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# Joe Borden

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## **This article was written by Charlie Weatherby**

Joe Borden, an amateur who broke into professional baseball at the age of 21, had a short but notable two-year major-league pitching career, playing in 39 games and posting a record of 13-16 with an earned-run average of 2.56. Although his record appears unassuming, he is best known for pitching professional baseball's first no-hitter, in 1875, and winning the National League's first game, in 1876. He was also involved in a few other "firsts."

In an era when pitchers threw underhand from 45 feet and batters could request a pitch location, Borden's pitching style was described by pioneer baseball writer Henry Chadwick as "having speed, but with little strategy. ... In addition to his swiftly moving fastball, he also delivered a curveball that moved down and away from right-handed batters. Both pitches he delivered from a low arm angle." He was called "phenomenal" when he broke in, but was released in the middle of his second season, causing *Sporting Life* to note that Borden's career "went up like a rocket and came down like a stick."

Joseph Emley Borden was born on May 9, 1854, in Jacobstown, Burlington County, New Jersey. He was the fourth of John H. and Sarah Ann (Emley) Borden's six children. His parents were New Jersey natives; his father was a prominent and well-to-do merchant who manufactured boots and shoes. Borden was a descendant of Henry Borden (1370-1469) of Headcorn, Kent, England. Researchers believe that the family (originally named DeBourdon) came from Normandy with William the Conqueror in 1066.

By 1870 the Borden family had relocated to Philadelphia, where 16-year-old Joe began to play baseball. In 1875 he was a member of the J.B. Doerr club, a crack amateur squad that played the best teams in Philadelphia and environs. On July 12, Doerr faced the professional Philadelphia Athletics of the National Association. With Borden in the box pitching under the name "Josephs," Doerr won 6-4, "the Athletics being unable to hit him," according to the *Boston Globe*. Borden's outing earned him widespread notice in the press.

Meanwhile, the White Stockings (also called the Pearls), another Philadelphia National Association club, needed a pitcher; Cherokee Fisher, who had started all 41 games up to July 22, was dismissed from the team for what author David Nemecek called "drunkenness and general misbehavior." George Zettlein, formerly of the Chicago White Stockings, was signed

as a replacement but wasn't immediately available. Desperate for help, manager Mike McGeary invited Borden to pitch for a few days as a noncontract player.

Before his professional debut against the Athletics on July 24, Borden persuaded McGeary to enter his name on the lineup card as Josephs; baseball historian Rich Westcott wrote that "Borden's family... did not approve of his playing baseball. ... Borden ... used pseudonyms, pitching under the name of Nedrob (Borden spelled backward) or Joe Josephs." In a game the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called "long and tedious, although closely contested in the first six innings," Borden surrendered eight runs in the seventh and eighth innings as the Pearls lost 11-4; "Joseph's pitching was swift but rather wild," the *Inquirer* said. Teammate Tim Murnane, who later played with Borden in Boston and became a respected sportswriter for the *Boston Globe*, said Joe "was hammered all over the lot."

Borden's second outing, an 8-1 loss, came two days later against Chicago; again, the *Inquirer* said, he was "rather wild."

With two losses under his belt, no one could have expected what came next. On July 28 Borden threw major-league baseball's first no-hitter, a 4-0 shutout of the Chicago White Stockings before 500 spectators at Philadelphia's Jefferson Park. In the *Chicago Tribune's* opinion, "The threatening appearance of the weather deterred many from witnessing one of the best games ever played. From the effective pitching of Josephs the Chicagos were unable to make a base hit throughout the entire game – a thing unparalleled in the annals of baseball." The 1 hour and 40 minute contest was the National Association's only no-hitter during its five years of play.

Two early August contests with Boston, by far the best National Association team, made a big impact on Borden's short major-league career. On August 3 rainy weather in Boston forced cancellation of the day's game between the Pearls and Red Caps, but a large contingent of fanatics were treated to a muddy exhibition between the two clubs, with each team exchanging pitchers and catchers. Boston won the six-inning contest, 4-2, with the *Boston Globe* noting that Borden "bothered his own men so that they went out in one, two, three order" in the first and second innings.

Though the weather was threatening on August 4, the 4-3 Boston victory in 11 innings was, in the *Globe's* opinion, "one of the most, if not *the* most exciting game ever played in this city." According to the *Boston Journal*, "Josephs, for an amateur player, is certainly a marvel. Not only is he one of the finest pitchers which the Bostons have ever faced, but he is

a splendid fielder and good batsman. His delivery is swift and accurate, and he has the strength to hold out, as his pitching of yesterday demonstrated, for in the eleventh inning he was, if anything, swifter than in the other innings. ... [He is] a pitcher, not a thrower."

