



## Baseball and the Presidency

by

S. Derby Gisclair

Member, Society for American Baseball Research



*President Taft throws out the first pitch on Opening Day, 1910 and establishes a new tradition.*

Opening Day, 1910, in Washington, DC was a milestone in baseball history. From behind the red, white, and blue bunting that flowed around the grandstand in American League Park on that crisp spring day, President William Howard Taft threw a baseball to the Senators' Walter Johnson, ushering in a new tradition in baseball – the ceremonial first pitch on Opening Day.

But Taft was not the first American President to be involved with baseball. George Washington and John Adams were known to play bat and ball games – either rounders, townball, or some other form of the game.

By 1860, the game of baseball had become such an integral part of the American fabric and the game's terminology had become commonplace in the American language. A Currier and Ives lithograph from the 1860 presidential election depicts Abraham Lincoln and his opponents – John Bell, Stephen Douglas, and John Breckinridge – debating the rules of the game.

In 1866, President Andrew Johnson became the first President to attend a baseball game between cross-town rival teams.

President Chester Allan Arthur became the first President to receive a major league team at the White House on April 13, 1883, welcoming the Cleveland Blues who would go on to finish in 4<sup>th</sup> place in the National League. Later that year, former President Ulysses S. Grant would be among 15,000 fans to attend the first major league game at New York's Polo Grounds.

On June 6, 1883, President Benjamin Harrison became the first President to attend a major league baseball game, witnessing the Cincinnati Red Stockings defeat the Washington Nationals.

The most memorable association between the National Pastime and the President, however, has been the Opening Day first pitch. This ceremonial event has allowed sitting Presidents to bask in the glow of Americana, to be part of something uniquely American, to enjoy a brief respite from the political grind.

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson became the first President to attend the World Series when he watches Game Two between Boston and Philadelphia. President Wilson and Edith Galt made their first public appearance as an engaged couple at this game. The following spring, Mrs.

Wilson was at the President's side as he threw out the first pitch on Opening Day in 1916. Wilson was received more cordially than President Herbert Hoover, who during the 1931 World Series was greeted with howls and boos from the Depression-era and Prohibition weary crowd who wanted beer. Hoover was one of the great baseball fans to occupy the Oval Office.

Although President Calvin Coolidge threw out the opening pitch, the real baseball fan was his wife. Grace Coolidge kept perfect scorecards of baseball games and often remained after the President made an early exit from the game.



*President Roosevelt throws out the first pitch at the 1933 World Series.*

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt threw out the first of a record eight Opening Day pitches in 1933 at Griffith Stadium in Washington, DC. In 1937 he would also be the first President to attend an All-Star game. Even during the Depression and World War II, Roosevelt insisted that baseball be given a green light to aid and enhance the morale of the country. He did, however, cease his visits to the ballpark during the war.

In 1945, President Harry S. Truman threw out his first Opening Day pitch and began a string of 16 major league games he attended while in office, a record that is unchallenged through 2004. Truman was the first presidential left-hander, and he delighted the crowd in Washington on Opening Day in 1950 by throwing out two first pitches – one with each hand! He was also the first President to attend a baseball game on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1952.



*President Truman throws out the first pitch on Opening Day, 1947 as the Washington Senators play host to the New York Yankees.*

President Dwight Eisenhower was a spectacular athlete and made no secret of his early aspirations to play major league baseball.

President John F. Kennedy christened Washington's new DC Stadium on Opening Day in 1962. The facility would later be renamed RFK Stadium in 1968 in honor of President Kennedy's brother, Robert. President Kennedy was an avid baseball fan who was very popular with the crowd. He was rumored to have an aide who was nicknamed *Undersecretary of Baseball* because he kept the Kennedy apprised of scores and standings.

The first President to attend a major league game indoors was President Lyndon Johnson who watched an exhibition game between the New York Yankees and the Houston Astros on April 9, 1965. Johnson was the first president to dedicate a new stadium when he watched the first game at Houston's Astrodome.

In 1970, President Richard Nixon threw out the first pitch at the first All-Star game to be played at night. Nixon's knowledge of the game was impressive. As a matter of fact, he was recruited by Major League Baseball to run the Players Association. He chose to continue his political career instead.

President Gerald Ford displayed exceptional baseball talent as a player on the congressional team during his tenure as a Michigan congressman. After throwing out the game's first pitch, Ford saw Hank Aaron tie Babe Ruth's home record by hitting home run number 714.

President Jimmy Carter attended Game Seven of the 1979 World Series between the Baltimore Orioles and the Pittsburgh Pirates, but did not throw out the first pitch. This would be the only major league game that Carter attended while in office and he is the only President since 1910 who did not throw out the first pitch on Opening Day.

As a Chicago Cubs radio broadcaster in the mid-1930s for Iowa radio station WHO, President Ronald Reagan was an astute baseball spectator. He made several guest trips back to the radio booth, both during and after his presidency.

In 1992 President George Bush had to travel to Baltimore to throw out the first pitch at Camden Yards, while President Bill Clinton traveled to Cleveland the throw out the first pitch in the new Jacobs Field in 1994.



*President Bush throws out the first pitch of Game Three of the 2001 World Series.*

Following the tragedy of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush brought the nation together when he threw out the first pitch in Game Three of the World Series between the New York Yankees and the Arizona Diamondbacks in Yankee Stadium.

Other memorable Presidential first pitches.



*President Wilson*



*President Harding*



*President Coolidge*



*President Coolidge*



*President Eisenhower*



*President Kennedy*



*President Johnson*



*President Nixon*



*President Ford*



*President Reagan*



*President Bush*



*President Clinton*

Copyright © 2005 by S. Derby Gisclair. All Rights Reserved.