

For the Love of the glove

Ever wonder how the connection between a ballplayer and his glove began?

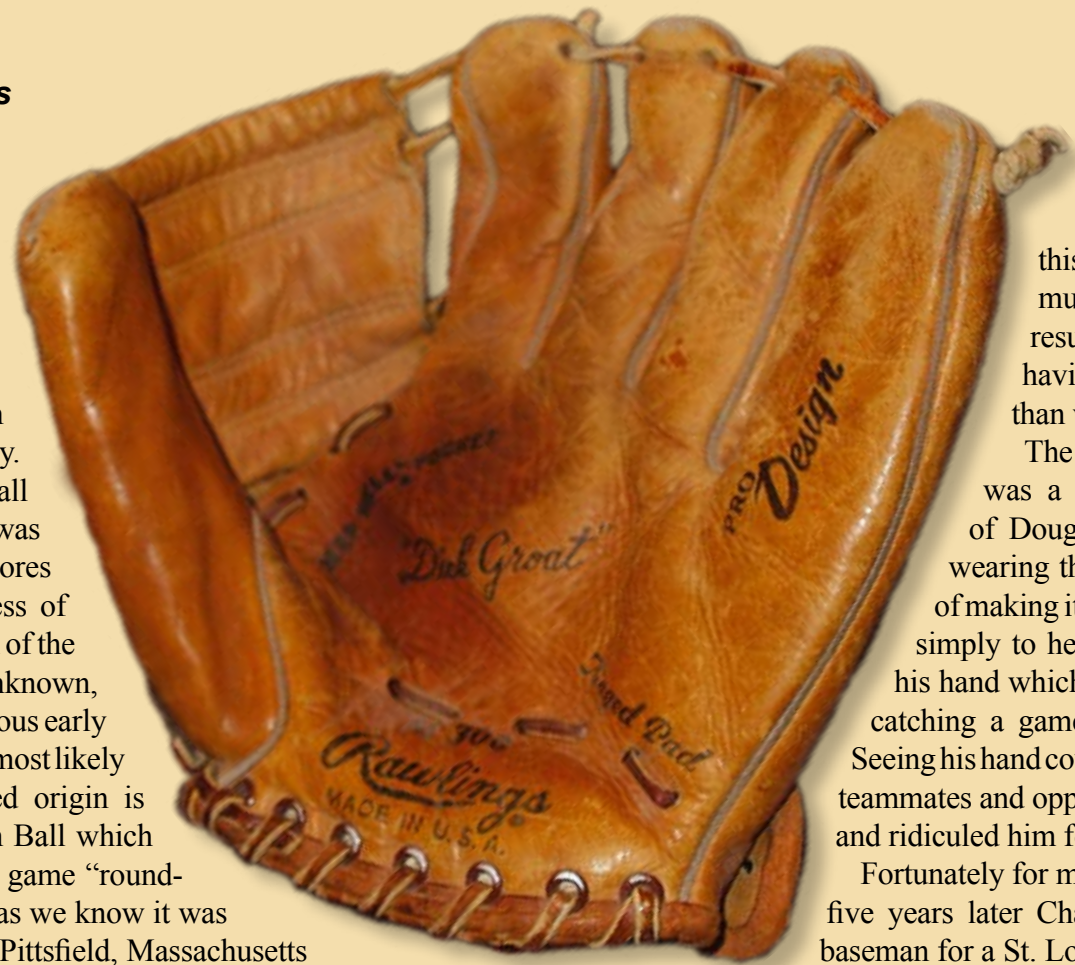
Story by Tucker Smedes

It didn't always fit like a glove. Baseball has been around since as early as the 1800's in America, but similar games had been played since the 14th century. Designed as a stick and ball game, the sport of baseball was known more for high scores than the defensive prowess of its players. The true origin of the game of baseball is a bit unknown, as it was derived from various early folk games pre-1800. The most likely and most widely believed origin is from a game called Town Ball which was based on the English game "rounders". American Baseball as we know it was first mentioned in a 1791 Pittsfield, Massachusetts ordinance which banned play of the game within 80 yards of the town meeting house.

Early teams formed the game into a real sport with aid from the Civil War in the early 1860's which helped to bring players and teams closer together. These guys were not bonnet toting choir girls. Ballplayers were rugged, tough, showing no fear. There was no fifteen day disabled list for a sprained pinky toe, or time off for emotional distress because the family kitten passed on. The game was a way of life.

As one would expect from the strong shoulder type, protective gear was more a sign of weakness than a show of enhanced skill or innovation. The helmet didn't exist until 1907, and batting gloves wouldn't show up until the 1950's. For a man to don a glove in the 1870's, he would be laughed at and mocked for showing his limitations.

Prior to those times, the sport itself was a much more rugged version than that which we see today. Players were expected to catch or simply knock the ball down however possible, then throw it across the diamond to another person wearing no glove or protection. Due to



this, the games were often much higher scoring, as a result of both teams often having many more errors than we see today.

