

Taking a swing at half-rubber, an early 20th century “family game”

“It was a family game,” says former Commercial High School coach and Chatham County Schools Athletic Director M. A. Spellman of Savannah. “It was passed down in families and it was played in your own neighborhood.” Spellman’s memories tally with those of Charles Barbee, a marine blacksmith now deceased, who was quoted widely in 1980 in *Half-rubber: The Savannah Game* by Dan Jones. Both Barbee and Spellman were baptized Catholic; Spellman at the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist and Barbee, at Sacred Heart Church. Both played half-rubber in Savannah.

A generation ahead of Spellman, Charles Barbee’s memories of this game, said to have originated in Savannah, centered around the “Old Raggedy Nine” gang, with several players having such familiar Catholic family names as Ryan and Kearney. Barbee said he first played half-rubber in 1913 at West Broad Street near Henry using a ball he cut in half. He surmised that this native Savannah sport might trace its roots back to games of stick ball that required broom sticks and bottle caps.

Memories

M. A. Spellman, Savannah’s 1979 Saint Patrick’s Day Parade Marshal, has a different and later set of memories. His are located at Greene and Washington Squares in the “Old Fort” district. Spellman recalls the firemen of Fire Station #1 on Broughton Street who played games of half rubber in Congress Street lane when he was a boy. There was no formal instruction in the game, Spellman says. “You just picked it up. It was passed down by friends and family. Half-rubber was a family game. You played it in your neighborhood.”

Spellman names Jim Pelli, “the Leonards” and Ed Dominick as players who introduced him to the game. He played half-rubber with “the Russells, the Hogans, and the Dyers,” among others. The gangs and games were mostly “pick-up,” he says, with tournaments taking

place between the Washington and Greene Square Gangs and others in the city.

Exactly how is this distinctly Savannah game played? In *Half-rubber: The Savannah Game*, Charles Barbee recalled that the half-rubber ball was thrown in the same sidearm style used for tossing bottle caps and that the game’s rules were similar to those of baseball. An early printed description of half-rubber was written by Lowry Axley, a North Carolina native who taught English at Savannah High School for years and may never have played half-rubber himself.



Rita H. DeLorme

English teacher Axley wrote in the *American Speech Journal* of August, 1927: “In half-rubber the boys of Savannah have invented a game and have added to the nomenclature of sport a new word. The game, which is a modification of baseball, is played with a half of a hard rubber or sponge rubber ball and a bat, usually a sawed-off broomstick.” The game as described by Axley was played on a court with a home plate and four equidistant lines horizontal to the position of home plate, corresponding to the bases in baseball. There were no lateral lines limiting the court, which was not standardized.

The pitcher was to sail the ball to the batter and, if the batter struck at but missed the ball and it was caught by the catcher, he was “out.” Axley’s version of the rules continued: “If the batter hits or tips the ball and it is caught on the fly, he is also called out. Two outs make an inning and the sides change.” Batters who hit the ball past the first base line got a “single” if the ball was not caught. If the next batter produced a safe hit beyond the farthest line he got a single and the man on base would score. The game could close after nine innings or when a previously agreed on number of “runs” was



Photo courtesy of Rita H. DeLorme.

Robert Harper, Jr., bats while his son Danny Harper (left) catches and Paul DeLorme (right) imitates the batter’s stance during a 1975 half-rubber game.

scored.

The author offered a variation on this set of game rules that allowed any ball falling in front of the batter and short of a designated line to be called a “single”. A ball falling beyond the line would then count as a “home run.”

F. T. Rea, writing in the current online Fan District Hub—news and features from Richmond’s Fan District—offers a simpler description of the game. Rea first heard of half-rubber from co-worker Jack Leigh who later became a well-known Savannah photographer. Interested, Rea briefly took up the game. “Half-rubber was played with a broom handle and half of a red rubber ball,” he explains. “The key to pitching was to throw the ball sidearm with the flat part down. Then it would zoom around, somewhat as a Frisbee flies. While throwing the half-ball with any accuracy was difficult, hitting or catching it could be maddening.” Balancing this frustration was the thrill of seeing the ball, once hit, soar. The rules, Rea learned, permitted the batter to hit the ball on a bounce, giving him a “free swing”. The batter was not “out” unless the catcher caught a ball he swung at before it hit the ground.

Still around

Though Charles Barbee, Sacred Heart Church parishioner and prime recollector of the early days of half rubber, died in 1969, the game of half-rubber is still around. In the 1970s, it enjoyed a comeback as half-rubber players

took to the beaches, including Tybee Island. Even T.S. Chu’s department-cum-everything store at Tybee began stocking kits for half-rubber games. Championship games involving teams from other cities resumed and have continued to be held.

F. T. Rea recently wrote in the Fan District Hub: “I hope, somewhere out there, children are still playing games like Strikeout and Half-Rubber. This isn’t to say I believe organized sports for children are bad, because I don’t mean that. What I do mean is that kids play games differently when they are on their own.” Many Savannah Catholics (myself included) have memories of fathers or grandfathers who played the simple game of half-rubber “on their own” and passed it on to their offspring. Like Charles Barbee, they may have enjoyed playing a game with a half-ball and a broomstick before taking on the heavy work of blacksmithing aboard ship. Or, perhaps, like M.A. Spellman, they played this same simple game with their friends before going on to other things like getting college degrees, serving in World War II, marrying, and raising a family. It’s just possible “the family game” of half-rubber helped prepare them for what was ahead.

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TV Mass Schedule

AUGUSTA

Sunday, 10:00 a.m. WAGT-TV

SAVANNAH

Saturday, 6:00 p.m. Cable 7

Sunday, 5:30 a.m. WTOG-TV