

The Evolution of the Baseball Cap in America 1858-2015

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Introduction:

While the origin of hats is unknown, it is assumed that the first hat was created to protect against the elements. Hats, as far back as known history can trace them, have been worn for either fashion or function reasons. The bonnet, popular in the 19th century, was a practical hat that shielded from the sun and kept the hair out of the face. Sometimes, styles become fashionable for aesthetic reasons. Fashion hats beyond practicality with feathers and large brims wider than the shoulders have appeared in American fashion throughout the decades.

Perhaps the two most important parts of fashion are contradictory. One, people use fashion to express their individuality but also two, they use it to identify with a culture or group of people. Before the creation of Hollywood and its movie culture American culture and fashion differed drastically in separate parts of the country. Therefore, many give Hollywood (and the invention of national radio and television) the credit for unifying American culture and fashion. However, prior to Hollywood's inception the baseball cap was invented. There is perhaps nothing more universally and globally recognizably American than the baseball cap. Over the decades, this cap has become recognized by the world as America's hat. The baseball cap survived decades of fashion evolution as it united people across the country.

The Baseball Cap:

The baseball cap is a great example of both fashion and practicality. The cap, as we know it today, was created by Ehrhardt Koch's company, New Era. When Koch's son realized how popular the sport of baseball had become he pitched the idea of creating a practical hat for players to wear while playing the game. The innovative design was made of six panels of wool sewn together and a leather sweatband, both intended to soak up the sweat.

Additionally, the cap had a visor intended to block the harsh sunlight. Prior to this invention players wore a variety of random hats or no hat at all. At the time Major League Baseball only included sixteen teams, and so although this cap was an ingenious invention, professional baseball could not sustain it's production. New Era needed to come up with other creative revenue opportunities. Therefore, the company began offering that at the end of each baseball playing season, for \$1.50 a piece, New Era would clean and mend the team's caps. Additionally, New Era realized the great selling potential of the cap. Brand historian Jim Wannemacher shares this realization: "if Major League Baseball players wore it, then everybody else would fall in line" (Bleier, 2020). So, New Era began knocking on doors in major cities with home teams, urging fans to purchase caps.

Who Wore the Cap First:

The amateur baseball team, the Brooklyn Excelsiors was the first team to wear an early version of the modern-day baseball cap. They began wearing their caps in 1858. The design evolved throughout the years to become more functional. Ultimately leading to New Era's version. The structured visor keeps the sun's glare out of the eyes, and the sweatband design is still used today. Interestingly enough, baseball stadiums used to have strict dress codes. Men had to wear a shirt, tie, and formal hat. When the dress codes were removed in the early 1900s fans began wearing their team's caps (Potter, 2016). The standard of fans wearing their team's hats was set by New Era as they knocked door to door selling caps (Bleier, 2020). New Era used the baseball cap to change the course of American fashion.

The Year That Changed Everything:

In 2015 the baseball cap experienced its most powerful fashion year since its inception. Prior to 2015, the cap was worn solely in connection to the game. Players and fans all across America wore their logoed baseball caps, regardless of the baseball season. But it was always worn to show support to a team with its logo. People wanted to clearly identify as

part of a specific team's fanbase. Also it is important to note that the cap was part of an individual's casual wardrobe. In 2015 the narrative changed. There was now a conscious effort to draw consumers in who are not interested in sports. For the first time brands began creating caps without logos or with non-sports logos. Perhaps most interesting, the baseball cap was accepted by high fashion brands like Givenchy and Kenzo released baseball caps as part of their collections. The fashion houses realized the cap was the perfect "entry-level designer purchase"(DeLeon, 2015). Caps made of luxury materials like cashmere, wool, herringbone tweed, and suede began appearing on the runways. Some designers even released caps embellished with beads and intricate embroidery intended for formal wear. Additionally, the cap underwent some structural changes. Brands started making some caps with five panels instead of six and a flat brim. This new structure further modernized the cap.

Breaking Boundaries:

The baseball cap breaks boundaries. It began with changing stadium dress code rules and continued through the decades. Once fans started wearing the caps to the stadiums they began wearing the caps to other casual social events. The cap is a unifying language between social classes everyone can understand baseball and a logo cap unites fans regardless of economic status. It is also a great conversation starter. Wear a Yankees cap to the south and people want to know how you like living in New York City, wear a Red Socks cap to Yankee Stadium, people want to know what you are doing there.

Outside of sports the cap helps break the divide between high-end designer and low-end fashion. Consumers without the budget for standard luxury brand goods can still probably afford a luxury brand baseball cap. These caps with brand name logos on the front, can be worn often and with many outfits. Allowing the budget minded consumer the

opportunity to sport a luxury brand. Additionally, in 2015, the cap broke the boundary between formal and casual wear.

My Opinion:

I call the baseball cap, America's hat. To me, its functional design represents our work ethic and the American dream. Come to America, wear the hat, work hard and anything is possible. The cap is part of today's fashion because of the American work ethic. It is inspiring to learn about Ehrhardt Koch and his company's journey to creating one of the most globally famous hats. He had the business mastermind to realize his product's potential and the work ethic to start selling caps directly to consumers in their homes.

It is beautiful how powerful the cap is at breaking boundaries. I remember the first time I went to Yankee Stadium. As the train travelled closer to the Bronx it filled with fans of all ages, religions, and backgrounds. We were all excited to get to the game. People began conversing with strangers, predicting the scores. The unity on the train ride up to Yankee Stadium is unique, something I have never felt anywhere else in the world.

Conclusion:

The baseball cap is an important part of America's history. Its story is intertwined with America's journey to a unified culture. It began with the sport itself. People in different cities quickly became fans of their home team and followed the season's scores, bringing other cities to their attention. Once stadium rules loosened up and allowed casual wear, fans were ready to represent and show support to the team through their apparel. Baseball caps served as the bridge between formal and casual. Men who were used to never leaving the house without a hat on now wore the cap to a game. As American fashion shifted further towards casual trends people began wearing the caps as part of their casual wear. When 2015 fashion

collections were released the cap further cemented itself in fashion as no longer a simply sports related item. The baseball cap had entered dressy and formal apparel.

The cap's journey is not over. Given its global presence the baseball cap is bound to undergo further modifications and changes in the coming years and centuries. I wonder which boundaries the break next. Perhaps the cap will distance itself from the game and baseball will take on new fashion. If it does, will the cap maintain its name?

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