

"Old Hoss" Radbourn

The Famous Old Time Veteran Who Pitched Seventy-two Games in a Single Season

By E. E. PIERSON

HAD it been left to his own choice, Charles Radbourn, the greatest pitcher that the national game has known, would have remained on the home diamond, obscure and unheralded. He was a man of little ambition, except as a nirod. He cared nothing for the plaudits of the crowd or the fulsome praise of the sporting writers. Give him a gun and a dog and he was happy.

The real credit for the development of Radbourn from a third baseman into a pitcher, and his acceptance of a contract from a major club, is due to his boyhood chum, William H. Hunter of Bloomington, Ill. The pair grew up together and were inseparable until the call of the big show through the medium of the Providence club. Of the youthful amateur team that performed for the edification of themselves and the natives at Bloomington, Henry, an older brother of Charley, was the pitcher, while the latter covered third. Henry was a good slabman for those days, using a straight ball with great speed. The Bloomington team played a good game for their age, ranging from 16 to 18 years, and attained quite a local reputation. One day Bloomington was visited by Dave and Jack Rowe, who at that time lived in Jacksonville, Ill. Dave was a pitcher and Jack a catcher. Dave was fond of showing off and had mastered the art of curving the ball. He condescended to show Hunter and several others how to pitch in making the ball curve, and Hunter took especially notice of the manner in which the sphere was held. Radbourn was not present at the time but the next day, Hunter showed him the new trick and Radbourn practiced until he mastered it. His brother Henry did not take stock in any such tomfoolery but the other boys did, and Charley began to make a better strikeout record than his brother. The result was that Charley was used on the slab and Henry sent to third. The two Rowes, whose chance visit to Bloomington and the demonstration before Hunter doubtless started Radbourn on the road to fame, also became prominent.

Jack was later with Detroit, being one of the Big Four, Richardson, Brouthers, Rowe, and White, regarded for many years as the greatest quartette in the history of the national pastime. Radbourn continued to improve and finally attracted the

attention of the manager of an independent team in Peoria. This manager would employ Radbourn when he had dangerous competition from the professional teams that occasionally played in Peoria. Radbourn's work was noticed by Tom Loftus when he visited Peoria with a team from Milwaukee and, when Charles Comiskey organized a team at Dubuque, Iowa, it was Loftus who recommended Radbourn and induced him to sign a contract. This contract took effect in the year 1879 and was Radbourn's first professional experience. It is a remarkable coincidence that it was Tom Loftus who tendered Radbourn his first and last contract. The final was made out when Loftus was manager of Cincinnati and after Radbourn had retired from the Boston club.

Radbourn made such a notable record with Dubuque that he was induced to sign a contract with Buffalo in 1880. He joined the latter club but after pitching four games with ill success, his arm growing lame, he returned home, determined never to pitch again. He took up his trade of butcher and worked steadily until the following winter. Along in January, he received a letter from the Providence club, asking his terms. He was inclined to ignore the communication, but his friend Hunter would not hear of it. He took it upon himself to answer the letter, and signed Radbourn's name to it, asking \$750 for the season, the money tendered him by Buffalo, which was \$300 more than the sum given him at Dubuque. Providence wired acceptance of terms and Hunter borrowed money from his father to send Radbourn to Hot Springs to get in

CHARLES RADBOURNE was perhaps the most famous of old-time pitchers. Like others of his generation he had the proverbial iron arm. His most famous feat was during the season when he pitched seventy-two games. He worked in twenty-seven consecutive games and won twenty-six of them, truly a phenomenal performance.



Charles Radbourn

condition. Radbourn was loth to go, as he believed that his pitching days were over. Hunter, however, wired Providence for \$100 advance money, which enabled him to pay all bills. Finally launched upon his career of fame, Radbourn made good and worked five successive seasons for Providence. August 17, 1882, he pitched against the Detroit club when each team was blanked for 17 innings. In the last half of the 18th, Radbourn hit for a home run, winning his own game, the most remarkable ever played up to that period.

