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# History Buried: Baseball's All-Star Game of 1858

BY JOHN THORN

In 2013, Citi Field hosted the All-Star Game, the first time the home of the Mets had held this honor since 1964, when the site was the brand new Shea Stadium. Most fans can tell you that baseball's first Midsummer Classic was held in Chicago in 1933 (even if there is not a soul alive who attended it). Yet precisely 75 years before that, there had been another, even by that time forgotten All-Star Game. Its location, within walking distance from Citi Field, is today unknown to all but a handful of baseball experts.

The adage that there is “nothing new under the sun” certainly applies to baseball, for which an earlier date may generally be found for any phenomenon, recent or distant, for which someone proclaims a “first.” To the historian, the Performance Enhancing Drug scandals of 2013 will recall the ingestion by Hall of Fame pitcher Pud Galvin, in 1889, of a monkey-gland serum designed to boost strength and endurance. But the shade in which baseball's all-star game had long languished was a particularly grievous state of affairs.

On July 20, 1858, nearly 10,000 fans gathered at the Fashion Race Course in Queens to watch what may have been the most important game in all of baseball history. That is a bold assertion, so let me back it up. In 1858, competitive baseball was barely a decade old. Despite rumors of payments or favors to some key players, baseball was governed by the rules and practices of an amateur association formed only the year before. Although this body called itself the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP), in truth, the new game was an exceedingly local affair, little played outside what is today the New York metropolitan area.

Indeed, New York City at that time consisted only of Manhattan. Brooklyn was a separate city, and it as well as the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island were not to be unified as New York City for another 40

years. We cannot identify an individual (like Arch Ward in 1933) whose bright idea it was to set the best (“picked”) nine of New York against the best nine of rival city Brooklyn. But the idea won immediate backing from the NABBP. A neutral site was selected not far from Flushing, at the recently established Fashion Race Course, where a ballfield was laid out within the enclosed grandstand area. The Fashion Course had been the property of Samuel Willets; fans going to the 2013 All-Star Game by elevated subway arrive at the Willets Point station.

The match (a series of three games with one each in July, August and, if necessary, September) was to be played for civic bragging rights. It became clear that to cover expenses, admission would have to be charged—to that point all games could be attended for free—with surpluses to be presented to the widows and orphans funds of the fire departments of the two cities.

Today, little is left of the city that was, let alone its favorite game. Shea Stadium and the House That Ruth Built are gone, as are Ebbets Field, the Polo Grounds, and several other sites of big-league games. A baseball-history tourist in New York walks in four dimensions rather than three, the fourth being that of stories and stats.

The Fashion Course began life as the National Race Course, in 1853. In that year, the Flushing Railroad established a station at what is today's Corona stop on the Long Island Rail Road, at 45th Street and National Street (named for the original race course, a fact known to few). In 1856, ownership of the race course changed hands, and the grounds were renamed for the horse Fashion, who in an intersectional race of 1842 had defeated a horse from the South named, oddly, Boston.

Then as now, the selection of players was a delicate matter. Several initial picks were not seen after the first game, as the cast of characters changed from game to game. The underdog New York stars—who in a prior

exhibition contest had lost to Hoboken's finest—won the first game by a score of 22–18; among the winners was future Hall of Famer Harry Wright. For the second game, played on August 17th, Brooklyn moved pitcher Matty O'Brien to third base. Frank Pidgeon, the Brooklyn shortstop in game one, became the pitcher, with Dickey Pearce of the Atlantics taking over at short. Brooklyn won easily, 29–8. New York's pitcher Tom Van Cott, who had thrown 198 pitches in game one, came back to toss 270 in a losing cause. Pidgeon threw 290. (Wide balls would not count against the pitcher until 1864.)

For the third and deciding game, played on September 10th, Brooklyn was the heavy favorite, based on their easy triumph in the second game. Yet New York won handily, 29–18, with the Eagles' Joe Gelston hitting a leadoff home run that was followed by six more runs before the side was retired. Of Pidgeon's eventual 436 pitches (!), 87 came in this first inning alone.

Among the firsts in baseball history that the opening Fashion Course game might claim were: first All-Star contest, first paid admission, and first baseball game played in an enclosed park. In the third (rubber) game of the series, umpire Doc Adams of the Knickerbockers called three men out on non-swinging strikes, the first time that new rule was applied.

How do we locate the site of the grandstand entrance of the Fashion Race Course? Streets have been rerouted and their names have changed over the years, but the lordly brick entrance to the race course was at 37th Avenue and 103rd Street, a mere 1.5 miles from Citi Field. ▼

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