

Backward K's and 6-4-3 double plays: Why baseball fans should keep score

Matt Smith ★ 2 February 2009

Ballplayers take the glory, but a game cannot be played without managers and coaches, umpires and an official scorer. Everybody likes to second-guess a manager and we always let the ump's know when they've blown a call. However, the scorer's role is the one that fans can relate to the most. 'Keeping score' is as much a fan's activity as it is an essential procedural part of an official game played in the States, Britain or any other country.

For non-scorers, the obvious question to ask is "why bother"? The official account is placed on record and all of the details and statistics are published on-line for future reference, so is it really worth the effort to keep score yourself? As someone who has scored games as a fan for nine years and counting, I know how it can increase your enjoyment of a game whilst improving your understanding of the events that take place on the field.

Learning how to keep score is a great skill to acquire and it's something that any baseball fan can pick up fairly quickly. Whether it is the fun of the process itself, or the joy of being able to look back over your own records, there are many reasons why sceptics should give scoring a try.

Learning the rules

It stands to reason that you need to know the rules of the game if you want to keep score. The two can go hand-in-hand because it is often only when you have to consciously make a decision on a play that you realise you are not entirely sure what the relevant rule is. Keeping score exposes the gaps in your knowledge and it is amazing how many little nuances can be missed even by an established fan. I've learned this from personal experience. While I had heard the announcers make reference to a "fielder's choice" on countless occasions and had basically worked out what it meant, it was only when I tried to score such a

play that I found out my understanding was incomplete. When a batter reaches base on a fielder's choice, he does not get credited with a hit. No doubt many of you reading this will think that's stating the obvious, but it had somehow managed to pass me by for a good year of watching games on TV before I realised my mistake. Don't be surprised if you find yourself making similar little discoveries when you catch the scoring bug.

Learning through experience is the best way to truly understand the rules, by scoring the game while it is in progress and also by checking your version against the official account afterwards. The process helps the information sink in much more effectively than simply by poring over the official rule book for hours on end. And, of course, it's much more enjoyable.

Increase your understanding

Having a clearer understanding of the rules is worthwhile in itself, but scoring can also provide you with an insight into the tactical decisions that are a fundamental part of the game. This is particularly beneficial for a non-playing British newcomer to the sport. Consider the following familiar scenario:

The road-team's manager makes a pitching change and the home-team's manager counters by bringing in a pinch-hitter. The hitter gets a walk and jogs to first base and then the next thing you know, one of his team mates is stealing second base! Once that half of the inning is over, the guy who stole second is standing in centre field, the person who was previously in centre field is now in left field and the person who was previously in left field is sat on the bench!

That's a lot to take in if you are still learning the game and the natural response to all of this activity is to simply let it wash over you. In doing so, you will

be missing out on the many little strategic battles that can determine the result of a game. If you are keeping score, you follow the game more closely and become more actively involved in the events on the field. You need to keep track of all the player changes for your scorecard and consequently you develop a better understanding of what is taking place and why a manager has made a particular decision at a certain point in time.

The scope for creativity

There are many different methods of keeping score. Most of them follow a standard pattern and if you are familiar with one system, you will generally be able to decipher another with little difficulty. Once you have got a basic system in place though, you are free to customize it as much as you wish.

At the simplest level this can entail deciding whether you mark a called third strike with a “Kc” or a backwards K, but it can also extend to your entire approach. Some may favour a very plain, meticulously ordered scoring system. Others may produce a multicoloured work of art, with gold stars denoting a great fielding play and red exclamation marks for a costly error. Just like handwriting, a person’s scoring system probably reveals a significant amount about their personality. The possibilities are endless and adding little personal touches to your scorecard is part of the fun.

Record what matters to you

The process of customizing your scoring system is not just about style, it’s also about content. This is your own account of the game and therefore it is up to you to decide what is important and what can be left out. There are many different styles of scorecards that you can use and deciding which one suits you best will largely be dependent on how much information you want to record. You may in fact use different scorecards for different occasions.

If you are watching a game with some friends and a beverage or two, a plain scorecard where you will simply list the basics is probably the best way to go. If you are in a more studious mood, you may want to log every ball and strike as well as extra details about each hit, beyond how many bases it went for (e.g. the direction of the hit, and whether it was a groundball,

flyball or linedrive). When scoring as a fan, there is no right or wrong way to approach the task: just record as much or as little as you like.

You decide!

