

Stories of Words: Sports



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ISBN: 978-1-937889-07-4



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Learning About Words

What kinds of sports do you play? Which ones do you watch? Many people have fun playing sports. This is not surprising because the word *sport* comes from a French word that means “pleasure” or “play.”

People around the world play different sports, but the thing that’s similar about them is that most people play sports to have fun. Some sports are played with just one player, while others require a team. But even if you don’t play or watch sports, you’re probably already using sports words and phrases in your conversations.

Many people use sports words



without thinking about their origin. Everyone who speaks English probably knows what to do when someone says, “Get Ready!, Get Set!, Go!” You might hear those words when a race begins, but a teacher might use them to start a timed test or a group activity, too.

Also, when someone says “I guess that lets you off the hook,” you know you’ve just escaped trouble. *Getting off the hook* is actually a phrase from fishing, where it means a fish has escaped trouble—it’s not going to be someone’s meal.

Similarly, when a person does too much of something, he or she is said to “go overboard.” In sailing, *going overboard* means “falling out of the boat.” That’s not a good place to be if the water is cold!

Listen for sports words and phrases as you talk to others. You’ll be surprised where you find them.

1

BASEBALL

Play Ball!

You may not have ever played baseball or been to a baseball game. But many of the words used to describe baseball are used in everyday conversation. One of these is the expression *play ball*. In baseball, it's a command that tells

players to start the game. In conversation, it can mean “to cooperate with someone.”





The words used to describe how pitchers throw the ball and how players hit the ball are especially popular. All the players are in

position, waiting. The pitcher quickly pulls his arm back and throws a pitch. The ball flies towards the batter. It's a fastball! Will the batter swing in time? Whoosh! Strike! The batter has missed the ball.

One of the goals of baseball is to throw the ball in such a way that the batter can't hit it. The most obvious way to do this is to throw a ball really fast. The fastball is just that—a ball that moves quickly. The faster the pitch, the less time the batter has to hit the ball. When you *throw a fastball* in conversation, though, it means you've tricked someone by doing something quickly.

Another way to get a batter to miss the ball is to confuse him or her. A breaking ball is a kind of pitch in which the ball seems to change direction as it approaches the batter. The ball may start to fall so the batter has to adjust how high he swings the bat.

A curveball is a kind of breaking ball that moves to the side as it comes near the batter. Outside of baseball, the phrase *to throw a curveball* means “to make an unexpected change.” Usually, it is a change someone would not want. A flat tire on the way to a game, for example, could be called a curveball if it kept you from getting to the game on time.



Pitches don't usually hit batters, but accidents do happen. A *brushback*, which is like a fastball, flies close to the batter's head. The intent is to make the batter step back and miss the ball. Experienced pitchers mix elements of different kinds of pitches to make sure batters don't know how the ball will travel.



Home Run!

After the pitcher throws the ball, the action moves to the batter. What will happen after he or she hits the ball? Both the players and the crowd hold their breath. Will someone catch it? Will it sail over the fence for a home run? Or will it be a foul ball?

A ball that is hit so that the batter circles all three bases and touches home plate in a single play is called a home run or a homer. The most exciting kind of home run is called a grand slam. That's when a batter hits a home run with the bases full. That means that all of the runners will reach home plate, adding four runs to the score. This term actually comes from a card game called bridge, where

it means “a victory in all competitions.”

Outside of baseball and bridge, a *home run* and a *grand slam* mean “a big victory.”





Here are some more baseball terms that are also used in conversation.

Baseball Term	What It Means in Baseball	What It Means in Conversation
ace	the team's best pitcher	someone who's very good at a task
foul	a ball that flies out of the playing area of the field	an action that is against the rules
pop up	a ball that flies high into the air	something that appears suddenly
sweet spot	the part of the bat that hits the ball farthest	the best place to be

2

AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Baseball may still be known as America's national pastime, but Americans love watching football, too. In fact, more people watch football on TV than baseball. (There are different games called football in different countries.)

Like baseball, many football terms are used in conversation. The word *football* is one of them. As you can guess, *football* is a combination of the words *foot* and *ball*. Games in which people kicked balls are very old, from at least early Roman times. An early reference using the word *football* dates to Ireland in 1308.



