The Rules of the Game

1867 was a dynamic year for Flint, Michigan. Lumber and textiles were the mainstays of local industry, the city's population was surging upward, and modest metro could boast five amateur baseball clubs – three of which formed that year. And in just a few years, the city would welcome another club, the Lumber City Base Ball Club.

To commemorate this year of urban growth and an explosion in the interest of amateur baseball, Lumber City Base Ball Club plays by the 1867 rules of the National Association of Base Ball Players.

The 1860s was a contentious decade for baseball. What began as a strictly social activity for men's social clubs, was developing into a competitive endeavor. Indeed, many clubs were complaining of the illegal use of paid players by some teams. This tension, between gentlemanly comradery and competitive spirit is evidence most clearly in the rules of the game. At the center of this friction was the pitcher and the striker, whose role in the game was in constant flux. Some of baseball's proponents believed that the pitcher should remain unimportant and simply deliver a fairly thrown pitch to the striker. On the other side of the coin, may saw the defensive advantages of a talented pitcher and began exploring ways to use the pitcher to gain an upper hand on the opposing club. It was the striker's job, to put the ball in play to highlight fielding – a feature that ballists believed was the most important and engaging characteristic of the game. Waiting the pitcher out for a fairly thrown pitch was an emerging tactic used by strikers. For many, this unnecessary delay of the game devalued the activity. The rules introduced during the 1860s were designed to address these conflicts. Below are some highlights of the rules of 1867.

Important Highlights of 1867

A "fair" Pitch
The pitcher must deliver a fair pitch for the striker as close to the center of home base as possible. A fair pitch is determined by: straight arm delivery, no snap of the wrist, delivered within the bounds of the pitchers point. Balls striking the ground in front of the home base, hitting the striker, or pitched opposite to that which the batsman strikes from, shall be considered unfair balls. If the pitcher does not succeed in throwing fair balls, the umpire can issue a warning. After the warning, the umpire can begin to call balls.

The Striker's Line
One of the most controversial rules of the 1860s was the instruction to strikers who could not "not step forward or backward" while swinging at the ball. The rules was intended to give some of the advantage back to the pitcher who had been progressively restricted in the last few years. Although the rules do not state the penalty, meeting minutes for the National Association of Base Ball Players indicate that players who did not keep at least one foot firmly planted on the line during their swing ran the risk of a struck ball being caught dead. It should be noted that there is no indication that a ball struck at and missed illegally, does not negate a strike.

Three Strikes -
The original rules from 1845 indicate that a ball struck at and missed three times is an out.

Beginning in 1863, the umpire could begin to call strikes if the player failed repeatedly to swing at fairly pitched balls – which was determined by the striker's reach and not whether it crossed home plate. Three strikes after the warning was an out.

Three Balls?
In the same manner that the umpire could issue warnings for batters delaying the game, the pitcher could be penalized for throwing unfair pitches and pitches which were outside the reach of the striker. After the warning was issued, the umpire would begin to call balls. Three more unfair pitches, or balls were ruled a walk.

Stealing?
It is difficult to determine the exact nature of base stealing in the 1860s. There was no restriction on stealing and scores from games in the 1860s are ambiguous on the matter. Printed reports indicate bases were awarded to a base runner for a hit, a defensive error (such as the catcher missing the ball) or an outright steal. But the accuracy of these reports are questionable as there was no specific provision in the rules that dictated how a stolen base should be scored until the 1880s. In addition, a large lead off was not practical (underhand pitching made the pick-off much easier for pitchers), open base stealing was a skill that only the swiftest of players could pull off. Box scores from clubs playing in New York in the 1860s reveal that while base stealing was a method employed during this era, only a few clubs could manage to use it effectively. Lumber City imposes an artificial restriction on base stealing to reflect the sporadic nature of the offensive weapon during this decade. Opposing clubs should see the home field rules for more information.

A few more important distinctions

The Fair-Foul Rule.
One major distinction in early baseball was the rule that indicated fair balls in the infield. Once a ball hits in fair territory, it was considered fair. This rule was changed in December 1876 as players began to exploit the rule with a batting technique known as "fair-foul hit"

The Bound
Although catching a struck ball on the first bounce in fair territory was eliminated in 1864, it remained in the rules for foul balls until the 1882.