T

HE war is over. The Red Sox have taken their booty and departed; the Brooklyns have accepted their easily gathered losing end and hidden from the remarks of their friends. All’s done, and the season’s through.

It was quite a big year in baseball—an immense gain over the two years of Federal strife. There was great pitching and there was fine fielding. Well and good. The batting was poor, the baserunning wretched. Lots of things must be improved next summer.

The batting of 1916 was deplorably low in both big leagues, and the baserunning was correspondingly feeble. Judging by the way in which the pitchers were hogging the show all summer, action of some kind, tending to help the hitting, has become imperative, but just what action will be beneficial, salutary, yet neither arbitrary nor absurd? You can’t put the pitchers’ plate any farther back. Not a chance. Such action would kill off the slow ball pitchers, who match brains and control against the prowess of the batsmen; it would fatally handicap the curve ball twirlers for at least one season, and it would leave the field practically in possession of the fast-ball fellows, who depend only on their strength and speed.

It would create all kinds of trouble if the ball were made still livelier. Such a plan would put an immediate premium
Recent History

the 1916 Records—Pitching
Present-Day Game—Extraor-
Base Running — Some Possible Improvements.

PHELON

on popflies over the nearby barriers at
several parks, and would subject the in-
fielders to the risk of serious injury from
burning liners.

To do away with the foul-strike rule
entirely would lengthen the games, and
soon result in developing foul-ball ex-
perts like those of twenty years ago—
men who could foul off a dozen good
balls in succession and delay the game
interminably.

It’s a strenuous problem, hard to figure
out, and unsatisfactory almost any way
you look at it. Yet it is self-apparent
that something must be done. Nineteen
fifteen was a pitchers’ year. 1916 was
even more so. The pitcher has always
gained skill and mastery far more rapid-
ly than the batsman. Whenever the
rules have been so changed as to handi-
cap the pitcher, he has always regained
his sovereignty before many months went
by; whenever new rules have handi-
capped the batsman, he has been almost
crushed by the jolt and has needed new
rules, or a livelier ball, to bring him back
to fighting strength again.

A three-ball rule might work the de-
sired changes, or the elimination of one
of the two foul-strikes. Let’s look them
over.

A three-ball rule has been frequently
decried on the ground that it would cause
too many passes. Some pitchers might
be handicapped, and might be taxed for
free tickets right along. The great ma-
The Baseball Magazine

Majority of the slabmen, though, could get by without suffering any penalty through their added impost, or reduced privileges. Where they would suffer would be in the greatly increased number of ringing hits that would be made off their deliveries. Restricted by the one deducted wide pitch, they could no longer waste one or two balls trying to get the batter swinging after wide ones. They'd have to put 'em over, and the batters would have a far better chance to smit 'em.

The effect on baserunning would be as salutary. There would be a minimizing of pitch-outs, which occasionally catch a runner, and more often delay the proceedings to no purpose. Runners would have a better chance for their getaway, and, if managers persisted in using the hit-and-run, there would be much better opportunities to exercise it. All things considered, it looks as if a three-ball rule might work a much needed change.

Turn we now to the suggestion of calling only one foul strike. This, too, looks like a valuable idea. There is no possible manner in which it could penalize the pitcher, and the objection to a three-ball rule: the possibility of too many passes could not be raised. Where the change in the foul strike rule would benefit the batter would be in taking off part of the percentage, or advantage, so often held by the pitcher when he gets two called strikes on the batsman before the batter can really get set for action. The benefits to the batter would not be as great as would be conferred by a three-ball rule, nor would the baserunner get any material profit, for the pitcher could waste a couple, or work the pitch-out system as before. Still, the hitter would have part of the percentage now operating against him removed, and this should materially help the majority of players.

All around the circuits, the pitchers bested the batsmen, early and late. In former years, there were always numerous pitchers who were very slow in rounding into form, and others who were easy marks in the spring. These men were kept because of their great value in the hot weather, and the managers patiently endured either the expense of paying them while they stayed idle, or the loss of the few games in which they risked their arms before midsummer.

There were also—up to a couple of years ago—numerous experimental slabmen off whom the batsmen fattened whenever they had a chance to light upon these novices and easy targets. Then, too, there were many batters who were holy terrors in the early weeks, and others who didn't get going till late in the warmer months. As the first set of batsmen began to fade, the other crowd would begin to slug. Count up all these elements: the pitchers who were easy at the start; the experimental pitchers who were always easy; the heavy hitters of the spring, and the sluggers of the fall—then you can see why there were some good, fat batting averages, and why life wasn't so soft for the slabmen.

But things seem to have strangely changed during the last two years. The pitchers, almost unanimously, got into great shape down South—and stayed so. They beat the batters to the conditioning, and, once getting the upper hand physically, retained it by superior craft and skill. There were not many poorly pitched games in the big leagues this season. The pitchers worked smoothly and steadily, and the batsmen couldn't dethrone them. Some of the veterans fell off, slowed up, and were much easier for the twirlers than in former times. Few of the newcomers from the little leagues showed much slugging strength. There were few, very few occasions when the pitchers were taken by surprise and swept off their feet, and there were a great many times when the batsmen were caught drowsing and were converted into little monkeys. Yes—it was a great year for the pitchers.

