



Baseball in Britain

Red Sox vs. Yankees series is latest example of America's National Pastime in England.

BY HILLEL KUTTNER

On June 29 and 30, Adam Perry will don his Boston Red Sox cap and T-shirt before seeing his favorite baseball team play the rival New York Yankees.

But rather than the "T" delivering Perry to Kenmore station near Fenway Park, it'll be the No. 388 bus taking him to London Stadium.

Perry, a purchasing specialist in England's capital, is among 120,000 people who bought tickets to the two-game series, Major League Baseball's first-ever regular-season contests in Europe. The vast majority of those attending will be United Kingdom residents. Most others will come from mainland Europe and from the teams' hometowns across the pond.

Perry heads a 1,000-member group, Boston Red Sox Fans of the United Kingdom, with about half attending the London games.

"We'll go to showcase our team against our ancient enemy," Perry said. "It's incredibly exciting."

This is the ninth season to feature MLB games played outside the United States and Canada, beginning with a venture in 1996 to Monterrey, Mexico. Monterrey has now hosted 11 games across four seasons, while Tokyo, Japan, has held 10 games over five seasons. MLB also played two games in Sydney, Australia, in 2014.

That's on top of the 49 games over five seasons played in San Juan, capital of the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. All but six of those were home games for the Expos during their final seasons in Montreal in 2003 and 2004.

Elsewhere, MLB players have participated in scores of exhibition and barnstorming games over baseball's history.

The 2019 season marks the first with even two non-U.S./Canada locations, following the campaign-opening Seattle Mariners versus Oakland Athletics series in March in Tokyo, and Monterrey hosting series between the Cincinnati Reds and St. Louis Cardinals in April and the Houston Astros and Los Angeles Angels in May.

Another curiosity: Three of the United States' four leading professional sports leagues will have played regular-season games in London in recent months, with the National Football League's three last October and the National Basketball Association's one in January. The National Hockey League held regular-season games in Sweden and Finland last autumn.

"Our goal and mission is to build the brand and game of baseball around the world," said Jim Small, MLB's senior vice president for international business.

"We think that bringing such a huge event – not just a major league game in Europe, but with those two teams (the Red Sox and the Yankees) – is going to create a shock," he said. "It's a big show coming to town – the town being Europe – so it's a huge opportunity for us."

Piggybacking on the event is MLB's annual European Elite Camp, featuring top high school prospects from the continent, on June 25-27.

MLB's London slate will continue in 2020, with the teams to be announced this summer. Also next year, baseball will return to the Summer Olympics after two consecutive absences. The fifth World Baseball Classic is set for 2021.

The London games are "something our entire organization is thrilled to be a part of," said Hal Steinbrenner, the Yankees' managing general partner. "We expect an exciting and intense pair of games, and appreciate the significance of representing our sport in such a meaningful way."

Surrey resident David Tait will be there. He'll enjoy the June 30 game from the upper deck, between third base and home plate. Tait has been increasingly drawn to baseball since a 2008 night, when, sleepless from bronchitis, he flicked on the television and watched part of a New York Mets game. Tait didn't understand much, like what constituted a called strike. But the game featured enough action to intrigue, and "the pitching fascinated me," he said.



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

Catcher Andy Slight chases a ball hit by Mickey Doolin during a February 1914 game in London at the end of the around-the-world tour by the White Sox and Giants. Baseball returns to London this summer for a series between the Yankees and the Red Sox.

Top: Players for the Dominican Republic team stand prior to a 2006 World Baseball Classic game against Cuba. The WBC has been played four times and has brought baseball to fans around the world. **Middle:** Los Angeles Dodgers players sign and toss memorabilia across the dugout to fans before their game against the Arizona Diamondbacks at the Sydney (Australia) Cricket Ground in 2014. **Bottom:** St. Louis Cardinals outfielder Harrison Bader throws a ball back to the infield, on a triple by the Cincinnati Reds' Phillip Ervin, during the eighth inning of their game in Monterrey, Mexico, on April 13, 2019.

Within five years, Tait was hooked. Being a British Airways shift worker enabled him to return home near midnight, shower, grab a beer and watch entire games.

