

## Baseball Talk Is Rich and Colorful

*By Irv Sternberg*

Right here, right now we are well into the baseball season. The good news is that our Rockies, celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup> year, have tasted the sweet success of lingering in first place. The bad news is that our batting performance has been pathetic, creating doubt that we can sustain our early success.

Nevertheless, there is one thing we can always count on—the language of baseball. Summer is that time of the year when baseball fans everywhere can be heard speaking a language unlike all others. Established over the years, baseball has its own colorful vocabulary. Rich and unique, the words and phrases uttered by fans from LA to New York offer an exotic, sometimes mysterious addition to our everyday language. While some of the words are familiar, only in conversation about baseball will you find these expressions used in a specific context far removed from the real world.

Taking hitting, for example. When a batter makes contact with the pitched ball, it may result in “a can of corn” for an out or “a frozen rope” for a single or “a dinger.” Respectively, that’s an easy flyball, or a hard-hit line drive, or a home run. If the latter lands high in the cheap seats, that’s the “nosebleed section.” A ball that lands between the fielders is a “Texas Leaguer,” sometimes called a “dying quail.” Now, I ask you: How often can you see a dying quail in everyday life?

The art of pitching also contributes colorful terms. A pitch close to a batter’s face is “chin music” while a rising fast ball is “high cheese” and a ball that doesn’t rotate or spin is a “knuckleball” that often drives a batter crazy because he has no idea where it will go.

Batters vary their swings trying to outguess the pitchers. To hit a homer they’ll “swing from their toes” or “swing for the fences” or, to make sure they make contact with the ball, they’ll “choke up” on the bat handle.

To make a spectacular catch, outfielders sometimes “leave their feet” while diving for the ball. When a team has trouble scoring, the scoreboard displays a string of “goose eggs.” When a base runner scores in the bottom of the ninth to win the game whether by a hit, walk or error, the play is called a “walk-off”—usually followed by a wild celebration. A team that wins by a wide margin has enjoyed a “blowout.” If the game is very close, exciting and suspenseful, fans are treated to a “barn burner.”

Like most other sports, baseball has a long history of keeping statistics. Batting averages, wins and losses, hits, errors, home runs and stolen bases have been around since bearded men first put on flannel baseball uniforms. But every year seems to introduce a new statistic, like WHIP, which is walks and hits divided by innings pitched. The stat supposedly measures a pitcher’s effectiveness.

I’m waiting for the day when baseball starts recording batting averages for bearded vs clean-shaven, red-heads vs blonds, lefties vs righties and tall guys vs short guys. My hero will be short and bald but have a red beard and swing from either side. That’s called a “switch-hitter.”

Even if going to a baseball game is “like watching paint dry,” as a friend recently said, you’ve got to be intrigued by its picturesque language.