In former seasons, some wonderful staff of pitchers would be the talk of both big leagues. Some one club would corral five or six men of unrivaled class, and it would be freely admitted, everywhere, that this one set of wizards had a big margin over all other pitching clusters. Not so this year, not so at all. There were just about sixteen sets of good pitchers in the major leagues. Everybody was pitching powerful ball. In the writer's opinion, almost any of the sixteen clubs could have shifted pitchers—made a wholesale trade—and had
no reason to worry. The Boston Red Sox could have won the American League pennant with Johnson, Ayres, Gallia, Harper. Even the pitching staff of Connie Mack, with the Red Sox as backers, would have done wonders at Boston. In other words, the pitchers were nearly all good—too good for the batsmen, and so powerful that some measure of reform will have to be adopted.

The baserunning of 1916 was inferior, partly through the light batting, partly (in the National League at least) through non-enforcement of the balk-rule, and partly through managerial orders. Of course, if you can't get on first you can't steal many bases, and not so many batters were reaching first as in former seasons. The balk-rule was a joke in the National League. In the American, it was occasionally enforced, but even in Ban Johnson's circuit too much latitude was permitted the lefthanders. It seems to be gospel with an umpire that a southpaw can do anything he wants and get away with it, and the lefthanders were allowed to go through the weirdest kind of motions without the slightest penalization. They hoisted their knees, humped their shoulders, made three-quarter turns to the plate, then whirled and threw to first, and the umpires let them get away with it. If a righthander tried the same tactics, he usually bluffed by in the National League, but was
brought up with a round turn in the American. Managerial orders, though, lessened baseninning tremendously. Take, for instance, the case of Jimmy Johnston of the Brooklyns—also of Marsans, with the Browns. Johnston stole over 100 bases in a powerful AA league not long ago, and Marsans is one of the cleverest natural baserunners that ever flashed the spikes. Neither of them stole anywhere near the number of bases this year, that his speed would guarantee if he were permitted to go right ahead on his own volition. Marsans was allowed more latitude than Johnston, but the fleet Cuban was much annoyed because he was held back time after time when he felt confident he could outsprint the hostile catcher. Johnston wasn’t allowed to do one-third of the basetheieving that he could have accomplished, and the same was true with many other speeders.

Formerly, the manager who had a team of light hitters but fast runners, believed their agility would make up for a great deal of their weak batting, and would send them down whenever they got on through fumbles, passes, or the few hits they delivered. Then, too, certain managers were happiest when they got a club that would both hit the ball hard and steal cushions. The Giants, when they were cleaning up in the National League, and the Athletics when they were champions of the world, were formidable samples of such ball clubs. They could hit, were always likely to pull a smashing attack, and yet they could steal bases like spooks if the hitting wasn’t progressing to suit them. But the 1916 managers didn’t count that way at all. If they had a heavy hitting team, they let it go at that; just depended on the husky batting, and didn’t ask their men to fatigue themselves by adding baserunning to their deeds. If they had a light-batting club, and got few men on bases, they seemed to think they would be throwing them away by risking them on the basepaths, and held them back in hopes that something, somehow, would occur to send them round.

A three-ball rule, and strict enforcement of the balk law, would help the baserunning, but there is no way to make the basestealing return to its finest form as long as the managers don’t want their men to take the chances and will not send them down.

Managerial acumen is much talked of, but it wasn’t shown on very many occasions this year, in either league. In most cases, when there was “a duel of wits” between two managers, both of them took a chance, trusted to Providence, and waited for results. When the results came, one lucky leader was hailed as a marvel of wisdom, and the other guy was a boneheaded baboon, when the outcome of the play was 90 per cent luck every single time. For instance, one manager sends up a pinch hitter, and the other boss changes pitchers. If the pitcher, thus hurried into the game, gets rid of the pinch hitter, then the pitcher’s manager is called a wizard. But if the pinch hitter slams one on the nozzle, then HIS manager is the wise guy, and the pitcher’s manager was cross-bred in a greenhouse between a lemon and an onion. Pure luck, either way—where does the wisdom come in?

The one instance, during 1916, where one manager distinctly and clearly outguessed and outgeneraled the other, and did it so conspicuously that it made baseball history, was at the finish of the great fourteen-inning world’s series game between Brooklyn and the Red Sox. The particular tip-off was when Hoblitzell found himself on second base, darkness coining on, one dead, Gardner to bat. Hoblitzell, not the fastest runner in the world, was limping like a Chinaman with a tailor’s goose attached to his ankle, and Gardner is no devil against lefthanded pitching. As already remarked, it was growing dark, and there would be small chance of another inning. Carrigan at once took measures which ended the game upon the spot. Robinson, who might have tried counter-measures that would have saved the situation, was outguessed and beaten. Carrigan drew Hoblitzell and Gardner out, sent the fast McNally to run for Hoblitzell, and sent the right-hand batsman, Gainer, to bat against the left-hand pitching of Sherrod Smith.

