

Americans Find New Joy in an Old-Fashioned Game

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This Is America. I'm Mario Ritter.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. This week, we hear how some people are learning to play the game of baseball the old way. And we report on efforts to help former prisoners build new lives.

For many Americans, the long, hot days of summer mean just one thing: baseball. Walk through a park anywhere in the country and you are likely to find young people and old people, men and women all playing ball.

Our reporter recently found a baseball game in a park in the southern city of Nashville, Tennessee.

That was the familiar sound of a bat hitting the ball. But this baseball game is not quite the game most Americans know.

"We play the game wearing no gloves, and there's a few minor rule differences."

This is vintage, or old-fashioned, baseball. Vintage baseball teams aim to experience the game the way it was played 150 years ago. The game was still young then and just beginning to spread across the country.

"Good eye, Trip. Using your peepers!"

Even the language of the game is taken from the 19th century. Michael Thurmon is chief of the Tennessee league. He says modern expressions are not used much in vintage baseball. There are older words for common actions like throw and catch. There are even older words for the basic tools of baseball, the bat and ball.

“You might say, ‘Well hurled,’ if somebody pitches a good pitch. You might say, ‘Well struck,’ for a good hit. The bat’s called a ‘willow,’ the ball is called an ‘apple’ or a ‘pill.’”

Some fans come to the game wearing clothing as it looked in 1864. Michael Cole was dressed as a Civil War army officer from a southern state. “This is my second game, and seems like I get more intrigued with it every time I watch it.”

Una Daly had never seen a game of vintage baseball and sat down nearby to watch for a while.

“Well, I like the fact that these look like they’re community members who are out having fun. They’re all ages.”

The number of vintage baseball teams is increasing. Teams can now be found in about half of the American states, mostly in the middle of the country.

This crowd is cheering for the vintage team from Nashville called the Nashville Maroons. The Maroons are playing against another group from the nearby town of Franklin. The two groups are the only Vintage Base Ball teams in the state. Together, they make up the newly organized Tennessee Association of Vintage Base Ball.

Organizers say vintage baseball looks back to a kinder, gentler age of sports. Trapper Haskins is the league vice president. He says both the ball players and those who come to see the games expect polite behavior. They expect traditional sportsmanship. Arguing with the umpire happens often at other baseball games, but not in vintage baseball.

“We don’t taunt. There’s no arguing the calls with the umpire. It’s sort of a, it’s a more genteel game.”

Vintage baseball also ignores the business side of the modern game. In vintage baseball, fans watch for free. The ball players are the ones who cover the costs. They pay to belong to the vintage baseball group.

Even though many things are different in vintage baseball, Trapper Haskins says it is still the game that millions love. And he says the game is even better when played the old fashioned way.

“The speed of the game, the cadence, the choreography of it, is just — it’s as close to perfection in sports as I think we’ve come.”

Next summer, four more teams will join the Tennessee Vintage Base Ball Association. The year after that, the association hopes to have teams across the state playing baseball the old way.

One more story about baseball, history and language. On September 23, 1908, baseball reporters invented a new word to describe someone who makes a mistake.

Here is what happened.

A huge crowd was watching the championship game between the Chicago Cubs and the New York Giants. The teams were playing at the Polo Grounds in New York City.

It was the last inning of the game. The score was tied. New York was at bat. Two men were on base: one was on third base, and one was on first.

The batter hit the ball hard. The man on third base ran quickly home to score what everyone believed was the winning run. New York fans went wild. They shouted and cheered. Some jumped from their seats and climbed onto the field.

There was only one problem. The player on first base, a man named Fred Merkle, did not keep running. Merkle saw his teammate score the winning run. So he did not go to second base as the rules required. He just walked back to the dugout, where the other players were sitting.

Chicago's second baseman realized Merkle's mistake. He called for the ball and stepped on second base. The umpire said Merkle was out and the winning run could not be counted.

With that ruling, the game should have continued. But too many fans were on the field.

The case went to the head of the National Commission of Organized Baseball. He decided neither the Chicago Cubs nor the New York Giants had won the game. He called it a tie.

The two teams had to play again for the championship. This time, the Chicago Cubs won, four to two.

New York fans were furious. They believed Merkle had cost them the championship. Newspaper reporters made up a word for someone like Merkle—someone, they suggested, who did not have a brain.

They called him a bonehead. It is still a word Americans use. Although, it is not a very nice one.

South Bronx Probation

New York City is experimenting with a new kind of probation office.

People who are placed on probation by a court have to follow many rules. For instance, they may have to be home at a certain time every night, or they may not be allowed to drink alcohol or leave the area.

A probation officer supervises them. People who break a rule of probation or commit another crime may be sent back to prison.

Some probation officers have a saying about their work. They say their job is to "trail `em, nail `em and jail `em."

The probation offices in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City are trying to improve their system. The South Bronx is one of the country's highest crime areas.

The South Bronx probation offices organize activities meant to be fun or helpful. Former prisoners take part in poetry slams, health examinations and information sharing with others seeking work.

The group that operates these probation centers is called the Neighborhood Opportunity Network or NeON. The goal is to create new methods to turn convicts away from crime.

Lonni Tanner is in charge of improving city service centers. She works with the New York City Department of Design and Construction.

She changed the old office space into someplace more inspiring.

"I saw a lot of people waiting, nothing going on. I thought, what if, in fact, this could be a place of doing rather than waiting?"

New York City Probation Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi is responsible for putting the NeON program into several high-crime neighborhoods.

"What it's really though about is improving public safety by engaging our clients productively, right, so they are part of their own rehabilitative process. It's not just something being done to them."

Contina Session is one of 15 probation officers at the NeOn center in the South Bronx. She helped Peter enter a program where he learned how to interview for jobs and avoid conflict.

Recently, she and Peter talked about his success in that program.

"Very proud of you for the graduation. How did you feel?"

"It was good. It felt nice to be appreciated for something – you know, accomplish something."

Catherine Rose Edwards is also on probation. She expressed thanks for the support of her probation officer during a hard time. She was arrested for a drug-related offense, but she was able to avoid prison.

"I would have lost my son. I would have lost my job. I would have lost everything."

NeOn's approach was a big change for many probation officers.

A year after the NeON center began operations in the South Bronx, most probation officers approve of the new methods. Some officers even attend the weekly poetry workshop offered by Poet-in-Residence Dave Johnson.

"If you'd like to write a story or a poem or song today, we have a little class that meets here."

Dave Johnson says poetry opens a way to search for answers about life. He says poetry also creates a kind of peaceful and effective communication.

"The poems are here, they're alive. They're within the people."

Every poetry class ends with an event called a poetry slam.

Probationers, officers and community members share their poems. Listen to this short poem.

"Little did she know / that bud blooming in the wind / is a rising sun ... "

Now we hear a poem about a woman's feelings for an alcohol abuser.

"Pour down the liquor / The lie's eating up your liver/ I won't forget / but I will forgive her."

Eighty percent of those who attempt the NeOn program successfully complete their probation time. Many are allowed to leave probation early because of their good behavior. The number of people able to leave early has increased 500 percent.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Mario Ritter. You can read and listen to our programs at



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