

Klaus-Dieter Gross (Regensburg)

Fistball at Camp Midvale



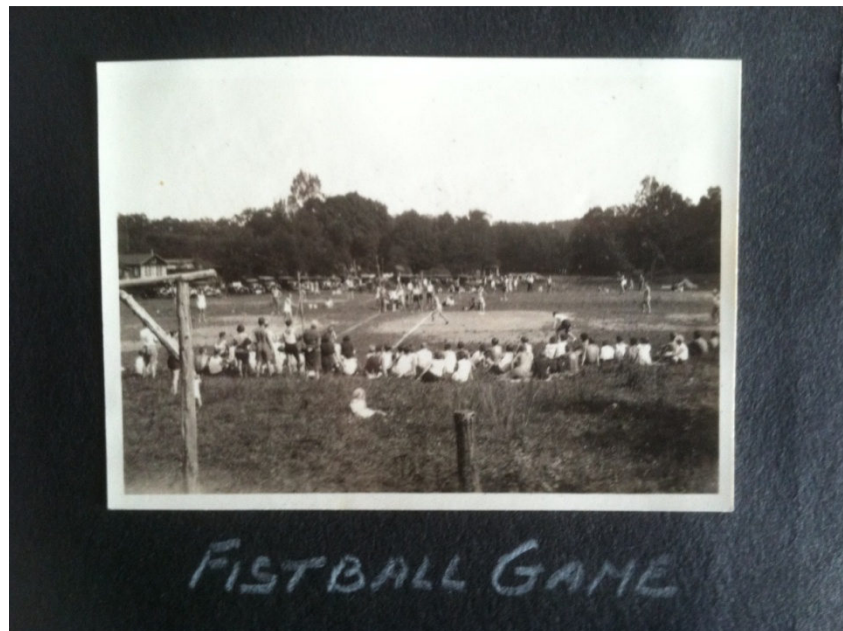
In the materials on the history of former Camp Midvale, once the biggest Nature Friends camp in the USA,¹ one comes across a type of sports not many Europeans and even fewer Americans know of: Fistball. The following survey thus adds up to our knowledge of everyday life at the Camp and exemplifies one more German influence on the practices of the American Nature Friends. In addition to giving proof to the presence of fistball on the grounds, the text sketches out basic rules of the game, and outlines a common background shared by fistball and the Nature Friends.²

¹ Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. "New York's Nature Friends: Their History, their Camps." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 2.1 (2014).

² Most of the images are part of the "Camp Midvale Originals" collection, a project aimed at restoring the history of the Camp. This one was contributed by Paul J. Fisher, who describes it as "another 1930s era photo of the New York campus from the archives of the Nature Friends Los Angeles Local."

Fistball at the Camp

The postcard reprinted above shows how prominently the fistball courts were located at the heart of the Camp, as do the following photos from Hans Wittich's valuable collection of visual documents ("Scrapbook").³ They prove it was attractive for players as well as for spectators and give an insight on both how the ball was played from in a defensive or setting position (i.e. with a stretched arm hitting the ball from below) and how both males and females participated.



³ Hans Wittich scrapbook; in "Camp Midvale Originals."

When attacking, a combination of physical skills and psychological concentration is necessary, like in this female attacker's spike:⁴

