

Play-Ask-It-Ball: Army vs. Navy on the Air

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The radio quiz show was a staple of the airwaves during the 1940s and by the end of the decade the genre could claim enough listeners that Bert Park's *Stop the Music!* is credited with knocking the number one show of the 1947-48 season, *The Fred Allen Show*, entirely out of the top 20 the next year. The earliest quiz program is unknown but John Dunning points to *Professor Quiz* in 1936, an assessment which Jim Cox, author of the authoritative guide to radio quiz and audience participation shows, does not dispute.

In 1941 staff at Chicago's WGN developed a twist on the quiz show concept by pitting Naval seamen against Army soldiers. Though not yet engulfed in World War II, the eyes of America were warily watching Europe and East Asia erupting in war. The military services were gearing up in case the United States found itself dragged into the overseas conflicts and it seemed natural to bring the good-natured rivalry between service branches to the airwaves.

Whether Paul Fogarty originated the concept, he was called on to develop and act as producer of the new show, *Play-Ask-It-Ball*. Fogarty had been with WGN for over a decade, starting first as a writer and actor on local series such as *Big Leaguers and Bushers* and *The Devil Bird* in 1932. He had gradually been given more sports-related broadcasts and most of his responsibilities were off-mike by 1941.

The series would be broadcast from a number of military bases and at each location a five-person team would be chosen from audience members. They were brought up on a stage on which was laid out a replica of a baseball diamond. Despite its name, the game show was an adaptation of baseball, not basketball. *Play-Ask-It-Ball* required little physical movement; rather, hits and runs were earned not by athletic prowess but by correctly answering questions. Graded on four degrees of difficulty, questions from fifteen possible subjects could be worth either a single, double, triple, or home run. Topics ranged from sports and movies to geography, the Army, and the Navy.

Jack Brickhouse, a Peoria, IL-born sports announcer was called upon to act as emcee and “pitch” questions to the participants. Brickhouse had arrived at WGN only the year before in 1940 primarily to serve as announcer for Cubs and White Sox baseball games. Jess Kirkpatrick, a local actor who went on to a long career first in radio and then in television, handled the new program's announcing duties. He umpired the games and called all the plays.

Contestants were moved around the diamond as teammates answered additional questions correctly. A question assigned the difficulty of a single was worth one dollar to the answerer. A double earned the player two dollars, a triple three dollars, and a home run a whopping four dollars. An incorrect answer was rung up as an out.

Six sites were chosen to host the show, three representing the Navy and three representing the Army. At each site

the host team earned runs for their respective service and the runs would accumulate week after week. *Play-Ask-It-Ball* was to rotate through the six-team circuit three times for a total of eighteen broadcasts. After all eighteen quiz shows the winning service branch would be determined by the accumulated number of runs scored over the successive weeks.

Play-Ask-It-Ball premiered on WGN on Saturday, May 3, 1941, at 7:00 in front of an enthusiastic live audience of over 1,500 sailors in the drill hall at the Great Lakes Naval Training station in North Chicago. During the debut broadcast the sailors managed four runs during the half-hour program.

Standings: Navy 4, Army 0

For the second show the WGN crew traveled to Fort Sheridan, just north of Chicago, for the 7:00 broadcast. Again an estimated 1,500 servicemen packed into a gymnasium to see five fellow soldiers compete in the contest. The team proved more than capable, tripling up the number of runs scored by the previous week's team with twelve, giving the Army an eight run lead in the standings. After the quiz portion had ended Brig. Gen. John L. Homer, commandant at Fort Sheridan, spoke to listeners.

Standings: Navy 4, Army 12

The third episode aired May 17 from the Naval Reserve Aviation Training base at Glenview, IL. Following the quiz portion of the show Lieutenant-Commander R. K. Gaines, commanding officer of the aviation base, gave a short update to listeners on the base's training activities. A prodigious output of scoring by the Navy men put them up by six runs over their Army counterparts.

