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Watching Baseball Games Remotely Before Television

by Mark Schubin

The infamous 1919 "Black Sox" World Series began in Cincinnati on October 1. According to the book *Eight Men Out* by Eliot Asinof (Macmillan, 2000), gambler Arnold Rothstein, later accused but never indicted of paying to influence the results, headed to New York's Ansonia Hotel, where he lived, to watch the opening of the game. He was reportedly looking for a signal that the fix was on.

The paragraph above is true. It is also seemingly impossible. On what mechanism could Rothstein have been watching live a remote baseball game in 1919? In the U.S. baseball wasn't televised until 1939. There *were* some earlier baseball television moments -- in Japan a 60-scanning-line electromechanical television system shot a baseball game in 1931, and, earlier, in 1928 a Bell Labs engineer hypothesized bringing a 50-line system to the Polo Grounds -- but 1919 is earlier still. Even the first baseball game broadcast merely on radio wasn't until 1921.

Nevertheless, Rothstein was able to watch the 1919 series opener, as it was happening, almost 600 miles away from where it was being played. According to *Eight Men Out*, other viewers of the image-display system he was watching at the Ansonia Hotel "would testify to its excitement. It was almost like being there, they said."

Although baseball has antecedents dating back at least to the 14th century, the first newspaper account of a game and perhaps the first game with some recognizably modern elements (three strikes to an out, three outs to a team's inning, fair & foul territory, an umpire, etc.) both date to the fall of 1845. The following year, after commercial telegraph service went into operation in the U.S., Lord's Cricket Ground in London installed its first "telegraph scoreboard," and the Associated Press was founded. As baseball adopted away games, the telegraphic press was ready to cover them.

Fans, however, found it hard to wait for newspaper accounts that followed the ends of games. The New York State *Oswego Daily Times* reported May 23, 1876 on "a group of Syracusans" keeping track of an away game in New Haven by gathering "around the baseball bulletin," based on telegraphic dispatches, posted at the newspaper's office. A year earlier, Massey's Billiard Hall in St. Louis had contracted with Western Union to get baseball game results delivered telegraphically each inning; they were written onto a blackboard.

The earliest patent for an improvement on posted written notices was filed in 1888 and issued in 1889 to Edward Sims Van Zile, at the time an editorial writer at Joseph Pulitzer's New York City newspaper *The World*. Called "Bulletin Board and Base Ball Indicator," it provided a diagram of the ball field and space for posting the names of the players in their batting order, the score by inning, and other information, with colored numbered indicator pegs (representing the players) placed in various holes on the field to allow the action to be followed via telegraph messages.

The system might seem almost trivial today, but in 1888 it was a breakthrough. *The World* placed a version of it outside its offices for that year's championship series. As reported in the November 16, 1888 issue of *The Electrician*, "The public 'caught on,' as we say here, and every afternoon while the series of games lasted the scoreboard was surrounded by a howling crowd of thousands of enthusiasts, who cheered or groaned themselves hoarse as they followed the movements of those little pegs from hole to hole." The street, leading to the new Brooklyn Bridge, was blocked by the mob, estimated at 6,000.

In a 1921 interview in *The Sporting News* (as reported in "Electric Scoreboards, Bulletin Boards and Mimic Diamonds" by Rob Edelman in the journal *Base Ball*, Fall 2009), Van Zile described how he came up with the invention. "One day in the fall I turned, subconsciously you might say, from a pad on which I was setting down an editorial and began making dots on another pad and a diagram of a baseball diamond." He was approached by Pulitzer's private secretary Edwin A. Grozier. "'Van Zile, you get that idea patented, and I'll give you $250 for your interest in it.' I told him he'd be throwing his money away, that the thing was not patentable, and so on. He insisted, however, paid me $250, and... the patent was granted to Grozier and his associates."

Grozier, himself (with Frank P. Anderson), was the inventor listed on an 1890 patent for an improved version, which added motion. The pegs could now "run" around the bases, indicating the players' "actual movements with great accuracy," according to the patent. Between the two patents, Grozier made enough money by 1891 to buy a controlling interest in *The Boston Post.*

Not even Van Zile's system, however, was the first way to watch baseball games remotely. In 1884, three telegraph operators -- J. U. Rust, E. W. Morgan, and A. H. Stewart -- came up with a different scheme that they implemented in Nashville's Masonic Theatre for a game in Chattanooga. One of them watched the game and telegraphed the action (in short code) to the second, who announced the plays, while the third moved the players' names on cards around "a painted view of the ball field," according to a report in *The Detroit Free Press*." The system was so successful that it soon moved from the 900-seat Masonic Theatre to the 2,500-seat Grand Opera House. It also spread beyond Nashville.