He eventually formed a Mets fan club and tweeted frequently. MLB officials invited him and other teams' partisans to a 2017 meeting in their London office.

"It was the first time some of us were in a room with other fans," Tait said. "Now, almost every MLB team has a (British) Twitter group."

It's a far cry from 1744, when, according to American historian David Block, the first mention of baseball appeared in a British publication: John Newbery's "A Little Pretty Pocket-book." Yes, baseball – not rounders, the game many Americans have long considered the sport's English precursor.

Just 19 words long, the mention, along with an accompanying woodcut, indicated that baseball involved a ball being thrown that someone struck (apparently with the palm of the hand, not a bat) before running to the first of three posts (not bases) and then back home.

The sport, of course, has journeyed far from where the book apparently placed it, in Newbery's native Berkshire County.

Baseball is a game that "in its infancy, we took from England, modified radically and are now taking back," said John Thorn, MLB's official historian. Baseball's return in June will metaphorically "show our grandparents how big we've grown," he said.

American baseball actually visited its homeland long ago.

The Boston Red Stockings (with future Hall of Famers Al Spalding their star pitcher and manager/outfielder Harry Wright, a Sheffield native) and Philadelphia Athletics interrupted the 1874 season for two months to



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play 14 baseball and cricket exhibitions across England, beginning in Liverpool.

"It was not a success. The Englishmen were not impressed," Thorn said.

Following the 1888 season, Spalding, by then an owner of the Chicago White Stockings, led several major leaguers on a world tour, with games in Australia, Egypt and Italy and a visit to England. A quarter-century later, in February 1914, the Chicago White Sox and New York Giants played in Chelsea at the conclusion of a nearly three-month global tour that included members of other clubs and several future Hall of Famers.

Perhaps the most acclaimed baseball game played in England also took place at Chelsea, between American Army and Navy teams late in World War I. The advertised attendance of King George V, who'd been to the 1914 game, helped draw several thousand spectators.

Players included three major leaguers, two of whom – pitcher and future Hall of Famer Herb Pennock and infielder Mike McNally – were members of the Red Sox who went on to play for the Yankees.

The game climaxed a summer league of eight U.S. and Canadian military teams based in England.

"In the long run, [the 1918 league] didn't do a lot for the popularity of baseball abroad," said Jim Leeke, author of "Nine Innings for the King: The Day Wartime London Stopped for Baseball, July 4, 1918." "What it did, especially the July 4th game, was convince the British we were reliable allies. ... The tide in France turned shortly after the game."

A more recent American soldier in England who made an impact baseball-wise was Vern Cox. A farmer from Tennessee, Cox served



Ichiro Suzuki returned to his native Japan in March and played for the Seattle Mariners against the Oakland Athletics at the Tokyo Dome. (Inset) Mariners outfielder Domingo Santana slugs a grand slam home run in the third inning of Seattle's season-opening win over the A's. The two-game series marked the fifth time MLB has played games in Japan.

with the U.S. military at the Croughton Royal Air Force Base in the 1950s. He met and married a woman from nearby Northamptonshire, and their son, Danny, was born there in 1959.

Vern played on Croughton's basketball team; at a subsequent posting in West Germany, Danny served as a bat boy on Vern's softball club.

"I was always playing with the older guys," said Danny Cox. "That helped me get good" – good enough to win 18 games for the Cardinals in 1985, pitch them to two World Series and earn a World Series championship ring with the Toronto Blue Jays in 1993.

Following the Cardinals' 1985 Fall Classic appearance, Cox and his mother, June, flew back to England for a relative's wedding. They attended an Oxford-Cambridge rugby match.

The unfamiliar sport "was fun to watch," he said. "I'd ask what the rules are, trying to understand certain situations and what the next play might be."

Similarly, he'll have his eyes on fans at the Red Sox-Yankees series. He and June plan to watch the broadcasts beamed from their homeland. For many attending, Cox said, learning baseball's intricacies could take some time.

"I'm curious about how the fans will take it in," he said. "I want to see what the atmosphere is like." 🍌

Hillel Kuttler is a freelance writer and editor. His articles on sports and on history have appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal.