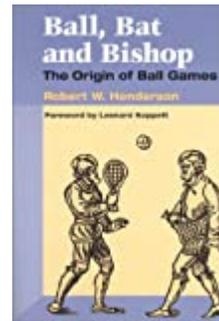




Robert W. Henderson. *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. xxiv + 220 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06992-5.



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Baseball <cite>Ad Fontes</cite>

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Sports history is a thriving academic speciality within the discipline of history and has been for many years. One of sports history's early classics is Robert W. Henderson's *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games* first published in 1947. When Henderson, the chief librarian of the New York Public Library's main reading room and the librarian of the Racquet and Tennis Club of New York, wrote his book, no serious literature for sports history existed. On the other hand, popular interest in sports history, particularly baseball, existed at a very intense level which has never abated. Although interest was high, existing popular history in 1947 was faulty. The myth that Abner Doubleday invented baseball at Cooperstown, New York in 1839 dominated the embryonic subject of baseball history, even though most knowledgeable and historically-minded sports writers knew it was not true. To correct that situation, Henderson used the resources of the New York Public Library and the library of the Racquet and Tennis Club to write a comprehensive history of ball games. That history culminated with the appearance of modern American baseball. Al-

though *Ball, Bat and Bishop* took several years to achieve the recognition that it deserved, it accomplished three things of lasting scholarly value. First, it provided its readers with an encyclopedic survey of ball games from ancient times through the nineteenth century. Although subsequent research has rendered some of his findings obsolete, many of his conclusions remain useful. Second, it told the story of the Doubleday/Cooperstown myth and destroyed its claims to be historical fact. Third, it provided a respectable start for the serious academic study of baseball and sports history. Now, over fifty years later, the University of Illinois Press has brought this significant and useful classic of sports history back into print for readers and libraries.

Ball, Bat and Bishop is organized in a chronological manner that proceeds from prehistoric times into the nineteenth century. Henderson's contention is that all ball games can ultimately trace their origins back to fertility rituals practiced by the ancient Egyptians. These early games reenacted the combat between the gods Horus and Set which in turn served as a metaphor for the shift from fallow winter to spring planting. Fertility rites

and early ball games were inextricably connected. Such spring time rituals spread from Egypt throughout the Mediterranean world and among the Romans took the form of the Saturnalia festival. Although the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire tended to suppress such ritual ball games, they revived under Islam. The ball games spread along with Islam into Spain and diffused from there into southern France by about 1000 A.D. There the ball game adapted itself to a Christian environment and became part of the rituals and ceremonies associated with Easter, a Christian festival located in the spring. Bishops and the members of their cathedral chapters participated in the ball game as did abbots and monks. Ceremonies of exchanging balls and racquets between bishops and their clergy developed and the actual games were played in the courtyards of the cathedral or monastic cloisters.

Over time these ceremonial games became secularized. Henderson points out that the ancestor of polo developed in Persia about the mid-ninth century, making it the first ball game to become secularized. Meanwhile a ball game called *la soule*, which used sticks and a ball and resembled modern field hockey, had moved out of the ecclesiastical cloisters and had become popular among the peasantry. *La soule* formed the common ancestor for a variety of team sports using a ball and sticks. These descendants of *la soule* included stoolball, football, hurling, cricket, baseball, and even golf and billiards. In all cases Henderson provides a reasonably convincing historical genealogy for the connections between the various games.

As befits the interests of a man who served as the librarian for the Racquet and Tennis Club of New York, Henderson shows how the ball games of the ecclesiastical cloisters evolved into court tennis, a secularized game popular among the aristocracy. Any comparison between the architecture of a traditional cloisters and

the court of court or real tennis makes the mutual connection obvious. Lawn tennis and racquet ball are both later offshoots of court tennis. Henderson also clearly demonstrates that the game of racquets did not solely have its origins among the well-to-do prisoners held in Fleet Street Prison during the eighteenth century.

Almost a third of *Ball, Bat and Bishop* deals with the early history of American baseball. Its connections to *la soule*, stoolball, and various shadowy English versions of baseball are clearly delineated. The amazingly flimsy foundations of the Doubleday/Cooperstown myth of baseball's origins are also traced. As Henderson points out, Abner Doubleday never claimed to have invented baseball which had long been a flourishing national pastime by his death in 1893. The claim first surfaced well over a decade later as part of A.G. Spaulding's dogged search for a totally American pedigree for baseball.

Ball, Bat and Bishop is a true classic of the literature of sports history. Henderson is a generally careful and fair-minded historian with a tremendous breadth of knowledge. It is unfortunate that the book does not provide footnotes to ease the identification of Henderson's sources. His contention that Egyptian religious ceremonies are the common ancestor of all ball games has a somewhat dated diffusionist or even hyper-diffusionist ring to it. The hyper-diffusionist aspect comes in when Henderson suggests that pre-Columbian contacts from Asia across the Pacific Ocean brought the religious ball game to the civilizations of Mesoamerica. Modern anthropologists and ethnohistorians are more likely to explain such similarities as independent inventions attributable to parallel cultural evolution. The scholarly discipline of sports history has gone far beyond the work of Henderson but it should continue to look upon him as one of its founders and pioneers. The reprinting of *Ball, Bat and Bishop* is a testimony to his contributions.

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