On April 15, 1886, DeGive's Opera House in Atlanta, in conjunction with the Western Union Telegraph Company, presented its first live baseball game, Atlanta at Charleston. According to *The Atlanta Constitution,* ladies were admitted free, and gentlemen paid fifteen cents for a ticket (about $4 in today's money). Atlanta's innovation was appropriate to the opera-house venue. Boys, dressed in uniforms of the players they were representing, ran around the stage's simulated ball field, reenacting what was received by telegraph.

Later that year, the Rust-Morgan-Stewart team set up at the Detroit Opera House, where the audience could follow "the progress of the game, even to the smallest details," according to the *Free Press.* They hissed, cheered, and applauded, "just such as is heard on a veritable ball field." The action was depicted on "a huge landscape" with "a well painted perspective view of a base ball diamond and outfield."

Although neither of those opera-house systems (nor one that began in Augusta in 1885) was patented, by the end of 1895 at least seven others were. The January 24, 1891 issue of *Scientific American* featured a big story on an "Electrical Base Ball Bulletin," invented by former Edison employee Samuel D. Mott (also an aviation pioneer and probably first to predict transatlantic passenger flights between the U.S. and Europe in just six hours at high altitudes). Mott introduced electric power in his invention, but the last patents of that group introduced something even more exciting: animated players.

The Electrical Engineer carried a lengthy report in its August 7, 1895 issue about "Automatic Baseball by Electricity," a system invented (and patented) by actor Frank M. Chapman and installed at Palmer's Theatre in New York City. It used moving figures, "true to life and about 3 feet high. Besides the fielding team and the man at the bat or those on the bases, three men of the team are seen on a bench waiting their turn," and there were also two coaches and an umpire. What did they do?

"...the batter at the home plate is provided with a bat which he flings down with a genuinely 'sickening thud' when he starts for first base." Incandescent lamps in the players' hands showed instantly who had the ball. "The umpire has a white light so that when a ball is hit out of play, he is seen to furnish a new one." A player on base could "move his legs so that he seems to be running, and of course he can be seen in the very act of trying to steal the next base." Strings, weights, and pulleys helped the characters "go through actions that are natural." Animated lights showed the arcs of the balls.

A week later, the August 16 issue of *The Telegraph Age* reported on "Reproducing Base-Ball by Telegraph," this time covering the animated-players system of Colonel Samuel R. Crowder, already in use in Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, and Richmond, "with contracts pending at New York, Brooklyn, Pittsburgh, and Chicago." "A base hit simultaneously sets off the batsman toward first base, and the coachers clap their hands and dance." Depicted players could also slide to avoid being put out and writhe in agony with a broken leg.

Between 1889 and 1927, the U.S. granted no fewer than 44 patents for systems to allow watching remote baseball games. One of the inventors was Hall of Fame pitcher "Kid" Nichols. Another pitcher, Bob Lemon, told in *his* Hall of Fame induction speech of being introduced to baseball at six weeks of age when his mother took him to the local (Redlands, California) opera house to watch a World Series game.

Americans who lacked access to a system were considered deprived. The following sentence (possibly written with tongue in cheek) is the complete text of a story in the June 5, 1906 issue of *The New York*

Times, headlined "Necessities First." "Tom Johnson in proposing to provide Cleveland with municipal baseball bulletin boards emphasizes the rule that the people must have the necessities of life, even if some of the luxuries are omitted."

The book *The Unforgettable Season* by Gordon H. Fleming (University of Nebraska Press, 2006), about the 1908 National League pennant race, gives some hint of how popular these remote game-viewing systems quickly became. One was installed in Chicago's financial district, where bankers and traders could see it from their windows. Below, "from every inch of ground at the intersection of Madison and Dearborn where a human body could be squeezed cheers and jeers arose. At the second scoreboard displayed from the Illinois Central station at Randolph street was a similar scene." For those who preferred to watch indoors, a system was installed at Chicago's Orchestra Hall. Box seats went for $1 each (roughly $25 in today's money).

It wasn't only those indoor viewers who weren't fond of the big crowds on the street. *The Evening Telegram* in New York City on October 15, 1911 estimated the crowd watching the World Series on their "playograph" in Herald Square at 70,000, about 20,000 more than were watching in the stadium where the game was being played just a few miles away. On October 8, 1913, Shaw's Jewelry Shop, located in that same Herald Square, sued the *Telegram*'s parent, The New York Herald Co., for loss of business during the 1911 through 1913 operations of that viewing system. They were awarded damages, and, as a result of another legal action, in 1914 got an injunction preventing the system from being used there again.