The career of Radbourn after he became famous is well known to the fans of the country, but not many are familiar with his early experiences. Several reminiscences are recalled by his chum, Hunter. The latter has been identified with the national game for years as a magnate, handling the affairs of the Bloomington club of the Three Eye league and also of the various circuits that preceded it. In the early days the pitcher delivered a straight ball, varying only in speed and, with the development of batting skill, the game promised to become a farce, due to the enormous scores. Arthur Cummings, Jim Devlin and other pitchers, had been experimenting with a twist or curve, but it remained for Radbourn to perfect and put into execution the in and out shoots, the drop and the upshoots and marvelous deceptions in speed, besides a system of watching bases, which gave the game an extraordinary zest. "Rad" was also the first to conceive the idea of walking the heavy hitters and then fanning the light weights. He was equally clever in strikeouts or serving a ball which was usually hoisted into the air for the outfield to grab. He fielded his position so well that he was played at all positions except behind the bat and was regarded for many years as the most graceful player on the diamond. His success was due to real ball playing. He never worked the press, nor catered to the grand stand and was, in

fact, so indifferent to applause or criticism, that patrons who did not know him well, regarded him as surly and capricious. He astounded a professor of the Wesleyan University in Bloomington by pitching a ball directly into the hands of a player concealed from view around the corner of a building, illustrating the extent of the curve given to his ball. In 1876, when Al Spalding, later millionaire manufacturer, was owner of the Chicago club, he brought the aggregation to Bloomington. Chicago was then far and away the champion city. Spalding was pitcher; Anson covered third; Jim White was behind the bat; Cal McVey on first, and Ross Barnes on second. Barnes was then the champion batsman of the world. He hit the first ball pitched by Henry Radbourne, for a home run and nine runs were scored before the side was retired. Charley Radbourne had been playing third. Capt. Lee Cheney then called Charley to the box. It was his first appearance against a big team. He faced second base before turning to deliver the ball to the catcher. It was a new wrinkle and the Chicago athletes laughed prodigiously. When Radbourne struck out the entire side, they ceased their laughing. They could not score thereafter. The only player of the Bloomington team who could hit Spalding was Cliff Carroll, also of Bloomington, who afterwards became famous as one of the sluggers of the majors. The Peoria team, with which Radbourne was identified in 1878, ranked as one of the strongest in the country. Many veterans who witnessed this independent team play, regarded it as one of the best ever organized. It was composed of the following players: Charles Radbourne, pitcher and right field; Dave Rowe, pitcher; Jack Rowe, catcher, later with Detroit; Cliff Carroll, first base, later with Providence, and other major clubs; Tom Loftus, second base, later with Washington; Jack Gleason, third base, later with the St. Louis Browns; William Gleason, shortstop, also with the Browns; William Taylor, left field, later with Pittsburgh, and Alveretta, center field.

That fall the Northwestern league was organized. Milwaukee lost its franchise in the National, and all of the players were signed by Rockford, the backers there believing that they had slipped one over on the remaining cities of the Northwestern. Ted Sullivan, who was to handle the team in Dubuque, was told of the Peoria players by his friend Tom Loftus, and he signed Radbourne, both Gleasons, Alveretta, Taylor and Loftus. These with Comiskey, Lapham, Sullivan, and Reis composed the Dubuque team.

The other aggregations regarded Dubuque as a joke and much sympathy was expressed for Sullivan and his lack of experience. However, Dubuque opened the season at Rockford, and, despite the fact

that Rockford was touted as a slugging team, Radbourne shut them, out by a score of 8 to 0. The defeat was an eye opener to Rockford and the players threatened to get Radbourne's goat the next time he faced them. Rad heard their remarks and asked Sullivan to let him pitch every game played with Rockford. The latter complied and Radbourne again shut out Rockford by the same score. Every game in which Radbourne pitched against Rockford that season was a defeat for his opponents. Dubuque made a runaway race, losing but eight or nine games during the entire season. Ted Sullivan still maintains that no minor league team ever organized excelled in speed or all around skill the aggregation that represented Dubuque in 1879.

It was on August 4 of that year that the Chicago team of the National League played at Dubuque under the leadership of Adrian Anson. Dubuque won by a score of 1 to 0. Radbourne pitched and Anson admitted that the slabman was a master. In later years Anson, in discussing this game said: "In my fifteen years as premier batsman of the game, I never faced a pitcher who baffled me more completely with his curves than did Radbourne on the occasion of that memorable game in Dubuque. We then learned that Dubuque had a star well worthy of the title. I do not hesitate to say that not one of the old school pitchers, or any of the later slabmen, could equal the famous Radbourne. I have seen them all in forty years' experience. Radbourne's most deceptive ball was a slow, down shoot, which for years baffled the best batsmen who had opportunity to face him. He was among the earliest to curve a ball and none ever developed the curve more successfully. For many years it was believed that the strange movements of the ball in his hands were due to a freak style of delivery. Not until he placed three posts in a row and curved the ball around them, did he convince the doubters that he could thus control the sphere. His ability then became fully recognized."