Football is hard to catch because of their shape. In conversation, a problem that no one wants to handle is sometimes called a *political football* because it's hard to grab or settle.



Many of the football players who score points are called offensive players. The word *offensive* meant “attacking” or “insulting” in France in the 1500s. In football, the offense is the team that has the ball and is considered to be “attacking” the other team. This word is used in the same way in conversation, too.

Defensive players, on the other hand, try to stop the other team from scoring points. They try to defend their goal, and they try to take the ball from the other team. The word *defensive* is also from a French word. It means “to guard or protect.”

Play starts in football at the line of scrimmage. The players line up on either side of this imaginary line, and no player may cross the line before the ball is put into play. *Scrimmage* originates from the word *skirmish*, which means “to protect or defend in small groups.” In fact, football players do try to protect and defend the ball.



Get Down!

The word *down* is used in a few ways in football. A game is divided into a series of plays called downs. The team that has the ball can try four times to move the ball at least 10 yards. If the players can't move it that far, they are said to "lose their down." Then they have to kick the ball to the other team. Also, when the ball is *down* in football, play has stopped.

One way football players earn points is by carrying the ball across the goal line. This is known as a touchdown. As you can see, *touchdown* contains the words *touch* and *down*. This word is also used to describe an airplane's landing. In addition, when someone does something really well, he or she is said to have "made a touchdown."

The word *goal* is interesting, too. People are not sure of its origin, but it seems to have come from an Old English word that meant "limit" or "boundary." Every football player tries to cross the goal, or boundary, with the ball, and score points.



3

ICE HOCKEY

The players speed around the rink, sticks flashing, bodies crashing into one another. It's ice hockey! Fast-moving and exciting, ice hockey is becoming increasingly popular in the United States. It's already the favorite sport in Canada.

Stick-and-ball games have been played for more than 1,000 years. They were played in ancient Rome and throughout Europe. In warm climates, they were played on fields. In cold ones, they were played on ice.



One source for today's ice hockey was a game called hurling that Irish immigrants brought with them to Canada. Another source was a game that came to be called lacrosse. This was a game Native Americans played before Europeans arrived. In the both games, players used sticks to move a wooden block toward a goal. French explorers thought the stick used in the game resembled a shepherd's staff, which is long and curved at the end. They called this hooked stick a *hoquet*, which means hook. That's how the game came to be called hockey.



The object of hockey is to score points by using a stick to guide the small circular puck into the opponent's goal. The word *puck* comes from the Scottish word *puce* and the Irish word *poc*. Both mean "to poke or deliver a blow."

Getting the puck into the goal is hard work. Hockey players can use their body to block an opponent with the puck. This is called checking. The word *checking* means "to block or stop" someone.

When a player blocks another player, it is seen as keeping the opposing player in check. The phrase *in check* means "under control or restriction of freedom." This is appropriate because one player is keeping another player from moving freely. *Check* is also used in chess, where it means that a player's king is in danger of being captured.



Hat Trick!

It's amazing when one player scores three goals in any game. In hockey, that's called a hat trick. It is a tradition to throw hats onto the ice when a player scores a hat trick. The tradition started in cricket, then was adopted by ice hockey. It was first used in professional hockey in Toronto, Canada, where the owner of a hat shop offered a free hat to any player who scored three goals. The fans soon offered their hats as well, throwing them onto the ice. Some teams donate these hats to local charities.



The power play is a type of play that is often game changing. Players who break a rule are put on a time-out in the penalty box. While one player is serving a penalty, the other team has an extra player. In this way, the team with one more player has an advantage. You may have heard *power play* in conversation, too, to refer to one person or team that has an advantage over another one.

Icing occurs when a player hits the puck onto the opposing team's side of the rink without aiming at the other team's goal and without the puck being touched. This is often done to "ice" or cool down the action, allowing a team to regroup. It's thought of as stalling or wasting time, so it is called as a foul. You probably know the word *icing* in another way, too: as the tasty topping on a cupcake!



4

BASKETBALL

Have you played basketball with friends? If so, you can thank James Naismith, a coach in Massachusetts, who invented basketball in 1891. Naismith wanted to help his students exercise indoors in snowy weather, so he hung a peach basket at one end of a gym. He thought the players would have fun throwing the ball into the basket. That's why, when you score in basketball, you "make a basket."

