

Contemporary Collectibles: Hats off to baseball caps

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

These days, anyone from your toddler to your grandma might be seen sporting a baseball cap, but there was a time when the only people who wore baseball caps were professional players. They've been around for a long time, and you might consider a collection of the various types of vintage examples to add to your contemporary ones.

To start at the beginning, baseball was not invented out of whole cloth by Abner Doubleday, as legend has had it. Rather, it evolved from earlier games played with bats and balls - something called "base ball" or "base-ball" was played with sticks and balls by both the British and Americans in the 18th century, in particular there was the popular English children's game of rounders, which involved players being physically hit with the ball. (Trivia note: Jane Austen referred to baseball in her 1798 novel "Northanger Abbey.")

As far back as the 1840s, amateur teams were playing along the East Coast and around the Civil War, a uniform style of baseball had evolved. The person who formulated the basic rules was a New Yorker named Alexander Cartwright. He diagrammed a ball field with 90-foot baselines and a home plate batter's box, introduced the hardball (originally a miniature cricket ball), and the following year the earliest game on record under the Cartwright Rules was played on June 19th in Hoboken, N.J. His system was known as the "New York game"; it became the national game in the 1860s and designated the "national pastime" in the 1920s.

As can be seen from early photographs, even the post-Civil War amateur teams wore uniforms, complete with caps. They were very much a unifying factor, imbuing the players with a shared sense of pride and team spirit. On April 24, 1849, the New York Knickerbockers adopted the first official uniform, a simple outfit consisting of a white flannel shirt, blue wool pants and a straw hat.

A few years later, the Knickerbockers switched to caps made of soft, fine merino. Already in place were the two main features of the modern baseball cap: a crown and a visor. In the 1860s, one of the most popular varieties, made by Peck & Snyder, featured a start pattern above the crown, and was designated as the "No.1." Priced from \$1.25 to \$2 - with muslin and flannel costing less than merino - it was favored by such leading amateur clubs as the Brooklyn Excelsiors, Philadelphia Athletics, New York Mutuals and New York Gothams.

Various types of uniforms shown in catalogs of sports equipment dating from the 1880s illustrate three other styles of caps: the "parti-colored cap" featuring vertical stripes on a pillbox crown and a striped bill, worn by the 1886 world champion St. Louis Browns, and the similar "Chicago cap," which substituted horizontal stripes and a solid-colored bill; the "college-style cap," which was boxy in shape and made from horizontal strips of fabric; the "Boston-style cap," a triangular-sectioned hat with a short front visor and forward tilting crown; the self-explanatory "jockey shape cap" and "skull cap," and the "base ball (sic) hat," which was basically a derby-form cap that never caught on - and neither did an 1895 experimental cap with a green-tinted, transparent bill for protection from the sun.

Further innovations following the turn of the century: placing a team icon on the cap, innovated by the Detroit Tigers in 1901, and the introduction by Spalding of the "Philadelphia-style cap," with the first stitched visor, resulting in a more durable cap. It wasn't till the mid-1970s though, that they really spread to the general population, led by farmers, truckers and outdoor laborers wearing promotional caps given away by beer companies and tractor-makers.

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