

Pharaoh at the Bat

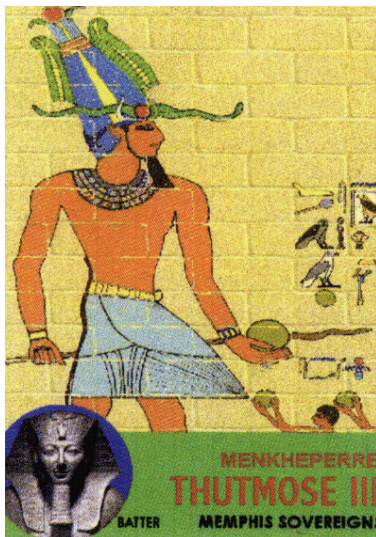
by Peter Piccione

Thutmose III was only seven years old in his rookie year, but with "Butch" Hatshepsut as his first coach and mentor, he has come to dominate the Near Eastern League. In 17 campaigns at bat, he has slugged away at teams as tough as Kush in the Southern Conference and Naharin in the Northern, and he has eliminated all competition. The eye of Apopi doesn't stand a chance against his mighty bat.

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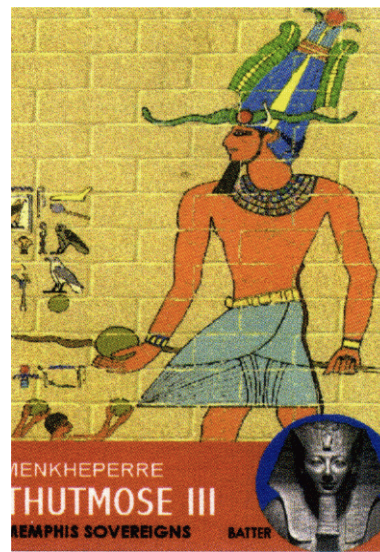
It just might be that the antecedents of the great American pastime can be found on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples. The earliest known references to *seker-hemat* (transl.: batting the ball) as a fertility rite and ritual of renewal are inscribed in pyramids dating to 2400 B.C. A wall relief at the temple of Deir el-Bahari showing Thutmose III playing under the watchful eye of the goddess Hathor dates to 1460 B.C. What makes this one special is its dynamism. Priests are depicted catching the balls ... this was really a game. By the time the Greeks are in Egypt, from the third to the first century B.C., temple reliefs of pharaohs engaged in "batting the ball" are not uncommon.

The game of *seker-hemat* was probably played in an open space – more than likely in the courtyards of the temples where sporting rituals were performed during festivals – and probably before a statue of a goddess like Hathor. The ball symbolized the eye of Apopi, who was the great serpent of chaos in Egyptian religion. When pharaoh struck the ball, he destroyed the evil eye, kept the universe in balance and renewed the creation of the world. So, batting-the-ball became part of a ritual known as "Overthrowing Apopi," and it was performed in the temples throughout Egypt every day by priests who acted as agents of pharaoh (the first designated hitters!). However, evidence points to the fact that batting the ball was more than a religious rite. One inscription in a Ptolemaic temple from around the third century B.C. states that when a pharaoh does this, he enjoys himself like a boy, a youngster, a child. Clearly when pharaohs engaged in *seker-hemat*, they were having a good time. Sport and religion combined into one activity. Modern baseball is often described allegorically as a rite of spring renewal, and it shares certain similarities with the cosmology of *seker-hemat*, especially in its titanic struggle of



pitcher against batter, and in its iconic heroes like Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson.

While there is no specific evidence as yet that running was involved, it seems likely that at some point, batting the ball was not a stationary act, since many other rituals the king



performed included running. It is also a distinct possibility that physical evidence of the bats used by the pharaohs has surfaced. In Tutankhamun's tomb, Egyptologists found a whole bunch of sticks, including staves for walking, and sticks meant to be used as fencing cudgels. But a couple of them don't seem to fit that mold. They lack knuckleguards, and they look just like the sticks Thutmose III is depicted using on the temple wall at

Deir el-Bahari.

The Egyptians played the earliest known game of bat and-ball, and it was the precursor of all ball games everywhere. Since we do know that the game of baseball wasn't really invented by anyone, that it actually evolved over the millennia, it is at least intriguing to speculate about its possible connections to Egyptian *seker-hemat*, and whether or not, once upon a time, mighty pharaoh might have struck out.

"What really matters is what's written on the temple walls;

And such eternal verities these texts they do recall

"There is joy in Mudbrickville!" All the texts they tout;

Over the temple wall and into the sacred lake, ever Pharaoh

clouts it out!"*

* Excerpted from the poem, "Pharaoh at the Bat" by Peter Piccione, © 2002. All rights reserved.

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