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IDEAS

Baseball Is Speeding Up Again

Major League Baseball attempts to tackle the sport's enduring problem: time.

By Chris Beneke

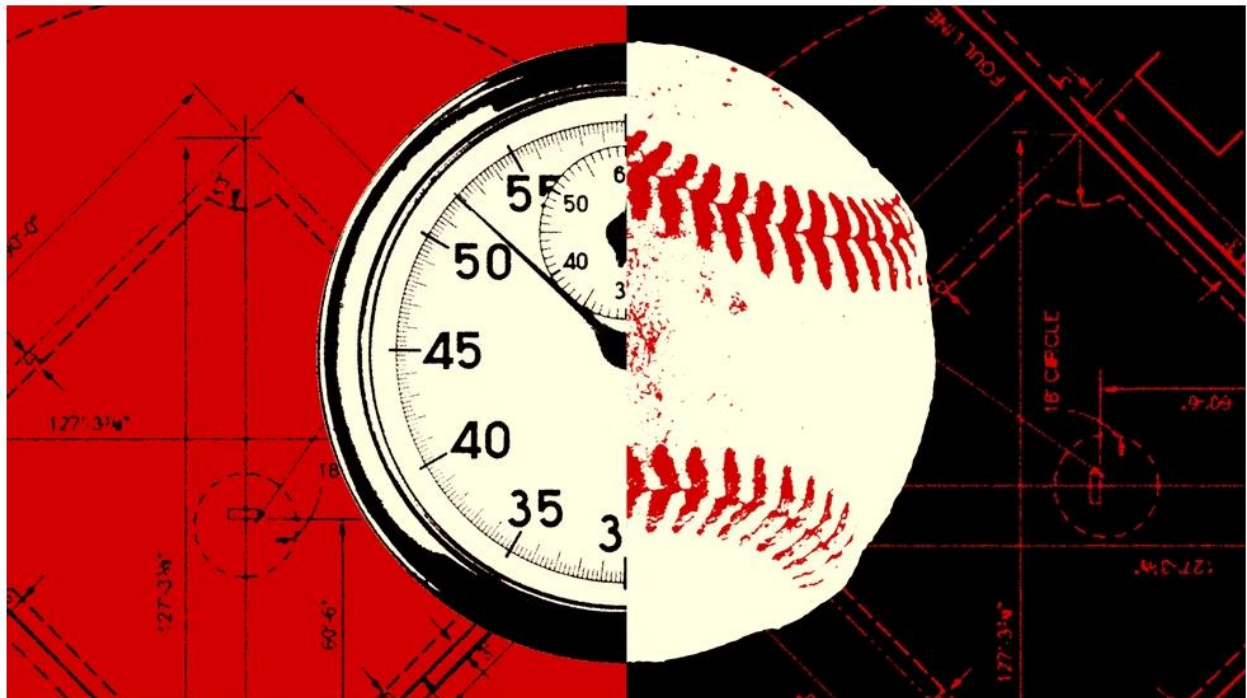


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In 1862, baseball's promoters realized they had a problem: Games were taking too long. Interminable at bats routinely extended matches beyond the three-hour mark. Fans were bored; newspaper editors were irritated. Sound familiar?

Major League Baseball today begins a new season under a set of new rules—including requiring pitchers to deliver the ball to home plate in less than 20 seconds and batters to take their place in the box well before that—that provoked early outrage from loyal fans upset about the abandonment of the sport's traditions. But the lesson of 1862 is that adopting new rules to keep the game interesting is itself an old baseball tradition, one that has ensured its continuing relevance as America's pastime.

Some changes restored the balance between offense and defense, such as the lowering of mounds in 1969 and the introduction of a designated hitter to the American League in 1973. Other changes, especially in the sport's formative years, improved the game's pace. None has been more significant, and none more like the rule changes that baseball has just enacted, than those adopted before and during the American Civil War.

Baseball's time problem was already evident in 1858, when an assembly of New York City clubs denominating itself the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP) instituted rules, including a cap on the number of innings to be played at nine, that would quickly be adopted everywhere. However, the NABBP confronted one particularly fraught matter that could not be resolved so easily: ensuring that the pitcher and hitter did not slow the game to a crawl.

Originally, pitchers were expected to toss the ball underhand in a manner that allowed the hitter to put the ball in play, much as you would expect in a modern game of kickball. As baseball became more competitive, however, pitchers began adding spin to the ball and aiming it outside the hitter's wheelhouse. Finicky batters declined such ungracious offerings and instead waited for another pitch. And then the next. And the next. Nothing prevented this from going on indefinitely, as it sometimes seemed to do. The slow pace was poorly suited to the demands of a people who could communicate via telegraph wires and ride on intricately scheduled railroads, speeding at unfathomed velocities.

To keep things rolling on the field, a 1858 NABBP rule compelled hitters to swing when presented with what the umpire considered "good balls." Batters disinclined to do so would, once warned, have a strike called on them. The introduction of the called strike reined in choosy hitters, but also encouraged hurlers to deliver pitch after

pitch just beyond the hitter's reach, or to locations where the batter could do nothing more than ground the ball to an awaiting fielder.

Thus, despite the new restrictions on hitters, game play continued on its sluggish course. A single at bat could take as long as 15 minutes, and newspapers reported on games that stretched beyond three hours. In one famously heated contest between Brooklyn squads—which concluded abruptly when one side walked off the field—batters saw 665 pitches in fewer than six innings of play.

So as the Civil War raged around them, baseball's rule makers continued tinkering with the game's imagined clock. In December 1862, they introduced a change that complemented the earlier called-strike innovation and its regard for game flow: the base on balls, or walk.

The framers of the new rule were so aggrieved about baseball's pacing problem that they vented their frustration in the rule book itself. They called the behavior of pitchers and hitters “very tedious and annoying” and “tir[esome to] spectators” who did not enjoy watching a team of men stand around as a sphere of wound yarn passed between two of them for the better part of an afternoon.

That bases on balls were originally intended to speed up the game may seem unlikely today. If one thing aggravates baseball traditionalists and casual fans alike, it's all the walks these days. The statistics-driven “Moneyball” revolution of the early 2000s put a premium on discerning power hitters like Juan Soto and Mike Trout while contributing to an agonizing slowdown in game play.

Nonetheless, speeding baseball up was the walk rule's stated purpose, and it quickly had the desired effect. The baseball historian Bruce Allardice notes that the average duration of nine-inning contests shrank from 3.04 hours in 1862 and 3.22 hours in 1863 (there may have been a lag in enforcement), to just 2.63 hours in 1864.

That brings us to the present. The 2023 rule changes won't reduce the frequency of walks (or strikeouts, for that matter). But by forcing pitchers to throw within a prescribed time and by limiting their pick-off attempts, it will almost certainly produce a reduction in both the time between batted balls and the length of games. In fact, the results from spring training suggest that we are about to witness an acceleration in the pace of Major League Baseball games on par with what happened to Civil War-era baseball.

Baseball's struggle with time remains as challenging in the age of TikTok as it was in the age of railroads. The latest revisions to the national pastime won't end that enduring struggle, but for a while at least, they will make the game more exciting to watch.

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