At first, there was no hole in the basket, so players had to retrieve the ball each time they scored. Eventually, the basket was replaced with a net hung on an iron hoop. In 1906, a hole was added. Today, even though no peach basket is used, a score is called a *basket* or a *hoop*.



In the first basketball games, players had to pass the ball to each other to move it around the court. Then they started to pass the ball to themselves by bouncing it. They borrowed the word *dribbling*, which means “to let something fall in drops,” to describe this action. A player lets a basketball fall to the court floor, where it bounces back, and the player lets it fall again. This is done over and over as the player moves around the court.



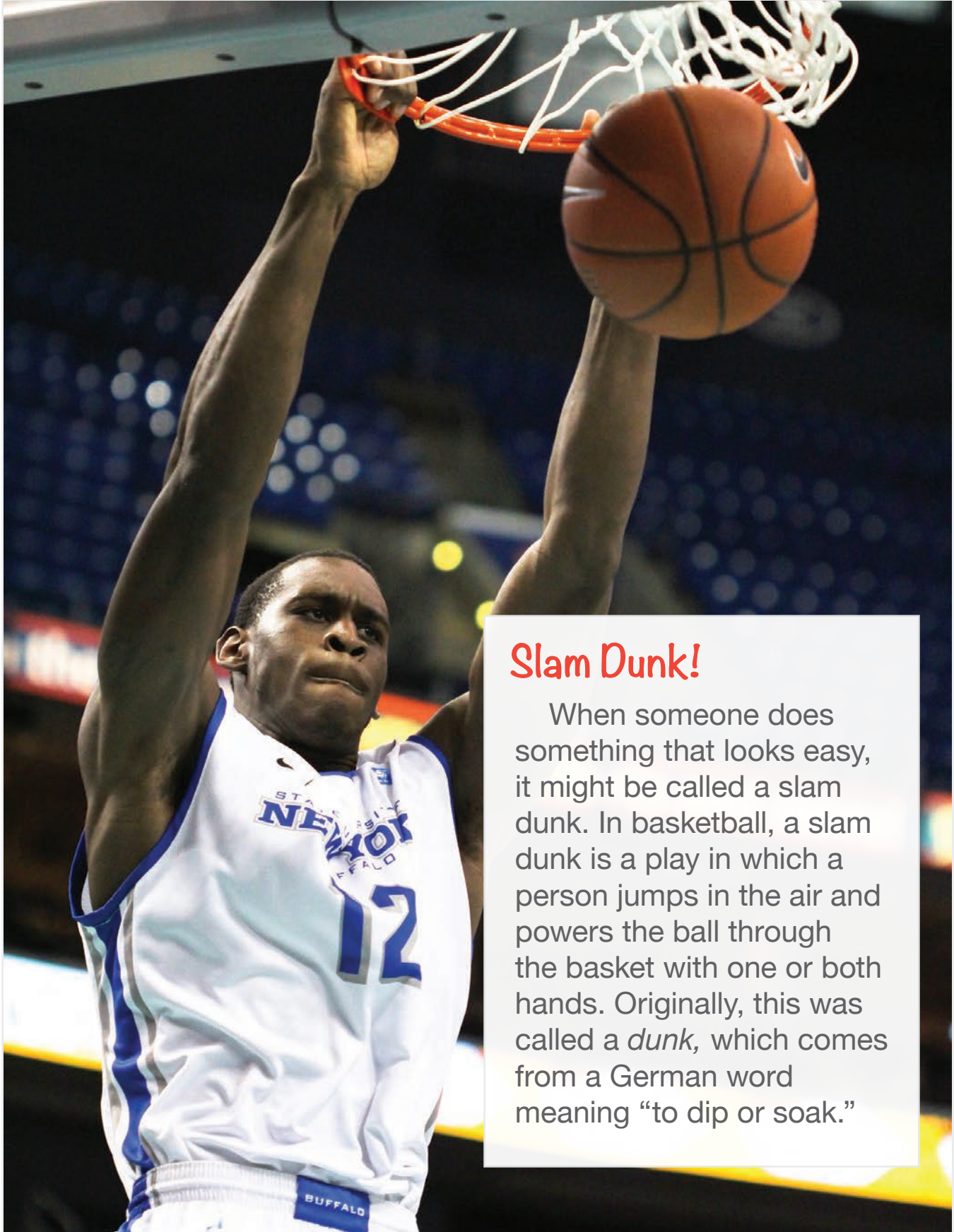


There are many ways a player can commit a foul, or break a rule, in basketball. One is to move forward without dribbling the ball or passing it to another player. This is called traveling. This term was used to describe how a player “goes to different places.”

