



Stealing First

by

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Among other baseball imponderables, I had occasion to consider the question of whether or not it was possible to steal first base. As almost everyone is aware, it is possible to steal second base, third base, and home plate. But can you steal *first* base?

The late Wilfred “Skeeter” Theard – a long-time fixture on the New Orleans baseball coaching scene – used to teach his players to thump their chest with their right hand as they ran to first base in the event of a close play at the bag, his rationale being that the umpire was probably *watching* the ball and *listening* for the baserunner’s foot to hit the bag. It may be a clever tactic, which I’m sure worked for Skeeter and his players on more than one occasion, but that’s not really stealing first base.

And I’m not referring to the old adage that says “you can’t steal first base,” meaning that hitters with low on-base percentages will never be able to steal second base if they don’t get to first base. Nor do I consider reaching first base when a catcher drops the ball after a third strike to be a stolen base.

So the question remains: it is possible to steal first base?

As strange as it may seem, it was possible to steal first base at one time, although the practice has long been outlawed.

The first known instance of stealing first base occurred on August 13, 1902 in a game between the Detroit Tigers and the Philadelphia A’s.

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In the sixth inning, Philadelphia's first baseman Harry Davis attempted a double steal with outfielder Dave Fultz, who was on third base. But Davis did not draw a throw from Detroit catcher Deacon McGuire as he slid into second base. On the very next pitch Davis took off towards first base to the amazement of everyone in the ballpark. Two pitches later Davis once again stole second base, and this time McGuire did make a throw to second, but Davis slid under the tag by Tigers' shortstop Kid Elberfield. In all the commotion caused by Davis everyone forgot about Fultz on third base, who scored without an attempt. The A's beat the Tigers 8 – 0 on the day.

The Athletics would go on to win the 1902 American League pennant for Connie Mack. Davis, who had begun his baseball career in 1895 with the New York Giants, would eventually retire after 22 seasons in the majors.

It was 1908, however, that proved to be a watershed year for stealing first base.

The game usually cited incorrectly as the first instance of stealing first base occurred on July 31, 1908 in a game between the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Giants. New York's Fred Tenney was on first, with teammate Dummy Taylor on third. The double steal was on, so Tenney took off toward second base on the first pitch. St. Louis catcher Bill Ludwig had quickly assessed the situation and held the ball. On the next pitch served up by Cardinal pitcher Arthur "Bugs" Raymond, Tenney bolted back to first base, once again without a throw and also without protest from the Cardinals. On the third pitch of the at-bat, Tenney's attempt to steal second drew a throw from Ludwig, but also allowed Giants' pitcher Taylor to score from third. As Tenney was called safe at second, a hurried throw to the plate from shortstop Patsy O'Rourke was too late to prevent the run from scoring. The Giants went on to win the game by the score of 9 – 2.



Tenney began his major league career as a left-handed catcher in 1894 for the Boston Beaneaters, but by 1897 was playing first base almost exclusively. He was traded in October of 1907 to the New York Giants with Al Bridwell and Tom Needham for five players. He retired in 1911 after 17 seasons in major league baseball, becoming a reporter for the *New York Times*.

The last known instance of stealing first base occurred on September 3, 1908 in a game between the Detroit Tigers and the Cleveland Indians.



Detroit's Davy Jones was on third base, their speedy shortstop Germany Schaefer was on first base, and outfielder Sam Crawford was at-bat. Manager Hughie Jennings flashed the sign for a double steal, and on the first pitch Schaefer bolted towards second base. Cleveland's catcher Nig Clarke wasn't fooled and held the ball. On the next pitch, however, Schaefer took off again, this time toward first base! Both players and umpires were astounded by the move and watched him dive headfirst into first without a play.

On the third pitch from Cleveland's Glenn Liebhardt, Schaefer once again took off for second base, this time drawing a throw from Clarke. As the Cleveland catcher released the ball, Jones broke from third to home and scored the winning run. Schaefer beat the throw and stood on the bag as the argument ensued around him. The Tigers won the game by the score of 2 – 1.

Although he stole second base twice and first base once during the game, Schaefer was credited with a single stolen base in the box score of the game. The scorer no doubt figured that stealing first base from second base was a negative base, and so credited Schaefer.



Not long thereafter the practice of reverse-stealing was prohibited in Rule 7.08, which disallows running in reverse order “for the purpose of confusing the defense or making a travesty of the game.”

While it would seem that stealing first base to be able to set up an attempted double steal on an ensuing play would be perfectly legitimate, it has nonetheless remained an illegal play.