



The Language of Sports

The English language is full of phrases derived from sports and games, a vocal testament to our continued obsession with pastimes both active and sedentary. Boxing, or pugilism, was wildly popular throughout the 19th century; followers of the sport, known as the 'flash mob', picked up the lingo and soon were talking about 'throw in the towel', 'saved by the bell', 'down and out', and, after the Marquis of Queensberry laid down the rules of boxing, 'to take the gloves off'. In 1828 reference was made to a double cross, defined as when a boxer takes money to lose a bout and then beats his opponent. To knock someone's brains out goes back even further while 'beat to the punch' was coined around 1790 in reference to Daniel Mendoza, a great pugilist who weighed only 160 pounds but won through his speed and agility. A hundred years later, American sportswriters were extolling the 'fancy footwork' of the boxers of those times.

Of course, many sports were just an excuse for gambling, card games did not even bother to excuse themselves, that was their *raison d'être*. Aboveboard, for honest dealing, dates from the 16th century and was soon followed by its antonym 'under the table'. Some are obvious derivations, 'double-dealing' and 'an ace up ones sleeve', for example; while others are quite obscure, 'jackpot' comes from a variation of draw poker where only a pair of jacks or higher could open the betting or start the pot. 'Down and dirty' came from stud poker where the last cards are dealt face down accompanied by the dealers remark "down and dirty", which they often were. Poker tables of the 19th century had a hole cut in the middle, leading to a locked drawer, where the house put a percentage of the bets, as well as any checks or I.O.U.'s; once a player had no credit or cash left he was 'in the hole'. While on the subject of poker it is interesting to note that Kitty was an Old West

term for a prostitute, gamblers in the saloons would toss coins into the lap of a Kitty watching the game for the winner.

Many other sports and pastimes have given us phrases, 'knuckle down' was a term used in marbles 300 years ago. The rules stated that you had to place your knuckle's on the exact spot where your marble lay. Oddly the term also morphed into 'knuckle under' meaning to submit. Bull or bear baiting, not such a popular sport these days, was a contest between a bull or bear and a pack of dogs. If the prize beast looked as if was losing the owner would enter the fray, driving off the dogs with sticks or staves, thus 'to stave off'. Archery gave us both 'a long shot', the winner at medieval contests, and butt, as in the 'butt of a joke'. Medieval archers used the round bottoms of wine butts (casks) as targets, so commonly that the words became synonymous.

The American Pastime, baseball, has also been a rich vein. 'To farm out' has nothing to do with agriculture, instead it comes from Branch Rickey's cultivation of major league players through his farm system; these farm teams were usually located out in the bush giving rise to the term 'bush league'. Carl Hubbell won 24 games in a row, pitching 46 consecutive scoreless innings, with his 'screwball', a pitch that baffled the likes of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. The list of sports phrases is enormous from fishing, (angling for something, bait and cut); tennis (lob, game set and match); and, of course, horse racing. In 1816, in an effort to equalize things, British horse racing introduced a scheme whereby extra weight was *given* to horses above the standard height and *taken* off horses below the height, which is where we get the phrase 'give and take'. The sport of kings also gave us photo finish and win by a nose. And so the list goes on from grandstanding, ace in the hole and shuffle, to home-run, home base, that's not cricket and bowl someone over.

Sources : Library of Phrases

Ammer, Christine. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*. Online. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997

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When James Naismith invented basketball in 1892 he did not name it but gave instructions to hang a box each end. The gym had no boxes so used baskets instead!