

“Striker to the ball!” What? He means: “Batter up!”

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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In this Sept. 6, 2014, photo, vintage baseball players with the Capitol Stars Club of Maryland and Virginia cheer their opponents during the 2014 Base-Ball Exhibition and Fair at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia. The clubs play baseball according to rules of the game as it was played in 1864.

PHILADELPHIA—A baseball game is being played at Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. From far away, it looks and sounds like a regular game between friends. There’s cheering from the bench as a runner slides into home.

But look closer. Something isn’t quite right. They’re pitching underhand. They’re not wearing batting helmets. There are no fielding gloves or catcher’s masks. The players even have floppy hats and carefully styled mustaches.

“Striker to the line!” yells a man. He is wearing a straw hat, suit and bow tie.

What he means is: “Batter up!” He’s the umpire.

This is not your father’s baseball. It’s not even your grandfather’s baseball. It’s your great-great-grandfather’s game.

Funny, Old-Time Nicknames

The Athletic Base Ball Club of Philadelphia plays the old-fashioned way. It's one of a growing number of teams nationwide that recreates the 19th century. The league does this with uniforms that match the ones worn in that period. Teams play by rules from the 1800s. Players even have funny, old-time nicknames.

"It brings people back to a simpler time, before million-dollar contracts, TVs, cars, steroids and gloves," said Bruce "Early" Leith. He is the commissioner of the Mid-Atlantic Vintage Base Ball League. He is never early of course.

Leith also serves as president of the Eclipse Base Ball Club of Elkton, Maryland. Eight years ago, he said, there were only three teams in that area. There are 14 today.

"We get calls all the time from people wanting to start a club," said Leith.

Baseball legend says the game was invented in 1839 by Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, New York. But researchers now say Alexander Cartwright and the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York City began to write the rules down. They did this in the 1840s.

Those rules were frequently changed. Therefore, today's vintage, or old-fashioned, teams have many old rulebooks to choose from. The Mid-Atlantic league plays by what are called the 1864 rules. The league includes the Athletic and about 20 other squads from Rhode Island to Virginia.

Making An Out On One Bounce

One of the biggest differences between then and now is that fielders could catch a batted ball on one bounce to make an out. The rule is understandable. Players back then were trying to handle a hard ball without gloves. Such equipment didn't become common until later.

The Athletic club is named after the Philadelphia team that started in 1859. The club formed about five years ago after Scott "Big Deal" Alberts began researching the sport's deep roots in the city. Alberts helped start the club. His teammates are called "ballists." They have a range of ages, athletic ability and occupations.

The team plays once a week. They are focused on being true to history. Their wool uniforms, which cost about \$300, include fancy buttons, a bow tie and floppy cap. Home plate is a white disc and the bases are sand-filled bags. Even the beer they drink comes from a 19th century recipe.

"We try to do everything we can as close as possible to the period," Alberts said. "Because if we're not doing that, we might as well just be playing softball in the park."

“Tally!” And “Tarnation!”

Arthur and Alice Best had a special appreciation for the recent Athletic game. The Bests happen to be people who stage historically accurate Civil War battles.

Alice Best said she “loved” that the players try to be historically accurate, drinking out of tin cups. “And they have their bats in a barrel, or on an old wooden rack,” she said. “It’s really, really nice.”

Not all teams go as far to recreate the past, said Dennis “Pops” Wiegmann, president of the National Vintage Base Ball Association. The group has about 65 active clubs. Some started in the 1980s. He figures there are dozens of other teams that are not part of the association.

But all share a common goal of having fun with friends and exercising with a historical twist.

“It gives people another way of looking at the game,” Wiegmann said.

It gives people another way of hearing the game, too. The umpire can often be heard shouting “Tally!” as a runner scores and “The striker is dead!” when a batter makes an out.

At which point players might cry out an old-fashioned curse word: “Tarnation!”