Radbourne was one of the best known sportsmen of the West, and a large proportion of his time, when not engaged upon the ball field, was spent in hunting and fishing. He was instructed in the handling of a gun when a mere boy by his father, and he kept the family table supplied with game in season. He was also successful as a fisherman, but his greatest delight was in seeking birds. Farmers, who invariably turned down all others who sought to shoot over their land, welcomed "Rad," and he was well known in the hunting districts of Illinois. He held membership in various clubs of sportsmen along the Illinois river, and was among the first to greet the ducks and geese upon their

arrival from the South in the Spring, or from the North in the Fall.

Radbourne was wonderfully accurate in shooting with a rifle or shot gun. Years of training at the traps and in the field, gave him a correct eye, and he seldom missed his mark. His skill was so well recognized that O. L. Cheney of Bloomington, an intimate friend, endeavored to arrange a match with other marksmen. He challenged the world to produce the equal of Radbourne and offered to wager \$10,000 that the great pitcher could outshoot any other person in live bird competition. Captain Charles Bogardus of Lincoln, Ill., at that time ranked as the champion sharpshooter of the world. For a time, hopes were entertained that a match could be arranged between the two. Bogardus excelled at target practice and in breaking glass balls. He was afraid, however, to pit his skill against Radbourne's at live bird competition, and the match could not be put on. Radbourne was a real sportsman. He was never known to shoot at a bird or animal not in motion. He scorned the pot-hunter, and would not associate with him. He owned a kennel of thoroughbred pointers, dogs that he had trained and, with their companionship, spent many happy hours afield. Not until a bird had taken wing, would he pull the trigger. Only when a rabbit was in full run, would he make an effort to halt it. Upon one occasion, a quail was captured with a broken wing. Radbourne would not consent to its death but brought the bird home, set the broken bone, and then presented the feathered prisoner to a friend who kept it in a large cage for many years.

Radbourne could imitate the "Bobwhite" call of a quail to perfection. Whenever he would pass where the bird was confined, he would sound the call. Without fail, the prisoner would respond and, when he would approach the cage, would flutter towards him as if desirous of showing its affection towards the man who had repaired the damaged pinion. Radbourne's reserved, almost churlish disposition, was never displayed towards his dogs. To them, there was no limit in his affection.

As compared with the performance of pitchers of the present era, the record of Radbourne when at the height of his fame with Providence in 1884, is almost unbelievable, and has never been equalled since the beginning of the game. He pitched no less than twenty-seven successive games and won twenty-six of them. In that year, Charley Sweeney was the other pitcher of the club, but he deserted in mid-season and it was believed that the pennant was lost. The management appealed to Radbourne, and he responded with that bulldog disposition that was so well known. He set himself pluckily to the work of pitching

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every day and refused to rest until the flag was won. He won twenty games in a row before he lost one, and then won six more, cinching the pennant. Out of four successive games, Radbourne pitched three shut-outs. In another stretch of four games but one run was scored. In his long run of victories, Radbourne scored five shut-

outs; four games of one run each; two of two runs each; three of three runs each, and one five run game. In eighteen of the victories, he allowed fewer than ten hits. His first defeat after winning twenty-straight, was by Buffalo, the latter club winning by a score of 2 to 0. Providence could secure but four hits in this game, while Buffalo landed five from Radbourne. With the flag safe, Radbourne pitched but eight more games that season, winning five, closing the season by shutting out Philadelphia, holding that club to five hits, thus demonstrating that he was just as effective at the close of the strenuous season as at the beginning. However, he failed to show his old effectiveness when he joined Boston and was not worked so regularly in the years that followed. Radbourne, however, was with Boston for five years and then he joined Cincinnati, remaining with the latter city until 1891, when he retired from the game. The succeeding years of his life were spent in his home in Bloomington. He had saved enough from his salary to enable him to live a life of leisure. His highest contract was tendered by Boston in 1886, calling for \$4,500.

Radbourne's retirement from the game appeared to affect him physically and he rapidly declined in health. Two years before his death, the explosion of a gun, while he was hunting, cost him the sight of one eye. This accident appeared to depress the great pitcher and paralysis set in. He became an invalid and died on February 5, 1897, in his forty-fourth year.

Twenty seasons have come and gone since Radbourne's death, but his memory is still green and will remain so as long as the national game exists.



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