern while football is viewed as being modern. However, these perceptions are shortsighted because each sport possesses qualities that make them more than just that simplistic view. Baseball is in fact relatively pre-modern, however, the obsession of records that coincides with baseball along with its quantification make it quite modern. Football is primarily modern as the common viewpoint suggests, however its war-like nature makes it somewhat pre-modern, while the separation of most Americans from the game makes it post-modern and significantly more complex.