

The Ancient Game of Wicket As Developed and Played in Connecticut

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The first English settlers brought with them the objects and culture of their homeland including English games, like cricket. The lives of our hardy Yankee forebears were not conducive to the lengthy and aristocratic cricket game. One can conjecture that cricket's rules were modified to accommodate the farmers, the tradesmen and the merchants who became our early American ancestors. From that, the ancient game of Wicket was slowly born, similar to its English cousin but completely abridged, to become the first uniquely American game.

A bowler attacks and a batsman defends his wicket. The side with the largest number of crosses (runs) wins the two-inning game. That much is simple but how the game played out is something no one alive today can attest to. The rules seem archaic and confusing when we read them and much about the actual playing of the game is not addressed in the rules.

The play is very open to interpretation and the batsman determines the fervor of play. For starters, if he doesn't like the bowl, he can simply kick the ball away, no need to exert oneself by swinging the heavy wicket bat. If he should hit the ball, he may choose to run to the other side of the alley and change places with the opposing batter. Or he may choose to not run anywhere. If it is hit hard enough, he may run back and forth between both ends of the alley making all the runs he can. Or not. If he is too tired to run, so be it.

The fielders, all 30 on each side, stand round in groups and wait for a hit ball to field. Wicket is a fly game, that is, it must be caught in the air to register an out. But if the fielder falls while catching the ball, it is not an out. One out, all out. The game takes only two innings but its leisurely pace makes the day of it, counting a decent lunch break in the early afternoon.

The bowler is the one player who does most of the work. His job is to knock down the wicket off of its 3" perch. The ball, which is closer to a softball-sized and is made of yarn wrapped in leather, is bowled underhanded. The bowler stands behind the wicket at one end of the 75' alley and he hops over it before releasing the ball stiff-armed. The ball must strike the ground prior to the halfway point or else its "no bowl" from the judge.

The batter holds the bat, which resembles a long handled ping-pong racket, on the ground with the fat end downwards between his legs as he faces the bowler head on. The swing is more like a through-the-legs croquet mallet swing. The bowled ball is rolling in, or hopping in, on the ground. Shinning, or the aiming of the ball towards the batsman's shins, is not allowed.

There are no balls or strikes called so batsmen may be at bat for considerable time. There is no kicking in Wicket. It's a merry game and a social game. Rules as follow:

June, 1858 Rules and Regulations of Wicket Ball
New Britain, Connecticut

1. The Wickets shall be 75 feet apart.
2. The Tick Marks shall be 6 feet from the Wicket.
3. There shall be a Centre Mark (at 37.5 feet) and the Ball shall strike the ground before it reaches the same.
4. The Bowlers shall stand astride of or behind the Wicket on striking it off, and the Wicket ball shall be struck from the inside, and the bowler shall pass over the Wicket when the ball is bowled.
5. The Bowler shall be within 10 feet of the Wicket when the ball leaves his hand.
6. Flying balls only out. (No bound catches).
7. The striker shall put his bat on the ground on or over the tick-mark, except in the case where the striker is caught or ticked out, after the strikers have passed each other.
8. There shall be no crossing the alley while the ball is being bowled.
9. No striker shall strike the ball more than once with his bat, neither shall he stop it with his bat for the purpose of kicking it.
10. When the ball has touched the hands of a bowler, it shall be bowled by him before it is passed to the opposite bowler.
11. It shall be the duty of the Judge to stop any unnecessary shinning.
12. There shall be one Judge and two Tallymen, and the tallymen shall compare their account at the close of the game.
13. The Supper for the whole party, including the Judge and Tallymen, shall be paid for by the defeated party.
14. Last ball to count 4; but the strikers must make the four crosses.

Bristol, Connecticut: In the Olden Time New Cambridge; 1907, page 294-305.

- 1st. – The ball shall be from 3 ³/₄ to 4 inches in diameter and weigh from 9 to 10 ounces.
- 2^d. – The wickets shall be 75 feet apart.
- 3^d. – The wickets shall be six feet long.
- 4th. – The tick marks shall be six feet from the wickets.
- 5th. – The ball shall strike the ground on or before it reaches the center, to be a bowl.
- 6th. – The bowler must start from behind the wicket and pass over it in bowling.
- 7th. – The bowler shall be within ten feet of the wicket, when the ball leaves his hand.
- 8th. – A throw or jerk, is in no case a bowl, but the arm in bowling must be kept perfectly straight.
- 9th. – In ticking, the bowler must stand astride or back of the wicket striking it off from the inside, retaining the ball in his hand.
- 10th. – When the bowler has received the ball, it shall be bowled by him before it is passed to the other bowler.
- 11th. – The striker shall in no case molest the ball when it is being thrown in, so as to hinder the bowler from ticking him out.
- 12th. – There shall be no crossing the alley when the ball is being bowled.
- 13th. – There shall be no unnecessary shinning.
- 14th. – In catching, flying balls only are out. A ball caught before striking any other object but the catcher is out.
- 15th. – In crossing, the striker shall tick his bat down on or over the tick. Mark to have a cross count except when caught or ticked out.
- 16th. – No striker shall strike a ball more than once except in defense of his wicket, neither shall he stop the ball with his bat and then kick it.
- 17th. – No one shall get in the way of a striker to prevent his crossing freely.
- 18th. – Lost ball may have four crosses run on it.
- 19th. – No one but the judge may cry “no bowl”.