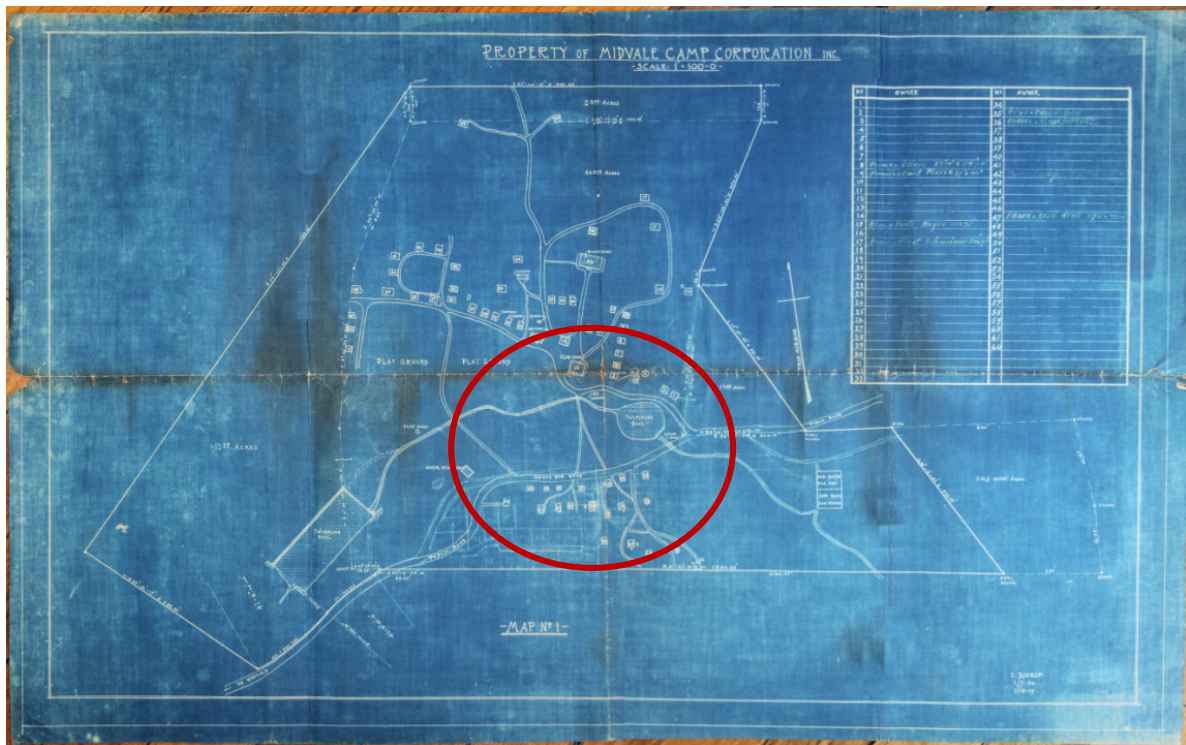


A map of the Camp, from the 1930s,⁵ indicates the concrete location of the fistball fields. Old-time members⁶ recall that three courts were situated in the space between the main access area to the Camp on the right and its new Olympic-size swimming pool on the left, next to the volleyball courts.

⁴ From "Camp Midvale Originals"; posted by Jody Nellessen.

⁵ From "Camp Midvale Originals."

⁶ Author's interviews with "old-timers" at the Camp in August 2012.



In Nature Friends journals fistball is often prominently mentioned first among ball sports, reflecting its high impact among members.⁷ Both local and national members' magazines report on how it was also played by Nature Friends elsewhere.

Regularly there were reports on the results of tournaments, such as this one of a "Sportmeet" at Camp Midvale on

Fist Ball:men N.F. - Hudson Co. 42-50
Hudson Co.11 - ATSB B'klyn 11 35-43
Fistball: women: N.F. - ATSB (comb.) 38-44

September 24-25, 1932⁸ (ATSB most probably is the "Arbeiter-Turn- und Sportverein" of Brooklyn, a German-speaking and working class sports organization friendly with yet not part of the Nature Friends). The Hudson County local's fistballers even used Midvale as their own venue.⁹

⁷ Among others, see *Nature Friend*, October 1936: 10.

⁸ *Bulletin of the Nature Friends New York*, November 1932: 8.

⁹ *Nature Friend*, August 1939: 15.

Outdoors

Aug. 20. We have decided that this should be Hudson County Day at Camp Midvale. All members of our Local should come and join in the fun. There will be fist ball, soft ball, swimming and hiking. For details concerning transportation to camp come to the social. We will strive to get you there if you have no car.
 Berg Frei. W. Schick, Sec'y.
 (Note: See notice of District Hike on Page 2.)

One major advantage of fistball was its flexibility and that it could easily be combined with other Nature Friends activities.¹⁰

HIKING

Hiking at this time of the year with children must be well planned to be a success. Pick a goal which will permit a campfire. The leaders must bring along in addition to the medical kit and football, matches, a hatchet and a knife. Children should be instructed to dress warmly. The pace must be steady and the children kept together while hiking. Picking dry twigs on the way while hiking will prove an interesting diversion, and will lead to much excitement.

It is helpful to have one leader play a sprightly game with the scouts, such as "three deep," while another leader builds the fire. As the twigs begin to crackle and the fire blaze, call the children together for luncheon, and be prepared with some good stories. Each child should be encouraged to tell his own.

Football, fistball or "Ring-O-Leavy-O" can be played to excellent advantage on hikes in cold weather. As a special treat, you can have marshmallow toasting, or chestnut roasting, or potato baking. A plan such as the above will prove a great source of fun and delight for both leaders and scouts. Write and tell us of your experience.

Along with volleyball, soccer, tennis, and athletics, it was so popular with youths during the mid-thirties that the Youth Section logo even included players in what clearly are gestures typical of fistball.¹¹

¹⁰ "NF Scouts Corner," *Nature Friend*, January 1936: 7.

¹¹ *Nature Friend*, September 1935 35: 9; also elsewhere, such as in the *Nature Friend*, November 1935 (anniversary) edition: 18.



Nevertheless contemporary players felt that there still was room for increasing the number of young players and for improving fistball's infrastructure at the Camp. How seriously some took their hobby is highlighted in the following report, which reflects an ambitious, even "bourgeois" competitiveness, both among youths and with the adults.¹² (In progressive contexts—at least theoretically—competition for its own sake was judged as individualistic and thus a breach of the values of class solidarity!)

Amongst its sports activities, the youth group in New York plays a great deal of fist-ball. Since it is seldom that there are enough youth group members at camp at any one time to make a team, one or two of the other boys in camp, as yet too young to join the group, play with us. We have opposed many adult teams and have beaten a great majority of them. In a recent tournament at Camp Midvale, the Youth team won its way to the semi-finals, but there we were defeated by a superior team. The team is improving greatly, and soon we may press the class A adult team to a challenge.

