

## The Evolution of the Baseball Cap

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When Hamas won a surprise victory in the Palestinian Parliamentary elections in January of 2006, the group's followers celebrated by parading through the streets of the West Bank and Gaza. Thousands of them showed their solidarity by wearing the movement's de facto membership icon: a green Hamas baseball cap.

It is a safe bet that most of the people wearing the cap that day—some of whom you can see in Figure 1 of the handout that's been distributed around the room here—had never seen a baseball game, and wouldn't even recognize one if it was plopped down in front of them. And that's just one measure of how the baseball cap—by which I mean a multi-paneled cap with a fused brim in the front, usually but not always with a button on top—has become America's most ubiquitous cultural export of the past generation, spreading far beyond the baseball diamond, even to places and contexts where baseball itself is largely unknown. Much like blue jeans, which are America's other primary contribution to global fashion, the baseball cap has become an all-purpose sartorial statement that has transcended its original context and can now be found in virtually any setting.

To get a sense of just how ubiquitous the baseball cap has become, consider for a moment its proliferation just throughout the sports world. In addition to the players on the baseball field, the umpires also wear baseball caps. Moving beyond baseball, we find that tennis players often wear baseball caps; Nascar pit crews wear baseball caps; lots of golfers wear baseball caps (many of them, in fact, including the most famous golfer of all, Tiger Woods, are contractually required to wear baseball caps by their corporate sponsors).

In football, the referee and other officials on the field wear baseball caps, most of the coaches wear baseball caps, and saying that backup quarterbacks get paid "to hold a clipboard and wear a baseball cap" has become such a cliché that if you google the words "backup quarterback baseball cap," you get 236,000 hits. And in virtually any team sport, including football, basketball, and hockey, a team that wins its league's championship is almost immediately outfitted, right there on the field, with baseball caps that say, "2008 World's Champions," or "Super Bowl 41 Champions," or whatever the case might be.

Moving outside the realm of sports, letter carriers and UPS drivers often wear baseball caps. You've probably seen movies or news clips showing ATF agents—that's the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms—wearing baseball caps. Farmers wear baseball caps, often emblazoned with the logo of John Deere or the local feed store. Boy Scouts wear baseball caps, and if you've ever watched an episode of M\*A\*S\*H, you've seen that Army fatigues include baseball caps. Hunters wear camouflage baseball caps. Apparel manufacturers like Lands' End and J.Crew sell fashion baseball caps, and companies specializing in promotional merchandise, like custom-printed polo shirts and ballpoint pens, do a huge business putting various corporate logos on baseball caps. Trucker caps, also sometimes known as gimme caps, are baseball caps. Painters caps are essentially baseball caps. And while you don't often see John McCain or Barack Obama wearing baseball caps, you can buy official McCain and Obama baseball caps on their respective web sites, as you can see in Fig. 2.

And that's all just here in the United States. As the Hamas example illustrates, baseball caps have also spread far beyond America, and beyond the countries where baseball is commonly played. If you've traveled abroad, you've no doubt seen people in baseball caps. Whenever there's news coverage of a natural disaster or humanitarian crisis virtually anywhere in the world, whether it's the tsunami that hit Indonesia in early 2005, the famine in sub-Saharan Africa, or the cyclone that struck Myanmar earlier this year, watch the aid workers distributing food and water and also the people receiving the food and water—you'll see lots of baseball caps.

Baseball caps have also become iconic symbols within certain subcultures. The most obvious example is in the American street-gang underworld, where wearing your cap rotated to one side or the other can be a sort of code. This has in turn led certain big league ballplayers—including the pitcher C.C. Sabathia, the American League's reigning Cy Young Award winner—to rotate their caps while on the field of play. It's a rare example of athleticwear influencing vernacular fashions, and then those fashions influencing athleticwear.

But again, this phenomenon extends beyond America. In the UK, for instance, there's a sort of white-trash youth subculture of teenagers called chavs, who among other things tend to wear baseball caps with a Burberry plaid pattern. These "Burberry caps," as they're known, became so closely associated with the chav scene's petty crime and rowdy violence that Burberry actually stopped producing its own branded baseball caps in 2004. The bigger question, of course, is why a British clothing company was producing a baseball cap in the first place.

Then again, it's easy enough to see why baseball caps are popular among laypeople. They're appealingly casual and nicely utilitarian. They keep the sun out of your eyes, cover your bald spot, and hide your bad hair day, all for a modest price. They can be manufactured either in specific fitted sizes or as adjustable one-size-fits-all. And they allow you to broadcast your chosen affiliation with, or affection for, a team, a brand, or just a message.

