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‘There was a sort of irreverence about it all’: How a late-night British MLB show became a cult obsession in the early ’00s

By Rustin Dodd Jun 27, 2019 61

In the summer of 1997, Erik Janssen was a Canadian expat working in the London film industry. His days were spent on freelance gigs and a fledgling career. His nights revolved around a more important pastime: Major League Baseball.

In the midst of the 1990s television boom, Channel 5 — an upstart free-to-air network in the United Kingdom — had purchased the rights to MLB games and started airing the American broadcasts in the middle of the night. For Janssen, a devoted Montreal Expos fan, the arrival of baseball in England was a genuine coup.

The only problem: The London-based studio show that accompanied the games was, in the words of a local, a shambolic disaster. Graphics were misspelled. The presentation was amateur. And the studio host, a stuffy veteran radio broadcaster, would occasionally refer to baseball as "glorified rounders," the popular children's game.

This being 1997, Janssen had no Twitter or Facebook on which to air his grievances. So he picked up the telephone and called the network. He reached a production coordinator, who offered a surprising response:

"The guy on the other line said: 'You sound like you know what you're talking about,'" Jannsen says. "He was like: 'Can you come give us a hand?' "

Janssen acceded to the request. One year later, he had moved from a helping hand to a lead producer, injecting his baseball knowledge and embracing a rollicking tone. And just like that, the cult of "Major League Baseball on Five" — the longest running baseball program in the history of the United Kingdom — was about to begin.

From 1997 to 2008, "Baseball on Five", as it was known to fans, aired across the country. It showed MLB broadcasts on Wednesday and Sunday nights and scored British converts through a London-based studio show that resembled "Wayne's World" — well, if the old SNL sketch was about baseball and *very* British.

The format — live American baseball with intermittent studio bits and chatter between innings — made an unlikely star out of a former

television reporter and indy-league ballplayer from southern California. It charmed insomniac students, breastfeeding moms and drunken blokes home from the pub. And it created something that had never existed before: a cultish baseball community in a country where the sport had almost no foothold.

“We were the crack dealers,” Janssen says, chuckling. “I don’t want to use that term. We gave them a taste. ‘This is baseball. Come back for more.’ ”

On Saturday, more than two decades after the initial broadcasts, Major League Baseball will arrive in the United Kingdom for the first time. The Yankees and Red Sox are slated to play a two-game set at London Stadium in an event dubbed the London Series. The hope among MLB officials is that the combination of pageantry and star power will lead to greater exposure for the game throughout Europe.

It is an ambitious venture. And for baseball fans in the United Kingdom, it is the most exciting development in decades. Yet for some, it’s also a reminder of a golden age of English baseball fandom, a time when the sport felt like a little secret and the community swelled with grassroots enthusiasm, a time when the most important television of the week — “Major League Baseball on Five” — came on in the middle of the night.

“The show itself *was* the community,” says John McGee, a public administration employee in Manchester, England, and a devoted baseball fan. “It’s weird thinking that only like 15 years ago, there was no such thing as social media. Message boards were in their infancy. And I certainly wasn’t aware of any British baseball message boards.

“There wasn’t the means to reach out and meet other baseball fans — except through the TV show.”

To understand the improbable success of “Baseball on Five,” it’s best to start with one man: Josh Chetwynd, an author, journalist, sports agent and former college baseball player who has a current gig in — wait for it — environmental public policy. Chetwynd has the kind of eclectic CV

that would make most people feel lazy. He's also sort of a legend among British baseball fans — like the David Cone or John Smoltz of the UK.

To baseball fans across the pond, Chetwynd is the empathetic American voice who explained the game, the straight man on the set of "Baseball on Five." But before that, he was just a television reporter at USA Today who had moonlighted as an indy-league baseball player after a four-year career at Northwestern in the early 1990s.

Gould and Chetwynd on the set during a typical broadcast. (Photo by Josh Chetwynd)

Chetwynd had grown up in Los Angeles, the son of a British father, and fallen hard for baseball. His skills were somewhat limited — " a total overachiever," he says — but he chose Northwestern because of their journalism school and used his family history to land a recurring spot on the Great Britain national team, a ragtag outfit looking for help. By the early 2000s, Chetwynd's wife wished to move to Europe while the couple was still young. Chetwynd found a communications gig in the MLB office in London.

The new role was predicated on looking for ways for MLB to attack the untapped European market, where baseball is a difficult sell. Yet by 2001, an unexpected opportunity arose: Channel 5, which owned the local rights to MLB, needed a new analyst to replace Todd Macklin, a Canadian who was departing "Baseball on Five." A colleague at the London MLB office told Chetwynd to try out.

The audition included a some riffing with the lead studio presenter, Jonny Gould, a Brit who had stumbled into television after his acting career stalled. Chetwynd did the first thing that came to mind.

"I'd heard he had played a little softball," Chetwynd says. "So I took the piss out of his softball skills."

