

BASEBALL

Baseball is America's national sport, played mainly by men. It developed in the mid 19th century from the British games of rounders and cricket. Baseball is also popular in Japan and several Latin American countries, and has been an Olympic sport since 1992. Softball is similar but uses a larger, softer ball and is popular with women.

Many Americans play baseball for fun because players do not have to be strong like football players or tall like basketball players. Some people think baseball is too slow, but the team managers often change their players and plans during the game, and there are many exciting plays. Many American families enjoy going to a Sunday afternoon double-header (= two games between the same two teams in one day).

The game

Baseball is played with long wooden bats and a small, hard ball, by two teams of nine players each. The infield has three bases (= bags filled with sand) and a home plate, also called home, arranged in a diamond. The distance between each base is 90 feet (27.4 metres). The pitcher, who throws the ball to the batter at the home plate, stands in the centre of the diamond. The distance from the pitcher's mound to the home plate is 60.5 feet (18.4 metres). The team that scores the most runs as its players move round the bases is the winner.

Each game lasts nine innings. In each inning the visiting team is first to bat (= hit the ball), while the home team plays defense. Players bat in turn but when a team has three outs, it must let the other side bat. If a batter hits the ball and it is not caught in the air for an out, he runs to first base. If the ball is thrown to first base before the batter gets there, he is out. If not, he then tries to advance to second base, third base and back to home for a run while other players bat. A base runner is out if another player in his team hits the ball and it is thrown to second or third base before he gets there. The most exciting play is when the batter hits a ball very far and can go round all the bases for a home run, also called a homer.

An umpire judges the throws. If a pitch (= ball that is thrown) is not hit, the ball is caught by the catcher behind the batter and returned to the pitcher. A batter strikes out (= is out) if the pitcher throws three balls within the strike zone (= the area between the batter's shoulders and knees) and he misses them or does not try to hit them. A batter can go to first base on a walk if the pitcher throws four balls outside the strike zone. As well as the pitcher and the catcher, the defense has four other players in the infield and three in the outfield.

Competitions

The professional season lasts from April to October. Major league baseball is organized into the American League and the National League. At the end of the season the four best teams in each league play to decide which two will go forward to the World Series. The team that wins four games in this competition are the World Champions. The New York Yankees have won the World Series the most times. Other well-known teams include the Boston Red Sox, the Cleveland Indians, the Detroit Tigers, the Chicago Cubs, the St Louis Cardinals and the Los Angeles Dodgers. There are also several minor leagues around the country.

Amateur competitions include the NCAA College World Series, won most often by the University of Southern California. Both American and foreign teams play in the Little League, and young people play in the Little League or Babe Ruth League.

Famous baseball players have included Ty Cobb, 'Cy' Young, 'Babe' Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Ted Williams, and Hank Aaron. All have been chosen for the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Language and culture

Baseball has its own colourful language, such as an Annie Oakley (a free walk to first base), a Texas Leaguer (a weak hit just over the infield) and a grand slam (a home run with three runners on bases). Some expressions are more widely used. To strike out means to fail, to throw somebody a curve means to trick them (because a curve ball deceives the batter), not get to first base means to get nothing done, and to take a rain check is to delay an event (a free rain check to a later game is given if a game is stopped by rain).

Baseball has entered the national culture in other ways. It is the subject of an old popular song, Take Me Out to the Ballgame, novels such as Shoeless Joe (1982) which became the film Field of Dreams (1989), and other films like The Pride of the Yankees (1942) and The Babe (1992). Baseball caps and shirts are fashionable in many countries.

(from *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*)

- **Define the following terms, using a dictionary if necessary.**
 - pitcher
 - batter
 - catcher
 - umpire
 - to throw someone a curve.
 - to take a rain check

- **Write T for true and F for false. Correct the false statements.**
 1. Baseball is imported from Britain.
 2. It is more popular in Japan than in America.
 3. It is an Olympic sport and popular with both men and women.
 4. It can be played by people of average height and weight.
 5. People think baseball is not exciting.
 6. American families enjoy watching baseball games.

- **Complete the following sentences.**
 1. Baseball is played with ... and ...
 2. A baseball team consists of...
 3. The baseball season is from ...
 4. The teams are divided into ...
 5. The World Champions are ...
 6. Professional World Series have been won most often by...

TWO KINDS OF FOOTBALL

American football, not to be confused with the football called soccer, is the American national sport. It developed from the British game of rugby and, although it is played in no other country in the world (except Canada), it excites tremendous enthusiasm. Intercollegiate games (games between universities) are great social occasions. More than 100 thousand mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, students and football fans from the general public, crowd into the huge, luxurious stadiums. During a recent college final in the Rose Bowl at Pasadena, California, there were severe earthquake tremors, but nobody noticed!

Then there is the razzamatazz - the splendidly-trained brass bands, the teams of pretty girls twirling batons and dressed in fancy costumes who march like well-drilled soldiers during the half-time show, the cheerleaders urging the fans to shout encouragement or applaud good play.

The method of scoring in American football is the same as in rugby. Players try to carry the ball over the opponents' line, and then to earn more points by kicking the ball between the upright goal posts *above* the bar. But that is where the likeness between the two games ends.

American football has a reputation for being a brutal and dangerous game. This reputation is not really deserved. The players hurl themselves at each other fiercely, but today their uniforms and helmets (fitted with visors to protect their faces) are so skillful padded that there are few serious injuries. By comparison, the rugby player is almost naked, having only a thin jersey and a pair of shorts to protect him from his opponents' boots and tackling.

The football coach is a very important member of the college staff - more important than the professors, some say! The coach picks promising football players from the high schools, and recommends that they be given scholarships. This is the only way some boys from poor families with no intellectual background can get to college. Quite a few of these students go on to become professional football players. The names of professional soccer clubs are as well known to Americans as professional soccer clubs are to Europeans and South Americans.

The Americans are addicted to crazes. When they take something up, they do so wholeheartedly, and often the rest of the world follows their lead. Jogging is an example of this. The Americans now have another craze, a game which most other countries call 'football,' but which they call soccer. Soccer is spreading like wildfire through all the States and gaining in popularity on baseball. It is being run by big business and TV advertisers, who are doing everything they can to sell it to the public. They are employing famous fashion designers to design novel uniforms for the players. They have introduced a musical background to the games, and there is happening. Most important, they have hired, at enormous expense, famous coaches and players from Europe and South America. They have also changed some of the rules, including the offside rules to make the game more exciting.

Soccer games can now draw crowds of over 70 thousand in cities where baseball attracts a mere 20 thousand spectators. The soccer stadiums are much more luxurious than the vast majority of European and South American league grounds. There is a seat for everyone and a parking lot for 25 thousand cars. Soccer is being brilliantly promoted, like any other promising American product.

(from *Background to the USA*, Richard Musman)

- **Write T for true and F for false. Correct the false statements.**
 1.American football developed from British soccer.
 2.Both football and soccer players wear uniforms and helmets.
 3.The football coach can give players scholarships
 4.The Americans are crazy about soccer.
 5.Soccer is more popular than baseball.
 6.Many things have been done to make soccer more exciting.
- **Answer the following questions**
 - a. In what way is American football different from most other games in the world?
 - b. In what ways are rugby and American football alike?
 - c. In what ways do rugby players and American football players look different?
 - d. Why has American football become much less dangerous in recent years?
 - e. How can some students from poor homes manage to get to a university?
 - f. How does big business “sell” soccer to the public?
 - g. Some American spectators do not know much about soccer. How do they learn what is going on?