The first man to don a glove was a catcher by the name of Doug Allison. He wasn't wearing the glove with the idea of making it enhance the sport; but simply to help ease the pain from his hand which was split open while catching a game earlier in the week. Seeing his hand covered and hidden away, teammates and opposing players mocked and ridiculed him for his weakness.

Fortunately for modern players, around five years later Charles C. Waitt, a first baseman for a St. Louis club felt much the same way Allison did. Waitt later told Albert

Spalding (a well known player and later athletic equipment developer) he was ashamed to wear his glove, but added that he needed it to save his hand. He went on to say the color he chose was the closest resemblance to flesh he could find, in hopes it would help minimize comments from wearing it.

Spalding however relished the commentary about the glove, and in 1877, wore a glove of his own. His glove was not designed to be hidden amongst the flesh, but stand out in full black leather. Spalding having played for nearly two decades at that point had developed several bruises on the inside of his left hand from stopping balls hit back at him while pitching.

Spalding felt an immediate relief stating the glove helped considerably, though it only lessened the blows. He continued to add layers of padding until the pain was more manageable.

Suffering through pain and agony to show ones toughness in a game was not a new concept to baseball, but one that shone brightly to the original players. The phrase, "the agony of defeat" could very easily be used to describe a player after a game prior to the late

1800's. Baseballs themselves were not made exactly the same as they are today, but they were still quite hard, and when thrown at top speeds, would hurt very much upon bare skin. Players were hospitalized much more frequently than modern times when the victim of a pitch gone awry and even catching said pitch would leave a lasting impression upon the catcher. Players today still feel the effects of a fastball thrown slightly off target. To catch one bare handed, a player would have had to show incredible strength and fortitude. The cuts, bruises, and broken bones were all signs of toughness, and to use pads or protection against a little ball would have gone against the masculinity of the game.

When Spalding, a player of high enough esteem finally stepped forth wearing a hand guard, the general demeanor of the players went from one of mocking and ridicule to one that evoked sympathy and understanding. It took over a decade after Spalding's black glove debut to make gloves commonplace, but by around the mid 1890's, most players were wearing gloves in the field. By the time softball was becoming a game of its own in 1887, gloves were no longer shunned.

Even still, the gloves of that time were not what you would see or think of today. The basic inception of the glove was a layer of padding for the palm of the hand, not a large webbed catch. It would provide a cushion from swiftly thrown or hard hit balls, but often left fingertips open to allow for greater control of the ball after knocking it to the ground. These gloves would be made of various types of leather and would have additional layers sewn in until the player felt the amount of padding adequate.

As players began to see the benefits of wearing a glove, styles and shapes began to evolve. By around 1900, nearly all players would wear gloves, drastically changing the game from one of high scoring to one of defensive battles. The impact of the glove on the game was obvious, with statistics of the time showing many players dropping considerably in the amount of errors committed from one season to the next.

In the early 1900's, baseballs too were improving in their design, allowing players to throw and hit them harder and faster. Even wearing a glove, players would suffer cuts and bruises on their hands. This prompted glove manufacturers to step up their

production and development, bringing new styles to the game. The webbed glove would make its debut, tying fingers together with laces, allowing players a location to catch the ball without it being dead center in their palm. Catchers however were not as lucky, and gloves with thicker padding would be developed with them in mind.

As styles of the glove improved, players realized that elongated webbings allowed them a competitive edge. In 1919, a pitcher for the Cardinals by the name of Bill Doak created a prototype for a glove which used a web between the thumb and fingers rather than the more customary five-fingered approach of years past. He sold his idea to a sporting goods manufacturer named Rawlings, who is still a major baseball equipment manufacturer today. The web allowed players to catch the ball with one hand, making it so fielders could catch nearly any ball they could get to.

As fielders gloves improved and became further developed, so too did catchers and first baseman's mitts. The catcher's glove was strengthened immensely with the introduction of the Hundley-Bench model, showing off a hinged system which closed on impact, allowing catchers to keep their throwing hand out of the way. First basemen also desired something to better their position, however for them it was all about size. Hank Greenberg first used a glove with an elongated web in the 1934 World Series, prompting the design of new, larger sized gloves for this position. The push for bigger and better eventually prompted a set of size limitations, stating today that no fielder's glove can exceed a maximum of 12 inches long and 7 inches wide. Softball players are able to go a bit further, being given 14 inches in length as their limit. First basemen in both sports are still given a bit of extra consideration however, and are allowed to slightly exceed this limitation.

The game itself has changed considerably since the glove made its first appearance. While fans might appreciate a high scoring contest amongst hitters, the game would simply draw on if those runs were the result of erroneous plays from either fielding or catching. Baseball seems to be a defensive game at its roots, and to go from multiple errors per game to less than one by the 1980's shows how the game has developed.