Another foul is called holding. Just as it sounds, holding involves keeping another player from moving.

Basketball also has many types of plays. One is the pick and roll. In this play, one player stands in place to set a *screen*, or “get in the way of a defender.” Another player then dribbles the ball and attempts to run the defender into that screen. Often, the defender struggles to get around the screener, and is *picked*—meaning “detached or removed” from the play. At this point, the screener can *roll* or “move toward the basket.” He or she might then be often open for a pass.

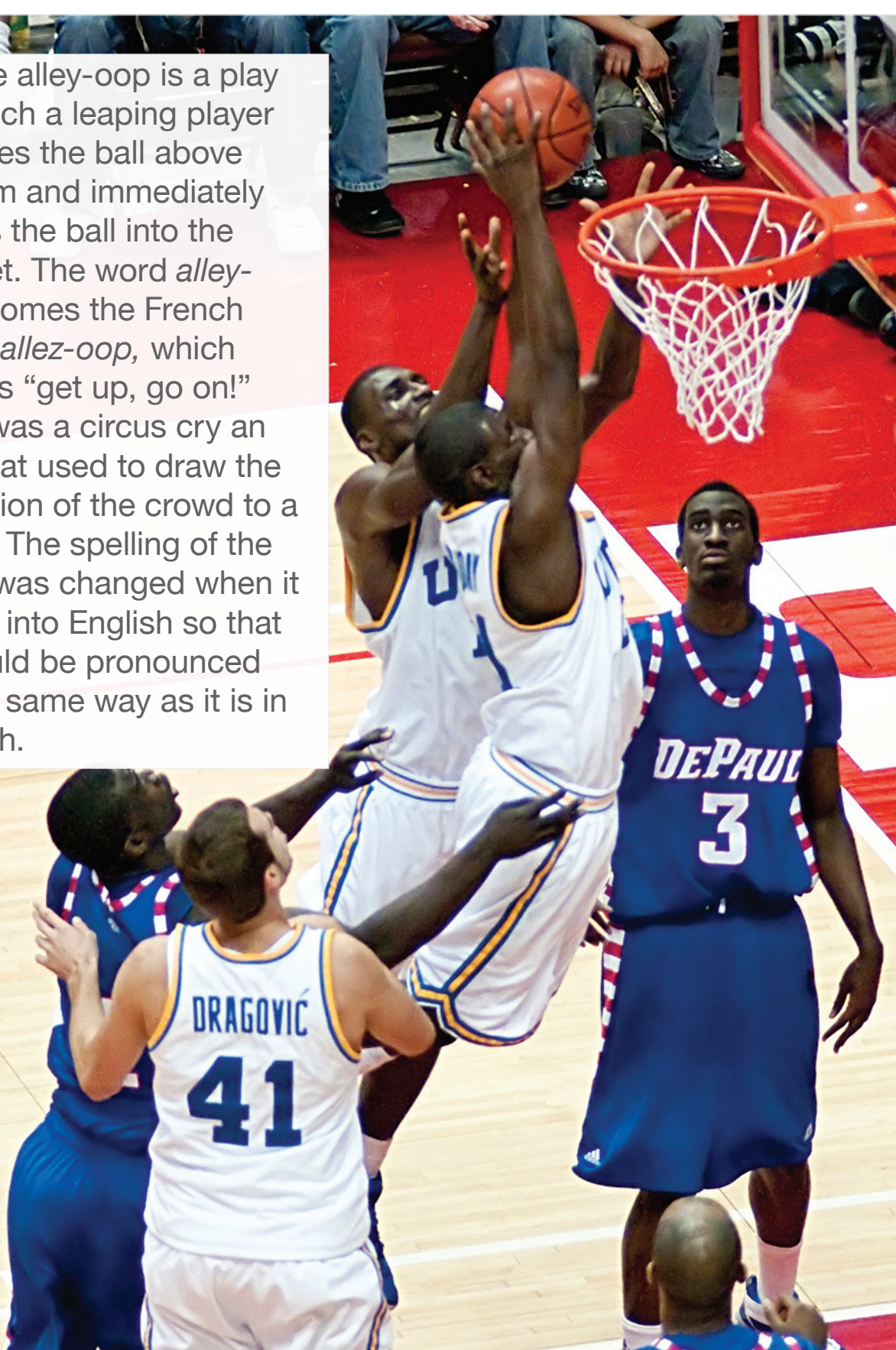




Slam Dunk!