After a 2-0 loss to Chicago on August 5, Borden notched his second win of the year on August 9 with a 16-0 rout of the St. Louis Brown Stockings, surrendering just four hits. From August 18 through the end of the season on October 25, George Zettlein pitched 21 of the Pearls' remaining 23 games. Borden briefly returned to the box on September 2 against Boston, a contest that ended in an 8-8, ten-inning tie. He finished the season with a 2-4 record, pitching 66 innings and posting an ERA of 1.50, third in the league. His opponents' batting average of .181 and on-base percentage of .203 were the lowest for a pitcher that season. (It was the last year of the National Association, a league that started with 13 teams and finished with seven.)

Borden came to be known as "the phenomenon" or "Josephus the Phenomenal." He again pitched for the Doerr club on September 3, but received lucrative offers from several professional teams, including the Philadelphia Pearls. The *Globe* noted that he had another means of support, being "in the boot and shoe business in [Philadelphia]" probably with his father, and "steadily refused all offers," insisting on a long-term contract. Nevertheless, on September 5, the Boston Red Caps' president Nathaniel Apollonio, and manager, Harry Wright, signed Borden to a three-year contract worth \$2,000 a year. According to baseball historian Peter Morris, this was one of the first multiyear contracts in major-league history.

The *Boston Daily Advertiser* was effusive in its praise of Borden, calling him "probably the best pitcher in the country next to [future Hall of Fame member Al] Spalding," who would soon sign with Chicago. The *Globe* observed, "His batting record as an amateur is first class."

With the National Association giving way to the new National League, the Boston club held its first 1876 practice at a YMCA on March 16. Borden was reported to be in splendid condition due to playing skittles during the winter. According to the *Globe*, all of the players were weighed and measured; Borden was listed at 5-feet-7¼-inches tall, (shorter than the 5-feet-9 listed in today's records) and 139¾ pounds.

The first game in National League history took place on April 22 at the Philadelphia Athletics' Jefferson Street Grounds. Borden and the Red Caps edged the Athletics, 6-5, before 3,000 spectators, making him the league's first winning pitcher. The Athletics stroked

ten hits, but squandered a superior offensive attack by making 11 errors. In a rematch two days later, Philadelphia routed Boston, 20-3; according to the *Inquirer*, "Josephs ... was hit with ease."

On April 25 Borden was the winning pitcher in a 7-6 victory over the New York Mutuals; manager Harry Wright replaced him with Jack Manning in the fifth inning, after he had surrendered five runs, making Borden the first starting pitcher in the National League to be relieved.

Boston's first home game, on April 29, was a 3-2 loss to Hartford. The winning run scored on Borden's wild pitch with two outs in the tenth, a ball that sailed ten feet over the catcher's head and into the grandstand, where, according to the *Globe's* Tim Murnane, "[it]made a hit with a swell society woman of Chicago ... hitting her in the face. The game was delayed while Mr. Borden went into the stand and made a dignified apology, and later called at the woman's residence, where in due time he was royally entertained and pronounced a well-bred gallant."

Borden's next game was also memorable. In the third inning of a 15-3 Hartford victory, he hit a leadoff single but became confused about who had the ball and was tagged out by first baseman Everett Mills, thus becoming the first National Leaguer to be a victim of the hidden-ball trick. For the second game in a row, Borden was replaced at pitcher by Manning and spent the rest of the game in right field.

On May 23, 1876, Borden pitched what might have been the first no-hitter in National League history, blanking the Cincinnati Red Stockings, 8-0. Box scores indicate two hits for the Reds, but 75 years later, according to SABR researcher David Nemec, baseball historian Lee Allen found that the two hits charged to Borden were really walks called hits by official scorer Opie Caylor, who usually counted walks as hits. This conclusion continues to be controversial; scorekeeping was not uniform in that era. Other historians doubt Allen's interpretation and maintain that George Bradley threw the league's first no-hitter, in July 1876.

Borden's stock took a dive during June. Chicago, with Al Spalding pitching, won three straight against Boston and Borden between May 30 and June 3, putting to rest the assertion that Borden was anywhere near Spalding's equal. Joe's wild throws and his nervous demeanor were harshly criticized by fans and the press, which suspected that he had a sore arm. Others speculated that he had changed his delivery or "lost his cunning." In

the *Chicago Tribune's* opinion, "These games should ... convince the Bostonians that Borden is nothing more than a third-class player in the pitcher's position. If they don't believe it now, they will within two weeks." According to author Neil Macdonald, "It was plainly evident that [Borden's] future was becoming the substance of clouds. He was throwing so wildly that batsmen and umpires gyrated in turbulent terror dodging his errant throws. ... He was throwing tantrums over his own inability to throw strikes."

On June 29 Borden recorded his final major league "first." Pop Snyder of the Louisville Grays hit a tenth-inning home run off him to give Louisville an 8-6 win over Boston. It was the first extra-inning game-winning home run in the National League.

Borden's final pitching appearance was on July 15, 1876, a 15-0 loss to Chicago and Al Spalding; Borden was relieved by Manning in the fifth after giving up four runs. The *Chicago Tribune* concluded that the two pitchers' performance represented "some of the worst pitching of the year. ... Neither Manning nor Josephs were any sort of use against the Whites, who had their batting armor on and made things very lively in the field." This was the final straw for Harry Wright, who had Manning make the next 11 starts. Foghorn Bradley replaced him for the final 17 games.