In fact, the group of people for whom baseball caps are arguably least appropriate these days would appear to be, ironically enough, major league baseball players. Think about it: Most ballgames are now played at night, so there's no need to wear a cap with a brim. And the baseball uniform already carries the team's insignia on the jersey, so the cap isn't needed as a team identifier. Certainly there's no need for the players who aren't even in the game to wear a cap while they sit in the dugout or in the bullpen. And yet the cap remains as a required part of the baseball uniform for all players—and for coaches and managers, for that matter—regardless of whether they're actively participating in the game.

To understand how the baseball cap went from athletic accessory to becoming the blue jeans of headwear, we need to look at how it came about in the first place. And the most important thing to understand in that regard is that the baseball cap was not devised to keep the sun out of players' eyes, or as way to display a team's colors or logo. Early baseball players wore hats for one simple reason: In the mid-1800s, a gentleman did not appear outside in public with an uncovered head. So the baseball cap, which we now think of as the epitome of casual style, actually began as a gesture of formality.

But those early baseball caps looked nothing like the ones we're familiar with today. The game's first official uniform, adopted in 1849 by the New York Knickerbockers, featured straw hats. A few years later the team switched to a wool cap featuring a crown and a small visor, and by the late 1860s sporting goods manufacturers were offering a variety of cap styles, most of which we would recognize today as distant ancestors of the modern baseball cap. If you look at Figures 3 and 4 in the handout, you'll see some of the models that were offered in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Although the baseball cap evolved a bit over the ensuing decades, it remained strictly an athletic accessory, worn only on the baseball field. But that slowly changed, helped along by three major developments:

First, during the 1950s, the fedora, which had been the standard men's hat design for decades, began to fall out of use. The standard folk myth is that the fedora began heading downhill when Jack Kennedy was elected president and chose not to wear a top hat at his inauguration, and that American men took the cue from him to stop wearing hats, but this is mistaken on two counts: First, Kennedy did wear a top hat to his inauguration, as you can see in Figure 5—he simply removed the hat while giving his inaugural address. And second, fedora use had already been in steep decline throughout the 1950s. In fact, the hat lobby—yes, there really was such a thing as the hat lobby—had practically begged Kennedy to wear a hat to his inauguration, because their business was in a tailspin.

The fact is, Kennedy's inauguration wasn't the beginning of the end for the fedora—it was closer to the end of the end. In any case, the result was the same: The demise of the fedora created a headwear vacuum that essentially left American heads up for grabs.

That coincided with the second pertinent development, which also took place in the 1950s: the nationwide rise of Little League baseball, which provided a generation of American children with early access to baseball caps. Many of these kids began wearing their Little League caps off the field, as a way of imitating their baseball heroes. By the time these kids became adults in the late 1970s and early '80s, the demise of the fedora ensured that the baseball cap was the primary piece of headwear—and in many cases the ONLY piece—they had ever known.

That's when the third major development occurred: The folks at Major League Baseball finally figured out something that now seems obvious—namely, that people will happily fork over some cash to buy their favorite team's cap. It's hard to believe now, but up until around 1980, it was extremely difficult to buy a Mets cap or a Yankees cap—that type of merchandising simply hadn't been invented yet. The advent of that product line, along with the growing laxity of clothing standards during the intervening years, made the baseball cap the perfect all-purpose headwear choice for the latter part of the 20th century.

As the baseball cap's profile rose at retail and on the street, it began to supplant other forms of specialized headwear. Wolfgang Puck, the most famous young celebrity chef of the 1980s, refused to wear a chef's toque—instead, he wore a baseball cap, to symbolize his rejection of rigid, formal cooking styles, thereby making the metaphorical leap from less formal headwear to a less formal approach to his profession. And many police

departments added a sort of casual-Friday uniform featuring a baseball cap, instead of the usual eight-point policeman's hat. In fact, just yesterday, the cap manufacturer New Era announced that they're going to start selling Gotham City Police Department baseball caps, apparently based on ones worn by policemen in the new Batman movie.

So how did we get from there to Hamas baseball caps? The honest answer: I'm still working on that part. But there's no question that this unassuming piece of headwear is now considered acceptable in virtually any context except a funeral. And maybe even there, if the deceased was a Mets fan.