What was the viewing experience like? The book *1921: The Yankees, the Giants, and the Battle for Baseball Supremacy in New York* by Lyle Spatz, Steve Steinberg, and Charles C. Alexander (University of Nebraska Press, 2010) indicates that some viewers considered watching these systems to be even better than being at the game itself. According to an editorial in *The New York Herald*, "Watching an actual game is tame by comparison." In the October 1921 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Heywood Broun reported an overheard conversation between two newsboys watching a game in person at the Polo Grounds. "Gee, what would you give to be in Times Square right now?" The editorial in *The Herald* emphasized how the remote boards "poured kerosene upon your imagination, and the electric sparks that traced the ball and the hitter touched it off in explosions...." Broun emphasized timing in even the simplest systems. "With nothing but chalk and blackboard to follow, the shifts came with a dramatic suddenness denied to those who see every move."

In *The New York Times* on November 12, 1916, Joyce Kilmer (author of the poem "Trees") wrote that Peter Pan-creator Sir James Matthew Barrie changed rooms at the Knickerbocker Hotel in 1914 so that he could "get a good view of the electrical scoreboard on the Times building." Barrie "spent many hours breathlessly watching the ball of light speed across the mimic diamond." According to Edelman, after Braves third-baseman Red Smith broke his leg in a slide on the final day of the regular season, he didn't join his teammates for the 1914 World Series; instead, he decided to watch it in Madison Square Garden.

Systems weren't restricted to major cities. As Edelman points out, that same 1914 World Series was also viewed in Auburn, New York and the 1917 World Series in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, possibly too small to afford a telegraph connection, local electricians built the town a viewing system, and its operator listened to the 1925 World Series via short-wave radio.

Among the names of the commercially successful systems were the Automatic Baseball Play-O-Graph, the Compton Electric Base Ball Game Impersonator, the Coleman Life-Like Scoreboard, Grover's Electric Marvel Player Board, the Jackson Manikin Baseball Indicator, the Nokes Electrascore, the Rodier Electric Baseball Game Reproducer ("which set Atlantic City wild"), the Star Ball Player, and Tom May's Electro-Wonder Score Board. Like "Jumbotron" today, "Playograph" became so popular that it changed from brand name to generic term.

Each system seemed to outdo the others. Chapman's used 50 light bulbs, Coleman's 400 (each in a slide projector), and the Nokes 1,500. Crowder equipped players with miniature bats & balls; the Play-o-graph proudly used a regulation-sized ball. Chapman's system, according to *The Electrical Engineer*, could depict everything "except the rows with the umpire -- which are not part of the game and can well be dispensed with;" after a Coleman was installed at the Providence Opera House in 1914, *The Evening*

News reported the next day that "even arguments between players and arbitrators are shown." Crowder's system, according to *The Telegraph Age,* could show players warming up; *Popular Electricity* reported in its October 1912 issue, "Even the consultation of one player with another is recorded on the Electrascore."

When they didn't outdo, they would sometimes sue. Grozier testified in a 1926 case (that went up to the U.S. Supreme Court) about his base-runner motion relative to that of another system's. And it was Federal appellate judge Victor Baynard Woolley of the Third Circuit, in his 1929 decision of another lawsuit, Baseball Display Co. v. Star Ball Player Co., who indicated that the pre-TV days of watching remote baseball games were numbered. Describing what the case was about, he wrote, "The device -- of less value since the broadcasting of national series games by radio -- represents a baseball field...."

The New Bedford, Massachusetts *Evening Standard* reported, on August 7 of that year, the troubles of the Standard Ball Player, which had been selling some 250 remote game indicators per year. "The radio, consolidating of newspapers, and the fact that the business is approaching the 'saturation point' may make the manufacture and sale of the cricket boards the biggest possibility it has in the future."

In 1931, the same year Japanese baseball first appeared on an early form of TV, the *Arizona Daily Star* sponsored free Playograph viewing of the World Series at the Tucson Opera House. In 1933, *The Roanoke Times* tried combining Playograph and radio. And, in 1939, when the first U.S. baseball games were televised, the *Vincennes Sun Commercial* in Indiana didn't even bother to put out its Playograph.

In the pre-TV era, between the 1880s and the 1930s, thousands of baseball fans filled opera houses to watch remote games live on reproduction systems. In the HDTV era, opera fans have been filling ballparks to watch remote operas live on giant LED scoreboard screens -- 32,000 at the Giants' AT&T Park, alone, for San Francisco Opera's *Aida* on September 24, 2010.

Turnabout is fair play.