Standings: Navy 18, Army 12

Episode four aired May 24 from Camp Grant, Rockford, IL. Camp Grant's soldiers were up for the task and knocked in a whopping fourteen runs to leapfrog their Navy peers who had earned an impressive 18 runs in their first two outings. Notably, a female participant was chosen for the night's broadcast and she proved her worth. Lieut. Dorothy Case, a nurse at the camp's hospital and perhaps the series' only female participant, went two for three on the night. Col. Joseph Hamilton Davidson, commanding officer, was the guest speaker at the end of the broadcast.

Standings: Navy 18, Army 26

The fifth broadcast was made from the only base outside the Chicago metropolitan area. For the May 31 show (originally scheduled for June 7), WGN's team traveled all the way to Tullahoma, TN, where they set up at Camp Forrest to perform with members of the Illinois National Guard units. That evening the soldiers amassed a show-record eighteen runs during the half hour. Maj. Gen. Samuel T. Lawton, commanding officer of the 33rd division, discussed the role of the camp in national defense.

Standings: Navy 18, Army 44

On June 7 (originally scheduled for May 31) the *Play-Ask-It-Ball* crew journeyed to the Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School in Chicago. The contestants were apparently getting comfortable with the show's format because every week seemed to see scores get higher and higher. During this episode the Navy contestants scored 22 runs to pull within four runs of Army in the standings.

Standings: Navy 40, Army 44

When round two started on June 14 the show returned to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. Commander T. Dewitt Carr, new executive officer of the station, spoke after the conclusion of the quiz during what was now being billed as the seventh inning stretch. The Navy's men came through and pulled ahead of Army with a fourteen-run performance.

Standings: Navy 54, Army 44

The following week for the 8th show Fogarty and company returned to Fort Sheridan on June 21. The evening's speaker was Lieut. Sidney DeLove, Fort Sheridan's provost marshal. From here on out the scores were rarely reported so weekly standings are unknown.

Episode 9, broadcast June 28, was a return engagement to the Naval Reserve aviation station in Glenview, IL. Lieutenant Commander Richard K. Gaines was the post-quiz speaker again.

During the July 5 production the WGN team returned to Rockford's Camp Grant where Brig. Gen. John M. Willis, the camp's commanding officer, spoke to listeners afterward.

As of July 19, 1941, when *Play Ask-It-Ball* completed its second round in Camp Forrest at Tullahoma, TN, Navy had taken the lead in the two-team standings. Maj. Gen. Samuel T. Lawton again spoke during the seventh inning stretch.

On July 26 the third and final round of the armed forces quiz show hit the air. WGN's production crew returned one last time to the Great Lakes Naval Training station with Army leading Navy 94 to 82. Unfortunately, this is the last score so far discovered in research of the program.

Play-Ask-It-Ball returned to Glenview, IL, and the Naval Reserve Aviation school on August 9 and the following week, August 16, Brickhouse and Kirkpatrick made their third and final appearance at Camp Grant in Rockford.

The final broadcast in the *Play Ask-It-Ball* series aired August 30. It was hyped as the first radio quiz show to be aired from the scene of Army maneuvers, a mock battlefield near Camden, AR. The Illinois soldiers who had been located at Camp Forest, Tullahoma, TN for their previous two appearances, were on maneuvers with the second Army, necessitating the change in broadcast origination. Army went into the final contest down twelve runs. Did they overtake their Navy opponent or fall just short? The historical documents don't record the ultimate winner of the series.

Play-Ask-It-Ball may have been the first quiz show to feature members of the military but it was not the last. Jim Cox has identified at least one other, *The Army-Navy Game* featuring Fred Uttal. This series premiered the following year,

1942, and appeared on NBC Blue and the Mutual system until 1944. Interestingly, there's no indication that WGN considered reviving *Play-Ask-It-Ball* after World War II broke out just a few months after it left the air.