Here again, the element approaching darkness should have been considered by Robinson, as it undoubtedly was considered by Carrigan. Robbie, with a
Pitcher Smith of Brooklyn Out at Third When He Tried to Stretch a Double in the Famous 14-Inning Contest Which He Lost to Ruth

The players, during the recent season, were more subservient to their managers, less inclined to try any thinking for themselves than ever. It was actually comical to see some of the stuff that resulted. In former years, if a man had two strikes and the next pitch was a wild shot that hit the ground or whizzed far overhead, that batsman was on second before the raging catching picked up the ball. This year, the batters, when such a situation came up, never even dreamed of striking at the wild pitch and scooting for first. Their alleged intellects had become so drilled to obedience, so obsessed with the idea that they must do nothing whatever unless the manager said so, that they didn't even have sense enough to grab this wide-open chance, but stood stock-still at the plate, awaiting managerial orders. And, as no manager ever lived who could see a wild pitch and yell "Hit at it" before it had gone by the plate, these chances were thrown away—the catchers picked up the ball at leisure, and the hitter, as a rule, struck out on the next one.

Yes, the managers are marvelous people—but isn't this wooden Indian stuff...
getting a whole lot overdone? In the days when the manager gave his orders, and quick-witted players obeyed them when they could, but acted for themselves when a quick shift had to be made, the games were far more enthusiastic and exciting—and that's the answer.

As remarked when discussing the batting, the pitchers were all good this year—too blamed good for the batsmen or the best interests of the game. It was not only a year of great pitching, but a season when every kind of pitching seemed to be developed to a superlative degree. There were great righthanders in profusion, and some splendid left-handers. The spitballers had a goodly harvest of success, although the moist delivery wasn't featured as much in the public prints as formerly. A few left-handed spitballers worked in both leagues, whereas a southpawed hurler of the moistened pellicle was almost unknown a few years ago. According to many pitchers, a great deal of the spitballing this year was mere bluff; instead of dampening the ball, the pitchers held it near their faces, masking it with their paws, and then flung a downshoot ball that fooled the batsman as effectively as the spitter. Fast-ball pitchers, both right and left-handed, throve exceedingly. The speed-merchant who can strike his men out, and not have to rely upon his field, had a great season everywhere. Inspection of the box-scores shows that in both leagues there were more strikeouts during September than there had been in June. The strikeout pitchers had been steadily gaining both in speed and in the deadly little extra "hop" which, added to the speed, makes the batsman miss the third one entirely.

Long ago, Tim Keefe and John Clarkson were the chief exponents of two widely different pitching schools. Clarkson maintained that there were eight men paid to support the pitcher, and that a hurler should work for their backing. Keefe always wanted to strike his men out—said that when the third strike nestled in the catcher's glove, there was no danger of that particular bird's hitting one over the wall or of having somebody muff or fumble it. The debate was never definitely settled while these two great pitchers were still in the game, but today Keefe would have the best of the argument. During the 1916 season, the strikeout pitcher, often working on small arenas where any kind of a long wallop would go over or bounce off the wall, had marked advantages when compared to his colleague of the other school.

Curve-ball pitchers who relied on a variety of bewildering deliveries and on good fielding to see them through were not among the dead ones, just the same. All season long, sturdy veterans, who worked their skill against the batsman's muscles, like Coombs at Brooklyn and Plank at St. Louis, were in there out-thinking and out-generating the hitters. Mathewson and Brown, once the best of them all at this kind of work, passed out of active service this year, finishing their great careers by a pitching duel in Chicago. Their places may not be filled for many seasons, but a large flock of the younger generation managed to administer severe punishment to the ambitious batsmen and their averages just the same.

As usual, big righthanders filled the highest seats of honor, and this was especially the case in the National League. There, such men as Alexander, Pfeffer, Mamaux, etc., were the biggest and most impressive stars of the pitching world. Comparatively few brand new players did anything surprising in either big league, the successes scored by the novices being only semi-occasional. Both the newcomers and the many players taken in and amalgamated through the death of the Federal League will be considered in a separate story.

The umpiring, emphatically, needs improvement as much as the batting, and it's even harder to figure out ways for its betterment. You can pass rules that will handicap the pitcher and help the batsmen, but what rule can you pass that will give you better and more accurate umpires? It can't be done. The present staffs of both the American and the National Leagues did a lot of poor work this season—inaccurate, erroneous, far under the standard of some years ago, despite the autocratic power now vested in each umpire's hands. This cannot be improved till each league discovers about three new arbiters of the most superlative brand—and when will that time be?