

It Curves! A Brief History of Wiffle Ball



Wiffle Ball season is once again upon us. Before you pick up your first white plastic ball and yellow plastic bat of the summer, we thought we'd fill you in on a few points about the proud game's history and science.

WHERE DID THE WIFFLE BALL ORIGINATE?

In 1953, David N. Mullany was watching his 12-year-old son and some friends playing a baseball-like game with a perforated plastic golf ball and a broomstick in their Fairfield, CT, backyard. The boys were trying to sneak pitches past each other by throwing curveballs and sliders, but to no avail.

Mullany, who had been a semipro hurler himself, knew all too well what thousands of Little Leaguers have had to painfully learn: nothing shreds a tender adolescent arm quite as effectively as throwing breaking balls. Mullany set about trying to save the boys' shoulders and elbows by creating a ball that would curve and bend on its own.

His original medium was an unexpected one: a hard plastic ball that served as packaging for Coty perfume. After having the boys experiment with various designs, Mullany hit on the Wiffle Ball we now know and love.

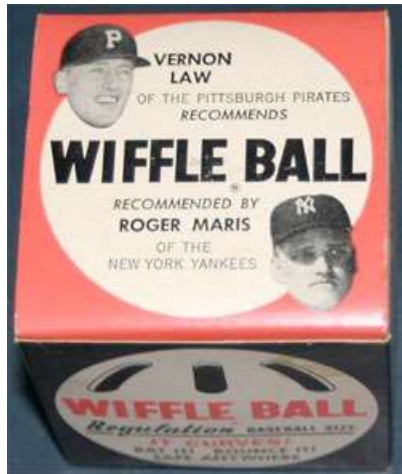
WHAT'S WITH THE NAME?

Like a lot of baseball fans, Mullany's son and his friends referred to strikeouts as "whiffs." Since the new invention made knee-buckling curveballs a breeze to throw, pitchers started racking up the punchouts. Mullany named the product the Wiffle Ball to honor its strikeout-friendly breaks.

WHY NO "H" IF THE BALL IS NAMED AFTER WHIFFS?

The Mullanys allegedly nixed the "h" to save money if they ever had to buy a sign for their fledgling enterprise.

HOW DID THE MULLANYS ADVERTISE THEIR PRODUCT?



For years the Mullaney family marketed their Wiffle wares using pictures of star big leaguers like Ted Williams and Pete Rose on the packaging. So did the Splendid Splinter and Charlie Hustle like to play with the darting plastic ball on their days off? Not necessarily. The Mullanys later explained in interviews that doing actual photo shoots with the players would have been too pricey, so they just negotiated with players' agents and then used any old photograph. The good news: this means you might have stood a chance against Whitey Ford in Wiffle Ball.

WHAT MAKES IT BREAK AND SPIN?

It's a pretty simple concept even if you're not a physicist. The side of the ball without the holes cut into it obviously has greater surface area than the other half. Thanks to this difference in surface area, a larger amount of atmospheric pressure acts on the hole-free side, which makes the pitch curve towards the holes.

WHAT ABOUT SCUFFS?



Throwing a pristine Wiffle Ball is easy. Getting the desired break on one that's been out in the yard for a while is more of a challenge. All bets are off regarding the aforementioned physics once the ball gets knicked, cut, and otherwise scuffed after taking a few solid whacks off the trusty yellow bat. In fact, if a ball is scuffed or cut in just the right way, all of the physics of the curves and breaks can be reversed; the pitch will actually curve away from the holes.

As you might guess, competitive players who are looking for an edge go to great lengths to "damage" their balls in just the right way to make their pitches really dance. They'll scuff the ball with sandpaper, stomp on it, even heat it up in a microwave to subtly change its surface. According to a 2002 article in *The Atlantic*, competitive players are allowed to do anything short of changing the molecular structure of a ball's plastic to achieve the desired effect.

WAIT, COMPETITIVE WIFFLE BALL?

Yup. Since the mid-1990s, adult Wiffle Ball leagues have been popping up around the country, and some of them are pretty serious. They even meet in annual competitions like the Wiffle Up! Three on Three World Tour, which pays out thousands of dollars to the winning teams.

HOW DOES COMPETITIVE WIFFLE BALL WORK?

This came as a bit of a surprise to us since we're used to playing Wiffle Ball like normal baseball with lighter equipment. However, some tournaments use altered rules that remove base running from the equation. Instead, a batted ball is assigned a value—single, double, etc.—based on where it lands on the field of play. Some number of "outfielders" try to catch the balls on the fly, and the ones that drop for hits advance whatever "runners" were already on base.

Other tournaments work more like traditional baseball and allow steals, bunts, and other strategic maneuvering.

ARE THESE GUYS TOTING THE CLASSIC YELLOW PLASTIC BAT?



Not quite. They're using equipment that you can't just pick up for a few bucks in the toy aisle of any drugstore. Instead, they come to the plate armed with bats made from aluminum, carbon fiber, fiberglass, or super-hardened plastic. You can pick one up if you want to dominate the game at your next company picnic, but grabbing that glory won't be cheap. Moonshot Bats' top-of-the-line SpectraCarb Enforcer goes for around \$200.

WHAT'S COMPETITIVE WHIFFING LOOK LIKE?

Here's a look at video from one competitive league. The movement on some of these pitches is insane even by Wiffle standards:

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