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## Abner Powell

Baseball's Forgotten Innovator

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One of the things people love about baseball is the recognition awarded for individual achievement – the first player to do this or that, the last player to achieve a certain milestone, and so on. However, baseball has forgotten the contributions of Abner Powell.

Born in Shehendoah, PA on December 15, 1860, Abner played only two seasons in the major leagues --- with the Washington Nationals in 1884 and with the Baltimore Orioles and the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1886.

He came to New Orleans to play for in the inaugural season for the city's new franchise in the Southern League in 1887. While in New Orleans he devised and implemented many new practices.

### ***Infield Tarpaulin***

For instance, Powell noticed the longshoremen along the New Orleans waterfront covering the mountains of cotton bales with a canvas tarpaulin when it would rain. This prevented the cotton bales from becoming soaked with water, making them too heavy to load onto the riverboats. Since players were not paid when a ball game was rained out, Abner devised the idea of covering the infield with a modified canvas tarpaulin so that the field could be used immediately following a rainstorm, thus allowing the game to be played and the players to collect their salary.

Visiting professional teams noticed the practice during their exhibition games and spring training camps in New Orleans and eventually Abner's idea caught on everywhere. By 1910, ballparks everywhere had a huge infield tarpaulin they used to cover the infield in the event of rain.

### ***Ladies' Day***

It was also during 1887 that Abner convinced New Orleans Pelicans owner Toby Hart to promote the idea of a recurring Ladies' Day at the ballyard. There had been Ladies' Day events in the city for cricket matches and horse races since the early 1800's, but Abner was the first to see the potential of bringing the ladies to the park on a weekly basis.

First, it would allow their husbands to attend the games more frequently and would build the fan base. Secondly, it would clean up the grandstands which had become overrun with gamblers and other colorful characters, with equally colorful language. Abner correctly deduced that the presence of ladies in the grandstands would quickly put an end to the riotous behavior. The first regularly scheduled Ladies' Day game was held in New Orleans on April 29, 1887.

## ***Rain Checks***

Baseball was a speculative business in the late 1880's. Leagues would form and fold over a period of weeks, so capturing every dollar was often the difference between meeting payroll or not.

In those days, fans were issued a thick cardboard ticket when they paid their admission. These tickets were collected after the game to be reused. However, when even the infield tarp could not prevent a game from being called due to prolonged rainstorms, fans were given a different ticket that they could use to attend a future game. Powell, now the manager of the New Orleans Pelicans, noticed that there were often more people requesting these future tickets than had actually paid admission – fence jumpers and free loaders were common in those days. He devised a detachable stub on each ticket that was labeled the “rain check” and that was first used during the 1889 season. Eventually he had a printer in Little Rock that made perforated tickets for the club. Once again, Abner's innovation caught on and is used not only for baseball, but for most other events.

If Abner Powell had patented his ideas he would have been able to retire a very rich man. Instead, he remained very active in baseball, resurrecting the defunct Southern League in 1901 as the Southern Association. At one point Abner owned four teams in the Southern Association, providing much of the capital and grit needed to keep the league going during its early years.

But baseball has largely forgotten Abner Powell, a man who gave his life – and some of his best ideas – to the game.

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