When someone does something that looks easy, it might be called a slam dunk. In basketball, a slam dunk is a play in which a person jumps in the air and powers the ball through the basket with one or both hands. Originally, this was called a *dunk*, which comes from a German word meaning “to dip or soak.”

The alley-oop is a play in which a leaping player catches the ball above the rim and immediately slams the ball into the basket. The word *alley-oop* comes from the French term, *allez-oop*, which means “get up, go on!” This was a circus cry an acrobat used to draw the attention of the crowd to a jump. The spelling of the term was changed when it came into English so that it would be pronounced in the same way as it is in French.





When a player misses a shot badly, it is called *throwing up a brick*. Clearly, a brick does not fly very well. A player who is throwing a lot of bricks is said to be performing so poorly that he or she is *throwing up enough bricks to make a house*. Sounds like it's time for the player to rest!

5

TENNIS

The player crouches, then throws the ball high into the air. She smashes the ball to her opponent. The crowd holds its breath. Will her opponent hit it back?





Tennis is an exciting game of hitting and returning a ball. In fact, the word *tennis* comes from the French word *tenez*, which means “to take or to receive.” The name is linked to how the ball moves back and forth between players.

Like the other sports in this book, tennis is an old game. It originated in the Middle Ages, and it was first played on grass. Today, it is played on grass or clay courts. Interestingly, the word *court* is an old word, too. It is from a Latin word that meant “an enclosed yard,” like a king’s court or home.



A tennis player uses a *racket* or *racquet* to hit the ball. This word comes from the French word *requette*, which means “palm of the hand.” In early tennis-like games, players used their hands to hit the ball. The word continued to be used even after the tennis racket was developed.

Hit the Sweet Spot!

A tennis racket has a handle attached to an oval area that has crossed strings. The middle of the stringed area is the best place to hit the ball. As in baseball, this area is called the sweet spot. In conversation, when something *hits the sweet spot*, it means it's been done very well.



Play in tennis starts with a serve. In fact, the use of the word *serve* is connected to the word's usual meaning: "to perform the duties of a servant." Some believe that when tennis was first played, it was a servant's job to throw the tennis ball in the air for the player to hit.

Today, the player attempts to hit the ball into an area

called the service box, which is on the opposing player's side of the net. Once the ball is served, it is said to be "in your court." In tennis, that means that it's your turn to hit the ball. In conversation, it means "it's time for you to do something."



When a player has no score in a game or a set, that player is said to be “at love.” Some believe the word comes from the idea that people play because they love the game, not for money. Some think that it comes from the French word *l’oeuf*, which means “egg.” Not only does an egg resemble the number zero, but a player who was unable to score a point might be described as “laying an egg,” an idiom meaning “playing badly.”

Exciting tennis games have lots of volleys. This is a term for players hitting the ball back and forth several times. The word *volley* originates from the French word *volée*, meaning “to fly.” This connects to the way the ball moves as it sails through the air.





Many tennis terms have different meanings in conversation. Here are a few.

Tennis Term	What It Means in Tennis	What It Means in Conversation
ace	a serve that the opposing player is unable to return	something that has been done very well
let	a ball that hits the net before it lands in the service box	to allow something
set	part of a game	to harden; a group of something