Borden made his final major-league appearance on July 19 in Philadelphia, where he played right field in a 10-7 win over the Athletics. It was his 16th game in the outfield, where he had seven errors and a miserable .462 fielding percentage. For the year, Borden was 11-12 in the box with a 2.89 ERA (tenth in the league) in 218 1/3 innings. He had 22 errors as a pitcher (second in the league), 34 strikeouts (sixth), and 21 wild pitches (third).

Borden was mediocre as a hitter, posting a .188 average; extra-base hits were rare (three doubles) and RBIs (8) were hard to come by. One of his better days at the plate was against Al Spalding on June 3, when he was 2-for-4 with a run scored.

Although Borden was released by the Red Caps on August 17, there was the matter of the two-plus years remaining on his contract. According to Peter Morris, club management came up with a plan to deal with the situation. First, they tried to get Borden to abandon his contract, which failed. Next, they gave him twice-a-day grounds keeping duties while also requiring him to attend daily practices. Borden, who had obtained legal advice on the contract's validity, did all that was asked of him, including serving as an umpire for an exhibition game between Boston and Fall River on October 14. He continued to be employed by the Red Caps until February 1877, when club president and noted tightwad

Arthur Soden negotiated a buyout.

With his exit, the press brutally reviewed Borden's tenure in Boston. The *Boston Herald* called his engagement "ill-advised, although he showed some talent as a pitcher. ... [He was] one of the most outrageous frauds who ever saw his name in a score sheet ... hired at a large salary to do certain work which he could not do, and the least spark of manhood or decency in him would have dictated his withdrawal when he could not carry out his contract. No one but a plug would have hung on and drawn money for which he returned no service. ... he was a glaring failure."

In 1900 the *Globe's* Murnane called Borden "perhaps the greatest failure that ever came to the Boston club." He wrote that Borden's initial trial with the 1875 Philadelphia club was "as much for a joke as anything," suggesting that he "was cute enough to lay up for the rest of the season and pick the best offer for the next year."

Done with professional baseball, Borden returned to Pennsylvania. In 1878 he was living in West Chester, near Philadelphia, and had his own business manufacturing and retailing boots and shoes. He briefly returned to baseball during the summer of 1883 when he joined West Chester's Brandywine Base Ball Club, a semipro team that played the region's best competition. On August 28 Borden pitched, played first base, and was 1-for-11 as Brandywine won games from two clubs, Christiana and the Alerts of Rock Run. His only other connection to baseball occurred in July 1888 when he was on a sales trip to Washington and ran into Boston Beaneaters' manager John Morrill, a former Red Cap teammate, on the train. Morrill introduced him to future Hall of Fame pitcher John Clarkson and catcher King Kelly.

In early June 1889, *Sporting Life* reported that Borden was a victim of the disastrous Great Johnstown (Pennsylvania) Flood, an error that was corrected in its June 19 issue, which said that he was "safe at his home in Philadelphia."

On February 7, 1891, Borden married Henrietta S. Evans in West Chester. The *Inquirer* described the festivities as "a brilliant society wedding." Evans was the daughter of newspaper publisher and politician Henry S. Evans and his wife, Jane, whose father was a doctor, historian, noted botanist and former Congressman William Darlington. Her grandfather was Revolutionary War General John Lacey, who later served in the New Jersey legislature. The Bordens set up residence with her mother in West Chester. They had two children, Richard, who did not survive his first year, and Lavinia.

By the time of his marriage, Borden was out of the footwear business and was an officer of a Philadelphia bank, Guarantee Trust and Safe Deposit Company, a position he held for more than two decades. He was also the Philadelphia representative of the U.S. Shipping Board, a federal government agency. By 1900 the Bordens had moved to Fernwood, a neighborhood in Yeadon, a west Philadelphia suburb.

Although he wasn't involved in baseball, Borden took pride in being in good physical condition and trained regularly at the Philadelphia Boxing Academy, where he was an amateur boxer "as good as the best," in the opinion of the *West Chester Daily Local News*. An avid hunter, Borden was a member of the Girard Kennel Club and owned some of the finest hunting dogs in the country, both beagles and bird hounds. One of his bird dogs, Ruby D III, won every show she was exhibited in and, according to the *Daily Local News*, "proved so finely drawn in all points that she became known world-wide and the standard of the class was raised by the dog authorities because of her showing."

Borden died on October 14, 1929, at the home of his daughter, Lavinia Cook Borden Adams, in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania. He was 75; the cause of death was listed as paralysis. He was survived by his daughter and a sister, Florence Borden of Philadelphia. His death came on the same day the Philadelphia Athletics won the World Series with a 3-2 victory over the Chicago Cubs. He is buried in the Darlington family plot at West Chester's Oaklands Cemetery. According to Rich Westcott, "His grave site was unkempt and unnoticed for many years until located by SABR member Tom Taylor [in 1990]. The unadorned tombstone makes no mention [of his] baseball career."

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