Chetwynd got the gig, joining Gould in the studio. And thus, if you were a British baseball nut, a curious sports fan or simply surfing UK television in the early 2000s, you could stumble upon a late-night baseball show that included a British-American with a short stint in the Frontier League; a former actor who knew little about baseball; and a producer who got his job through a phone call.

Somehow, in the eyes of viewers, it was a smashing success.

"'Baseball on Five spurned (sic) a cult and moved a generation," wrote Ryan Ferguson, a British blogger who penned a tribute post to the show in 2014. "To be a part of it is a great gift we should forever cherish."

The general aesthetic of "Baseball on Five" was, as Chetwynd puts it, "very loose." Imagine two blokes sitting inside a London television studio and bantering about baseball until the wee hours of the morning. Imagine the hosts having to hastily exit the studio for the 6 a.m. news show when games went extra innings. Imagine the show accidentally cutting to black and Gould, on air, razzing the crew member who caused the snafu.

"There was a sort of irreverence about it all," Gould says.

In a way, it was exactly the kind of late-night television show you might find on early 2000s cable. Need a good American analogue? Think the

“The Tom Green Show” or some other studio show on MTV or ESPN2. The difference was that Channel 5 was a network, or in the parlance of English television, a “terrestrial” channel. It was also desperate. Launched in 1997, Channel 5 was the fifth network in the UK and well behind its more established brethren. As a result, it went searching for cheap content. One answer was live American sports.

Instead of commercials, the network supplemented live baseball games with a short pregame show from London and short segments between innings. To McGee, who started watching while having sleeping problems during university, the bits were the “secret sauce” to the whole affair. Gould offered, in his own words, the “very British” comic relief. Chetwynd delivered insight and knowledge that taught the game but didn’t patronize. In one segment, Chetwynd would break down the mechanics of a changeup. In another, the crew would crack on the latest exploits of Jeff Weaver, a perpetual muse. Sometimes, the inning would finish so quickly the broadcast would cut back to the studio and Gould was still disposing his chocolate wrappers.

“It was always slightly chaotic like that, because it was 1 o’clock or 2 o’clock in the morning,” says Matthew Smith, who began watching while in high school in Norwich. “But that was kind of part of the ramshackle charm to it.”

Today, Smith is the chair of the British Baseball Hall of Fame, an organization formed in 2009 to promote the history the sport in Great Britain. Yes, it exists. The inaugural class included Sir John Moores, a famed English businessman who founded a professional baseball league in Liverpool in the 1930s. The boomlet of the early 19th century included a Great Britain victory over the United States in the 1938 Amateur World Series, a precursor to the Baseball World Cup. As you probably guessed, the popularity did not stick.

Chetwynd describes the history of British baseball as one of hope and frustration, a cycle where a resurgence seems possible and then the sport recedes back to its previous state. Translation: Not many fans. Some of this is due to the preeminence of cricket, another bat-and-ball game

which came into prominence in the 18th century and surpasses early variations of baseball. Some is due to the difficulty of following a daily MLB schedule with a significant time difference.

“Baseball is a night hawk’s game in the UK,” McGee says.

And some of it is simple parochialism; British fans have a prevailing skepticism of American sports.

The latter, of course, is starting to change. The NFL has grabbed a foothold in England with regular games in London. The NBA has a cultural presence across Europe. Now, MLB is seeking to catch up.

“If you try to scratch under the surface at a certain archetype of British baseball fan, I think what we have in common is our lack of commonality,” says McGee, who started a British-centric baseball podcast to draw in the disparate groups.

Smith, the Hall of Fame chair, says he came upon the game in an old-fashioned way: The television listings. He was in high school and enjoyed other sports. He stumbled upon “Baseball on Five,” learned the game and adopted the Oakland A’s because their colors matched the Norwich City Football Club.

“Back then,” Chetwynd says, “you could be coming home from the pub late at night, a little tipsy, and you turn on the baseball and you see these two guys chatting about baseball and you could go: ‘Oh, this is kind of interesting.’ ”

At its peak, Jonny Gould says, “Baseball on Five” was getting around 20 to 25 percent of the viewing audience in its late time slot. The overnight audience was tiny compared to daytime viewers, of course. It still constituted a decent victory for Channel 5, which always ran last among the networks during daytime hours.

It also served as a boon for baseball in the United Kingdon, Chetwynd says. During World Series games, the show could attract more than a million viewers. Not bad for a country where baseball was an afterthought.