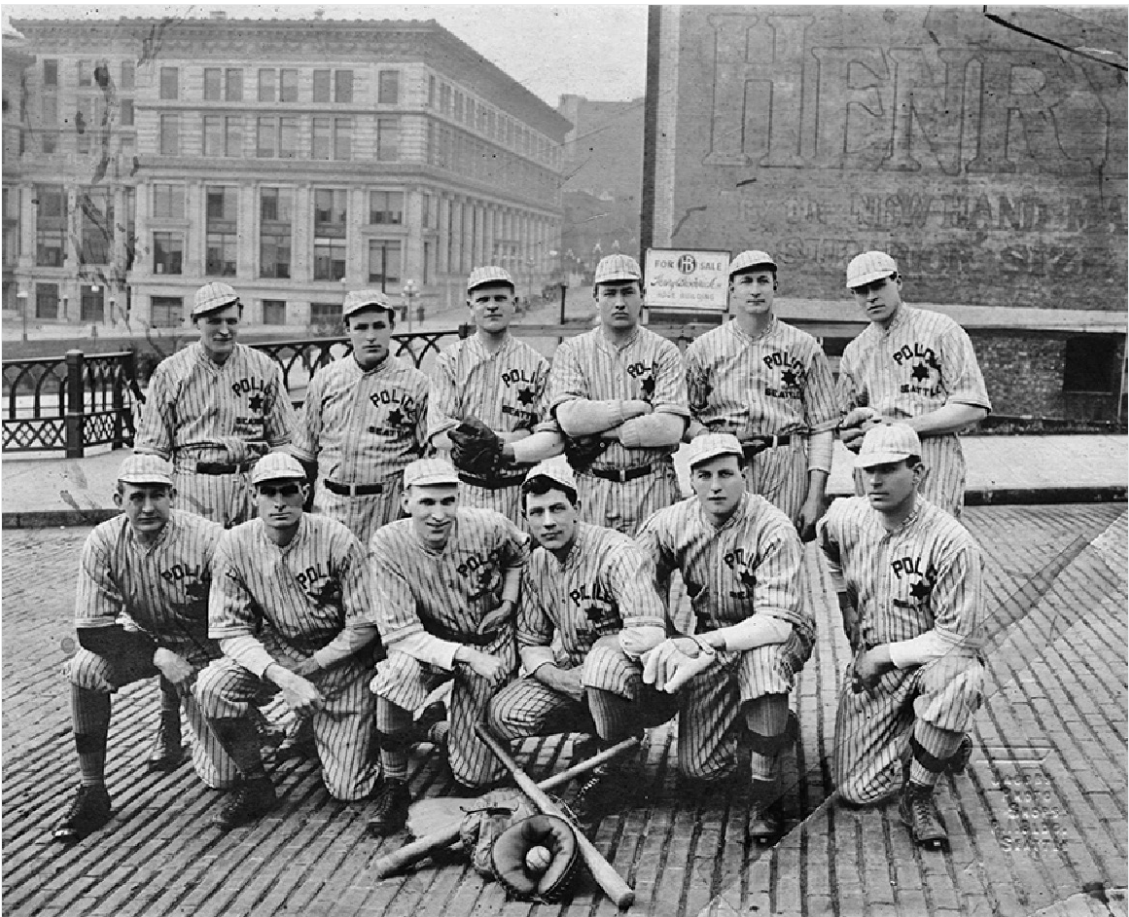
Our Changing Language

People have played sports for thousands of years. The earliest sports were developed to help people practice their hunting and survival skills. Later, sports were played just for fun.

You can see some of the history of sports through the stories of sports words. Some tell you in which country a sport was invented. Some tell you how a sport was played.

The meaning of many sports words and phrases has changed over time, just as the sports themselves have changed. New words are invented to describe new plays and new technologies. Old words are changed when they move into a new language.

The language of sports changes quickly, but knowing sports words and phrases can help you have fun when you watch sports—and when you play them!



Glossary

defense: in sports: trying to keep the opposing team from scoring points; in conversation: trying to stay safe or keep others safe

foul: in sports: an action that is against the rules of the game; in conversation: something that is dirty or has a bad smell or taste

offense: in sports: trying to score points; in conversation: attacking someone

origin: the beginning of something



Think About It

- What sports do you like to play or watch? Tell a friend how the sport is played. Use two or three words in this book to help you explain your sport.
- Play a sport or game with a friend, and make a note of any word you use that has multiple meanings. You can start with the words in this book.
- What sports or games do you know that are not discussed in this book? Choose one and list a few words that describe some action or move in that sport. Teach these words to a friend.



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ISBN: 978-1-937889-07-4