Because this is your account of the game, you can play the role of official scorer. If you disagree with the official scorer’s decision on a close play (i.e. the scorer called it a hit but you thought it should have been an error against the fielder) then there’s nothing to stop you overruling him/her. No doubt some scorers will gasp in horror at this thought: “How dare you disagree with the official ruling”!

Well, sport is all about opinions and there are some plays that are not clear-cut and rely on an element of judgement. In MLB’s official rules, part of deciding whether a play should be called as an “error” involves a subjective opinion on whether the play could have been made with “ordinary effort”. If you feel strongly that the official scorer got it wrong, why not call it your way? It might make sense to annotate your scoring of the play with a note of the official scorer’s decision though, just to clarify why your account doesn’t match the official one.

Your memories preserved

The above are all valid reasons for keeping score, yet they mainly focus on the process rather than the outcome. For some people, the best part about keeping score is the completed scorecard that you produce. It would be natural to think that the scorecard is of only minor interest, particularly for MLB games. All of the information you record can be accessed on-line via many different websites, accompanied by a vast amount of additional data about the game in question. If it is all there to refer to anyway, doesn’t your unofficial version become a bit redundant?

The answer is an emphatic ‘no’. Precisely because of the factors mentioned above, the scorecard is *your* record of the contest. As such, referring back to it doesn’t only allow you to recall the action on the field, it also conjures up your personal memories of watching the game. In this sense, a completed scorecard is similar to a photograph. When you look at a photograph taken while on holiday several years ago, you don’t just see what is in the picture. You are

#	Batter	Pos	Inn	1	2	3
1	R. Winn	R	9	1		
2	O. Vizquel		6	1		
3	P. Feliz	S	1			
4	B. Bonds	L	DH	1		
5	R. Duran		4	1		

Figure 1. A scorecard from a game between the San Francisco Giants and the Oakland A's on 20 May 2006. This was the game in which Barry Bonds hit his 714th career home run, tying Babe Ruth's mark.

immediately taken back to the moment when the shutter clicked down. What you did before and after the photo was taken. The other things you saw at the time. The conversations you had with your friends/family. The sounds and smells, feelings and emotions; they all come flooding back. Just like a photograph, a fan's scorecard can be a portal back to a moment in time.

Take for example my completed scorecard of a game from 20 May 2006 when Barry Bonds hit his 714th career home run, tying Babe Ruth's mark. Figure 1 shows part of my scorecard for this game and even though it happened less than three years ago, it's incredible how many little details escape your memory until prompted. I watched it live over the Internet via MLB.tv and looking over the scorecard immediately takes me back to the comfy chair I was sitting in, with a drink to my left and a blank scorecard and pencil resting on a clipboard waiting to be used. Bonds' team, the San Francisco Giants, were playing against the Oakland A's and I was certain he would break the record against my team.

With Bonds batting fourth in the Giants' lineup, everyone (including myself) was eagerly anticipating his first at-bat, but the scorecard shows that the first inning would prove to be an anti-climax. Randy Winn popped up to first base (the "F3" notation is

surely a sign of my excitement, as I would normally use a "P" for pop-ups), Omar Vizquel flied out to the left fielder and then, with Bonds waiting in the on-deck circle, Pedro Feliz struck out swinging to end the inning. I can vividly recall the feeling of disappointment as Bonds trudged back to the dugout.

That feeling soon disappeared though. Leading off the top of the second inning, Bonds blasted the landmark homer on a 1-1 count. The little cross shows where the ball landed (sparking mayhem in the stands as the crowds battled for the valuable souvenir) and the smudge mark behind my "714" reminds me that I had to erase my initial writing, scrawled during my overexcited celebrations! Bonds is a controversial figure, and he had just homered against the team I support, but the thrill of the occasion couldn't help but sweep me off my feet. When I look at that square today, the sensation of watching a little piece of baseball history being made comes flooding back.

The start of an enjoyable journey

Baseball fans who already enjoy scoring ballgames will no doubt be able to relate to this experience and to the other stated benefits of keeping score. If you have never tried it before, do yourself a favour and give it a go. Keeping score will not be a source of joy for every baseball fan, but it might be for you. And if you find yourself falling for the scoring bug, becoming an active participant in British baseball as an official scorer could be your calling. I'm sure the Great Britain Baseball Scorer's Association would love to hear from you if so (<http://www.gbbsa.org.uk>).



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