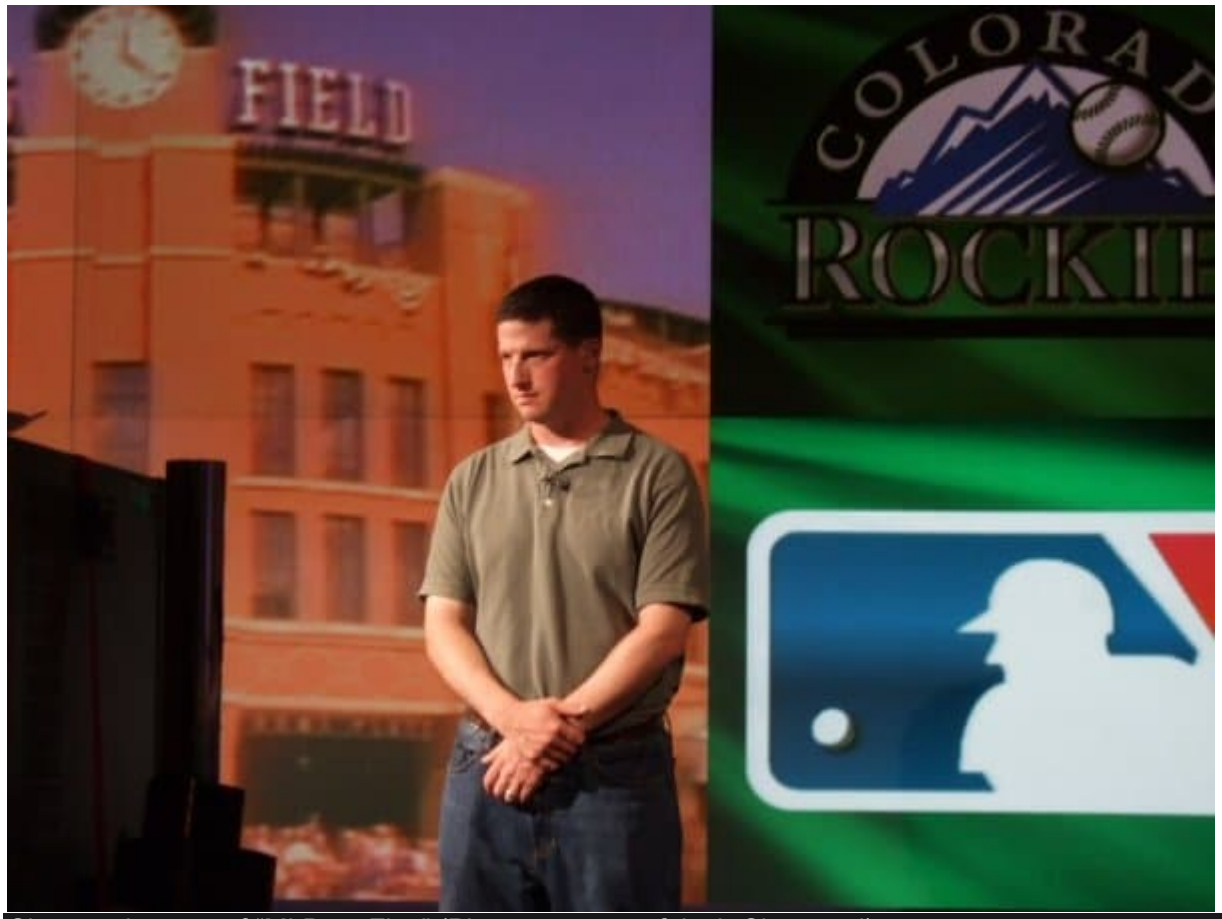
“You find that a lot of people that are still diehard fans today fell in love with the game from our show,” Chetwynd says. “Primarily because you could fall upon it.”

For “Baseball on Five,” the end would come in 2008. Channel 5 faced a round of belt tightening in the midst of the global recession. It pulled away from live sports rights and embraced cheaper late-night programming. Chetwynd, who had gone to law school, focused on a career as an author and agent, representing, among others, Gift Ngoepe, the first major leaguer from Africa.

Ten years later, you can still find Major League Baseball on English television. More to the point: Any British fan with disposable income can watch every MLB game on MLB.tv. Still, Smith believes something was lost. The current games are on cable network BT Sport. There is no studio show or British presence on the broadcast. It’s just the American feed from ESPN or Fox. In this way, the sport attracts the kind of people who would watch it in the first place.

“I can watch any MLB game on demand whenever I like,” Smith says. “It’s amazing, but I think it’s very easy for us to underestimate how important the free-to-air coverage is. The holy grail would be for baseball to end up on free-to-air TV again.”

Smith, of course, has no plans to watch the London Series on television. He’ll be there in person. So will Chetwynd, who will offer analysis on a rare British telecast on BT Sport. And so will McGee, who calls Chetwynd — basically an unknown among American fans — an “absolute legend.”



Chetwynd on set of “MLB on Five” (Photo courtesy of Josh Chetwynd)

The best part about “Baseball on Five,” McGee says, was understanding that you weren’t alone. There were baseball fans in Great Britain. They were night-shift workers at Heathrow Airport and students who should have been studying and people couldn’t sleep. To this day, they still stop Gould and Janssen on the streets or in train stations.

They were the kind of people who found the game later in life and became hooked. They were kids who adopted teams and remain among the small (and devoted) segment of British baseball fans. They were, Gould says, the kind people who would email the show, write that they were asking a girlfriend over to watch baseball, and then ask for a proposal on air.

True story, Gould says. Same night, a guy emailed and asked for a divorce.

“We didn’t need script writers,” Gould says. “We had our viewers.”

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