



The Evolution of the Spitball

The use of spit to get extra movement on a breaking ball is as old as the game itself. There are solid stories of Tommy Bond and Chick Fraser throwing what could be termed a spitball back in the 1800s. Bobby Matthews was one of the game's first great pitchers, and his "drop ball" was actually a spitter. There is an account of Matthews using this "drop pitch" when he was 16 years old, which was way back in 1868!

But apparently no pitcher from the 1800s had such an electrifying spitball that they used it as their main pitch. Unlike the next generation of spitballers, the early practitioners of the pitch seemed to be going for a more mild form of the pitch that would be easier to control, and the detailed descriptions of their technique generally involved just moistening the tips of their fingers.



"Corridon ... started experimenting with a wet ball, later getting this ball under control. I think this was the birth of the spit ball."

*— Geo. Hildebrand
in a letter to Ernest Lanigan, Feb-20-1920*

The second coming of the spitball had pitchers who were getting a huge break on the pitch, and rather than wetting their fingers, they focused on moistening a spot on the ball itself. Some were described as slobbering on the ball, and a few even licked the ball directly with their tongues. One spitballer of the new generation described his method as wetting a spot on the ball about the size of a "half dollar." The big breaking pitch was tough to control, but for those who could master it, it was such a superb weapon that around 1904 we began to see for the first time pitchers who were using it as their dominant pitch. Thanks to a letter written in 1920 by respected umpire George Hildebrand, we have an unusually clear picture of how this came about.

Before becoming an umpire, George had been an outfielder, playing primarily in the minor leagues. In 1902, while George was with the Providence Grays in the International League, he was warming up with a pitcher named Frank "Fiddler" Corridon who showed him his spitball, and in the old style, Corridon was just "wetting the tips of his fingers" so he could better control the pitch.

As an outfielder, Hildebrand simply enjoyed the novelty of the pitch and didn't care about control. He wanted to see how much break he could get on a pitch. He got really impressive results when he used more spit on the ball. He wrote, "I held the ball the same as Corridon, only wetting it a great deal more." In an appropriate distinction from Corridon's old style spitball or "drop ball," Hildebrand called this pitch a "wet ball." Corridon refined the big breaking wet pitch into one that he could control well enough to use in a game. And so Corridon — who technically had already been a spitballer — appears to be the first of the new generation of spitballers throwing the wetter pitch.

Even more important in the evolution of the spitball is Hildebrand's account in the same letter about showing the "wet ball" to another pitcher later that year. Hildebrand was a native of San Francisco, and in the fall of 1902, he joined the Sacramento club for the extended season of the Coast League. Sacramento had a skinny little pitcher named Elmer Stricklett who had hurt his arm, lost his fastball, and the club was close to giving up on him and releasing him. Hildebrand taught him his version of the spitball, and Stricklett proved to be an exceptional pupil. He quickly mastered the pitch, won eleven straight games, and saved his career.

Hildebrand's letter goes on to describe how a touring team of major leaguers came to play exhibition games on the Coast, and one of those players was American League pitcher Jack Chesbro who was fascinated by what he saw when they went up against Stricklett's spitball. Here was this little 5-foot-six, 140-pound pitcher, with no fastball, and he was getting out big league hitters with an amazing breaking ball. Chesbro had Stricklett teach him the pitch, and Jack began throwing the "wet ball" in the majors in 1903, and by 1904 it had become his main pitch.



Elmer Stricklett
Master Teacher of the Spitball

That same 1904 season, Fiddler Corridon made his debut in the National League as its first dedicated spitballer. Overin the American League, Elmer Stricklett would pitch briefly that spring with Chicago before going to the minors. That fall he was drafted by Brooklyn in the Rule 5 draft, and he proved to be a huge bargain. He became a regular starter in their rotation for the next three seasons, and in 1906 he led the team in both innings pitched and in ERA. He relied so heavily on his wet pitch that the newspapers nicknamed him "Spitball" Stricklett.

But Stricklett's biggest contribution to the spitball had taken place during his brief stay with the White Sox. Manager Fielder Jones was impressed with Stricklett's spitball and asked him to teach the pitch to his roommate, a rookie named Ed Walsh. At first Ed had a difficult time controlling the pitch, but by 1906, it had become his best pitch. He won seven games in a row and went from mediocrity to a six-year stretch where he was the game's best pitcher. From 1906 to 1911 he had the most innings, most strikeouts, and the best ERA (1.62) of any pitcher in baseball.



Ed Walsh
working up the ol' saliva.

Walsh relied so heavily on the pitch that he needed to chew slippery elm bark to keep his saliva flowing and get him through the game. He estimated there were many games where he was throwing 90% spitballs. His success caused the pitch to spread like wildfire. Over one hundred pitchers in his era have been identified as throwing the spitball, and dozens developed sufficient control of the spitter to use it as their main pitch. As early as 1907 hitters began complaining and said that the spitter was the toughest pitch to hit.

When the spitball was outlawed in 1920, seventeen established spitballers were allowed to keep using the pitch. The last, Burleigh Grimes, retired in 1934, and it is safe to say we have seen nothing since that was truly like the spitball in its heyday in the early part of the 20th century. All the spitballs in the modern era have been illegal pitches, and these covert spitballers cannot afford to be too obvious in doctoring the ball, or raising suspicions by getting too big a break on the pitch. These modern spitballs being thrown on the sly are likely more similar to the early spitballs of the 1800s than the super spitters thrown in the days of Ed Walsh.

"I think [Walsh's spitball] disintegrated on the way to the plate and the catcher put it back together again. I swear, when it passed the plate it was just the spit that went by."
– Hall of Fame outfielder Wahoo Sam Crawford

Research Notes

- ⊖ The spitball of the 1800s was also called a "drop curve." The term "spitball" was not really used until the 1900s. The pitch was also called the "saliva shoot" and a few called it a "thumb ball." (The principle of the spitter is to use the spit to get the fingers to slide off the ball earlier and that gave the thumb a larger role in the release of the ball and the control of the pitch.)
- ⊖ Hildebrand umpired in the American League for 23 years (1912-34) and wrote the letter at the request of Ernest Lanigan who was a respected sports editor and baseball historian who published the first Baseball Encyclopedia in 1922. He later became the curator and historian at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Hildebrand's account of the birth of the spitball was apparently the basis of a story written by P.A. Meany for *Baseball Magazine* in 1913. In 1920 Lannigan contacted Hildebrand to confirm that account. The resulting letter from Hildebrand is today part of a collection held by the New York Public Library.
- ⊖ Jack Chesbro said he learned his spitball in the spring of 1903 from a demonstration by Elmer Stricklett. The only difference between his memory and George Hildebrand's letter is that Hildebrand thought that lesson had taken place in late 1902.