

CHARLES “OLD HOSS” RADBOURN

Sources & Activities

Primary Sources

- “A Crooked Game,” *Pantagraph*, September 2, 1876.
- “The Floating Evidence on the Crooked Game of Friday,” *Pantagraph*, September 4, 1876.
- “Base Ball,” *Pantagraph*, February 16, 1885.

Secondary Sources

- Edward Achorn. *Fifty-nine in '84: Old Hoss Radbourn, Barehanded Baseball, and the Greatest Season a Pitcher Ever Had*. (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2010)

This book is also available for purchase at the Museum or at your local library.

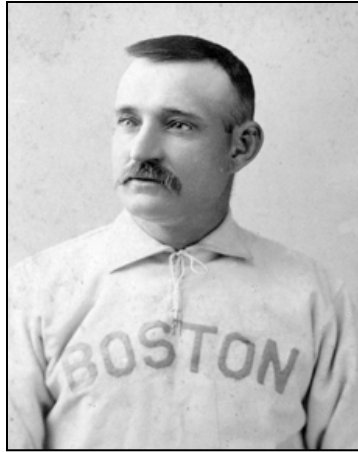
- “‘Old Hoss’ Achieved Lasting Fame as Nineteenth-Century Ballplayer,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.
- “‘Old Hoss’ Radbourn Embodied Baseball’s Coarser Past,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.

This book is also available for purchase at the Museum.

- “Evolution of 19th Century Baseball Rules” - <http://www.19cbaseball.com/rules.html>

Suggested Activities & Discussion Questions

- **Activity 1:** Have students review the baseball website from above. Students should then compare the rules of baseball: then and now. Have the students respond to the following questions: Which era of baseball do you prefer? What reasons can you think of that would have affected baseball’s rules over time? Explain.
- **Activity 2:** Read the “Crooked Game” articles from above. Summarize the controversy in your own words. What modern examples of cheating in baseball can you identify?
- **Discussion Question:** It could be said that Charles Radbourn was his own worst enemy...that he defeated himself. What actions and decisions do you see supporting that statement?



CHARLES “OLD HOSS” RADBOURN (1854-1897)

Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn is the most famous baseball player to come from Bloomington, Illinois. In 1939, over forty years after his death, he was named to the National Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y. Very few nineteenth century players have been so honored. But, Radbourn set a pitching record that still stands and likely always will.

Born in Rochester, New York in 1854, Charles came to Bloomington at a young age. There were four boys and four girls in his family, a team in themselves, and he learned to play baseball on the empty lots around town. Public records first take note of Radbourn in 1876 when he was playing for a Bloomington club. Two years later he was pitching in Peoria and by 1880, he was recruited to the National League playing for the Buffalo Bisons of Buffalo, N.Y. In Buffalo, Charles played outfield and second base. By the next year he was back to his real love, pitching.

The 1881 season saw Radbourn playing for the Providence, Rhode Island Grays. Here he was teamed with another young pitcher named Charlie Sweeney. The two young men had developed a rivalry over who was the best pitcher and who could lead the league in pitching **statistics**. In that first season, Radbourn won 25 games and had 11 losses and led the league in the most wins. The following year (1882), Radbourn won 31 games over 19 losses and led the league in the most strike-outs. It was during this season on August 17, that Charles hit a homerun in the 18th inning to win a previously scoreless game against Detroit. In 1883 he won 49 games over 25 losses, and broke the all-time record for most wins in a season.

Radbourn worked hard to be a great pitcher and baseball player. However, he also played hard off the field. He became known as a heavy drinker with a short temper. In July of the 1884 season, his **turbulent** temper led to his suspension from the league. In the eighth inning of a game, Radbourn became angry when an umpire said he **balked** (or quit a pitch illegally). He started throwing the ball “with reckless **haste** and wildness” seeming to try to unnerve his opponents. After this game, rumors started to spread that Charles purposely pitched poorly because he had just signed a contract with the St. Louis Unions for more than twice his salary. But just four games later, it was Charlie Sweeney, Radbourn’s rival, who walked off the field in the middle of the fourth inning. It seemed it was Sweeney, not Radbourn, who had signed with St. Louis.

Now with both their top performers gone, the Providence Grays were desperate for a pitcher and **reinstated** Radbourn. He agreed to pitch every game for the rest of the season on the

condition that the management gave him Sweeney's pay on top of his own. "I'll pitch every day and win the pennant for Providence even if it costs me my right arm," Radbourn said. He did just that. Radbourn played a fantastic season pitching 59 wins, 12 losses, and two ties, and the Grays defeated the New York Metropolitans for the championship (today what is known as the World Series). That season he pitched 672 innings and struck out 411 batters. Radbourn's record of pitching 59 wins in one season (1884) still stands to this day.

Unfortunately, pitching every day did in fact cost Radbourn his right arm to the point where it hurt to lift it to comb his hair. They started to call him "Old Hoss" because of his hard work and devotion to baseball. He was one of the first pitchers to effectively use the curve ball, a technique he had developed practicing against the family barn on west Washington Street back in Bloomington years before. In his first years in professional baseball, overhand pitching was not allowed. Pitching underhand made the use of the curve ball even more **revolutionary**. He even came up with variations of the curve ball called "dry spitters" and "hardball."

Five years at Providence, R.I., were followed by five years in Boston with the Beaneaters. He also met and married his wife, Carrie, while in Boston in 1887. Finally he went to Cincinnati and there ended his career with the Reds in 1891. His was a memorable career and he finished with 308 wins and 191 losses. However, it was a career cut short by over-work of his pitching arm.

After leaving the major leagues, Radbourn moved back to Bloomington. He went into business running a pool hall and saloon. "Radbourn's Place" was located at 214 West Washington Street (where Commerce Bank is today) in downtown Bloomington. However, his years of hard living and hard playing had left him in worsening health and he grew steadily sicker during his last years of his life. According to *The Daily Pantagraph*, his disease "gnawed at his mental and physical being robbing him of speech, feeling and locomotion long before his final day." He died after a hunting accident on February 5, 1897. He was only 43 years old. He is buried in the southwest part of Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Today a replica of his Hall of Fame plaque can be found on his headstone in the cemetery. He was remembered by the *Charleston Daily Mail* this way: "'Old Hoss' Radbourn was one of the men who helped establish baseball as America's national game." Clark Griffith, another McLean County Hall of Famer who grew up in Normal, said "Old Hoss" was his inspiration to be a pitcher. *The Daily Pantagraph* in Radbourn's obituary stated that "he was the greatest baseball pitcher of his day....(at the time) his name was used as frequently as the president's. His matchless pitching, followed by his winning by hitting a homerun in the 18th inning (in 1882) placed him head and shoulders above any player either preceding or present."