

## **Our National Pastime: Baseball as a Cultural Icon**

For three-plus hours, we sit and watch a small white object soak into the summer night. This ball is round, small enough to fit around your fingers and is seamed to create texture to induce various spins. This seamed ball happens to be very versatile. It can be hit with a large wooden stick and it can be caught in a large leather glove. It can be thrown to “fool” people, namely those carrying a stick. A baseball is more than a necessity to play our national pastime; it is a symbol of pleasure and American values.

As we walk into a Major League ballpark, players play catch or take batting practice and both tasks require incredible hand-eye coordination. Interestingly, hand-eye coordination is not needed to survive our daily lives, but is nonetheless valued because of its aesthetic appeal. Americans are captivated by accomplishments that appear unreal. We know that we are physically incapable of smacking a baseball that is traveling faster than a car, or catch a ball hit with an even higher velocity—and we find pleasure in this. Americans enjoy watching people do things they can’t because generally, we are insecure about our own lives. Watching stardom on a baseball fields provides hope that one day, our lives will be fulfilling. As we see it, the life of a star athlete is the perfect life.

An intrinsic pleasure of watching this ball lies in our appreciation of heroism and the incredible feats accomplished with hand-eye coordination. Heroes rise from the unexpected, making sensational plays or carrying their team with a series-clinching hit. The mob at home plate is a celebration of not only a victory, but American values of hard work and dedication. It is a celebration of accomplishment in our progress-driven culture.

The values embedded in this game stem from the fact that our heroes appear ordinary. They look like us, talk like us, and walk like us. They weren’t provided a 7-foot frame or a 250-pound body, essential traits to a basketball or football star. They could have been us, the spectator, but hard work and perseverance granted them celebrity status. There is pleasure in this because we can symbolically place ourselves on the diamond or in the clubhouse. It is American for us to imagine ourselves obtaining glorified heights because we feel as though we are generally unsuccessful but also use this imagination to counter our thoughts that we never will be successful.

Baseball is also about the pleasure that originates from ritual. From cracker jacks, to hot dogs, to the national anthem to the “first pitch,” baseball is consistent from day-to-day. The grounds crew tidies the infield during the middle of the sixth inning, we enthusiastically sing baseball’s anthem “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” during the middle of the seventh. We watch as the ball is tossed around the horn crisply after an infield out with nobody on (3-4-5-1, or first baseman to second to third and back to the pitcher). We know that relief pitchers are allowed eight warm-up tosses. The visitors always bat first and that the home team always is allowed a final chance in the bottom of the ninth.

We value that nothing much changes in a baseball game. But what does change is perhaps what brings fans to the stadium each night. Managerial decisions, heroic and slumping performances and the win/loss column are unpredictable. We enjoy this, too. The combination of baseball’s day-to-day rituals and baseball’s unpredictability suggest that as Americans, we enjoy living with order and some degree of predictability, but not so much predictability that there is no entertainment value. We want to be caught surprised at times, but not overwhelmed with chaos.

As Americans, we value the connection between the past and the present. As we observe a routine pop fly to short in a Major League game, we recall and can feel what it’s like, physically and emotionally, to be the batter and shortstop in that situation. We feel what it’s like to get “jammed” as ball hits bat, and we know the feeling of retreating for an easy “can of corn” and then executing the timing of shutting the mitt at precisely the right moment.

A baseball is much more than the necessary tool for one of America’s most prominent games—it is the foundation for a game that is a symbol for how we interact and engage in our daily lives.