

On Language

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A Study commissioned by a brewery in the early 1980's found that nearly 70 percent of Americans watch, discuss or read about sports every day, and that 44 percent actually take part in some kind of sports activity daily. The same study revealed that only 3.7 percent of those surveyed were "virtually uninvolved" in sports. Not surprisingly, sports affect the way we think, the way we look and the way we talk.

This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Throughout the ages, people have borrowed and made use of the colorful language and imagery of sports. The still-popular expression *to start from scratch* goes back to the first Olympic Games, in 776 B.C., in which a line scratched in the dirt served as the starting point for foot races and jumping events. Track and field, then provided us with probably the earliest and most enduring example of the sports metaphor, but almost every sport has made contributions. We will *kick off* or

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get the ball rolling (both phrases fare soccer terms) on a short list of some of the more popular examples. Perhaps, *right off the bat*, we should start with one of the richest sources—baseball.

Expressions like *off base*, *can't get to first base* and *touch base with* come from baseball, as do *go to bat for*, *out of left field*, *drop the ball*, *in there pitching* and *ball-park figure*. Less obvious is *south-paw*, originally the term for a left-handed pitcher, now applied to any lefty. This is from the westward orientation of home plate in early ballparks, so that the batter wouldn't have the afternoon sun in this eyes. Thus, when a pitcher faced the plate from the mound, his left hand was on the south side.

Football has given us *huddle*, *chalk talk*, *a flag on the play*, *Monday morning quarterback*, *fourth-and-long* and *all-American*, among others. And there are colorful examples from boxing, such as *answer the bell*, *a low blow* (or *below the belt*), *on the ropes* and *down for the count*. Equally descriptive are *roll with the punch*, *saved by the bell* and *throw in the towel*. The expressions *put*

up your dukes and *duke it out* are derived from *put up your Duke of Yorks*, old Cockney rhyming slang for *forks*, meaning the fingers of one's hands and, eventually, the fists.

To tee off comes from golf, of course. *To be stymied*, meaning to be stumped or thwarted, also comes from golf. Actually, a *stymie* is, or was before 1951, a golfing situation on which another ball was positioned between a player's ball and the cup. Golf rules were changed in 1951 to permit the obstructing ball to be lifted until the shot is made, so the term became archaic—except in our common speech.

Golfers consider it good to be *below par*, or *not quite up to par*, the calculated number of strokes an expert golfer would use to complete a given hole or course. Yet, interestingly, in normal conversation, those same expressions convey the opposite meaning.

We have also adopted slang from the game of cricket, which is, along with rounders, an antecedent of baseball. *Butterfingers* was an epithet first applied, in the 1800's, to cricketers fielding poorly, and the term *fast one*.