

Scorecard

Edited by Kostya Kennedy and Richard Deitsch

Balk Like an Egyptian

Forget Abner Doubleday, Alexander Cartwright and that rounders theory—the seeds of our national pastime were planted four millennia ago on the banks of the Nile

Peter Piccione translates hieroglyphs for his history students the way a horror-movie archaeologist deciphers ancient curses from sarcophagi—slowly and portentously. During slide presentations at the College of Charleston, he'll run through images ranging from papyrus paintings to the Pittsburgh Pirates before posing a question seemingly out of leftfield: "Did the Egyptians invent baseball?"

It's a rhetorical question for Piccione. For years this 51-year-old academic sleuth has investigated the mysteries of seker-hemat, a bat-and-ball game that predated Wee Willie Keeler and Big Train Johnson by at least four millennia. Piccione's seminal lecture lures crowds far outside Charleston—he's given his baseball talk in Chicago, Dallas and Cooperstown; this month he's booked at Emory University in Atlanta—and the way he tells it, the original sandlot was the Sahara. And the top hitter of 1475 B.C. was the pharaoh Thutmose III, a Near Eastern Leaguer as immortal as Babe Ruth.

Academics have long batted around theories of baseball's origins. Our national pastime has been traced to age-old games played in England, France, Germany, Libya and Spain. One 10th-century Norse variation, knattleik, was a dawn-to-dusk affair in which Viking batters swung at balls of leather or wood. (No, the batting helmets weren't horned.)

"The Abner Doubleday myth dies hard," says Tim Wiles, director of research at the Hall of Fame. "But we no longer think the sport had a single inventor. It has evolved over many, many years."

An authority on ancient Egypt for three decades—his doctoral dissertation decoded the rules of the Egyptian board game senet, a distant uncle of Parcheesi—Piccione is the first scholar to propose that baseball grew out of a Pharaonic fungo. By decoding reliefs and texts on the walls of temples, the Brooklyn-born Egyptologist has determined that the really old ball game was played by kings during the festivals of certain goddesses and in front of the statues of deities. References to seker-hemat (roughly, "batting the ball") go back 4,400 years. In Piccione's reading of Pyramid Texts Spell 254, gods command a pharaoh to cross the heavens and "strike the ball" in the meadow of the sacred Apis bull.

A thousand years later, at the shrine of the love goddess Hathor in Deir-el-Bahari, Thutmose III was depicted playing pepper (above). In one hand T-3, as Piccione calls him, brandishes a sort



SWAP YA FOR MIGUEL CAIRO Piccione created this baseball card using a hieroglyph.

of Memphis Slugger; in the other, a ball resembling the stitched leather orbs that have been found in excavations. Two priests, arms upright, grasp balls in their hands. The inscription: "Catching it for him by the servants of god."

The aim of the game, Piccione reckons, was to swat at and destroy the evil eye of Apopi, the serpent of chaos. Though it's unclear if T-3 was a designated Hittite, the professor suspects seker-hemat involved umpires, baserunning ("Running

was a big part of Egyptian games") and huge crowds. "Who wouldn't want to see the Pharaoh beat Apopi?" Piccione asks.

Until excerpts of Piccione's work made it into the Hall of Fame library, the most convincing document in the Hall that linked the Red Sox to the Red Sea was a clipping from the *Weekly World News*. The story claims that a pyramid game was played by two six-man teams using a ball made of tightly wrapped palm fronds and that outfielders hurled daggers at runners who rounded second and tried to score. "I guess that was the first twin killing," cracks Wiles.

The father of the father of the father of the father... of the modern game is on exhibit, but not in Cooperstown. He's in the Cairo Museum. "T-3 is a muscular mummy, maybe 5' 7"," Piccione says. "He was a Hall of Fame military man with 37 victories in 37 campaigns. Like Roberto Clemente, he was heroic. Like Brooks Robinson, he had a good disposition. Like Ty Cobb, he took no guff. And like Joe DiMaggio, he wears his wrappings natty." —Franz Lidz