A member of our group suggests that the various locals engage themselves in series of games, at home and away, in different sports, such as baseball, fist-ball, tennis, swimming, track, or any other sport which the Youth might suggest. The present lack of facilities makes it improbable that we have these series in the near future. However, let us first see how this idea meets with the approval of the other groups. Here's hoping that next summer the plan will be in full swing. Berg frei. —L.K.

¹² Youth section in *Nature Friend*, September 1935: 9.

Some basic rules

Fistball is a team sport. The rectangular playing area is twenty meters wide and fifty (indoors forty) meters long; a ribbon (or small net, rope, or string) of two meters height (females 1.90), suspended between two upright posts above the "center line," separates the court in the middle, thus defining the teams' particular playing areas. The size of the ball is similar to that in soccer, i.e. heavier than a volleyball. The speed of a fast ball can be up to 100–120 km/h.

Wikipedia explains:

Each team consists of five players, with players trying to play the ball across the net from one half of the field of play to the opponents' half - using only their arm or closed fist (unlike in volleyball where open hands are allowed) - in a way in which the opponents cannot return it. After clearing the net, the ball may be contacted up to three times by the five players on each team - with a bounce being permissible before each contact (also unlike in volleyball where no bounce is allowed), but no repeat hits by any individual player within the three attempts. Similar to volleyball, the three hits are ideally used to save, set and spike the ball back into the opponents half, in that order.¹³

The ball is served from a service line three meters from the center line. Failure to return the ball is an "error" and counts one point for the other team.



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¹³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fistball#Overview> (Oct. 21, 2014).

¹⁴ Images taken in 2010 and 2013 at various in- and outdoor tournaments of the NaturFreunde fistball team of Regensburg (Germany) (photos by Christian Frimberger).

Fistball then and now

There is a controversy as to what an extent fistball is among the oldest ball sports ever.¹⁵ Implausibly it has even been dated back to the ancient Romans.¹⁶ More credibly, Italian sources suggest that during the Renaissance there were early versions of bouncing a ball across a line with the lower parts of the arms. In the 19th century, especially in German gymnastic circles ("Turner") it became popular as a social diversion from their otherwise highly individualistic exercises. Only in the 20th century did it turn into the athletic, dynamic, and competitive ball game of today; instead of trying to keep the ball going between teams as long as possible (as the early Turners did), now the aim was to force the opponent team into committing errors.

Fistball is not an Olympic sport, but the International Fistball Association (founded only in 1960) is a member of the International World Games Association. Tournaments range from local and purely leisure-time contests to continental and world championships.¹⁷ Of the roughly 60.000 players as of now (latest dates of 1999¹⁸), more than 40.000 are German, 8000 Austrian, and 7000 Swiss; Czech, Italian, and players from other neighboring countries often are part of the German communities there. Likewise, prestigious South American associations, among them Argentina, Brasil, Chile, and Uruguay, date back to German immigration. Well below the 1000 mark we have countries as diverse as Namibia or Japan. The USA joined the IFA after 1998.¹⁹ Not being an Olympic sport is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Popularity suffers from a lack of presence in the media and little support by financial sponsors; yet the absence of "Big Money" has helped retain classically "amateur" values, like friendship, togetherness, etc.—values the *Naturfreunde* / Nature Friends stick to up to the present day.

Occasionally, the "Turner"-background has given fistball a bad name among liberals due to the nationalistic agenda of the "Turner" movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but this is in no way the full picture. Fistball was also widely played in the German-language working class before the Second World War, and along with Central European working-class emigrants came to the USA. This is what historically explains fistball's presence at Camp Midvale (and other German-language

¹⁵ For such an opinion see, e.g., <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fistball> (Oct. 21, 2014).

¹⁶ Johannes Hafner's exam paper ("Durchführung eines Faustball-Projekts im Rahmen des Wahlbereichs im Sportunterricht der Mittelstufe" (Ludwigsgymnasium München 2014) convincingly argues that the game described in classical sources rather resembles that of hitting a (fixed) punching ball.

¹⁷ See <http://www.ifa-fistball.com/en> (Oct. 21, 2014).

¹⁸ For the following data see Jens Kolb. "Faustball - Eine Untersuchung zu Problemen, Problemlösungen und Möglichkeiten einer Weiterentwicklung und Verbreitung" (Oldenburg 2000), accessible at <http://faustball.tgd-essen-west.de/jenskolb/fbexjeko.htm> (Oct. 21, 2014) and <http://www.jens-kolb.de/examen/index.html> (Oct. 21, 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. <http://usfistball.com/> (Oct. 21, 2014).

working class contexts, as in the ATSB mentioned above). After the forced dissolution of the Nature Friends in the East and Midwest of the USA in the wake of McCarthyism (which severely damaged the Camp as well), their New York and Midvale substitute organization, the Metropolitan Recreation Association, certainly stuck to the progressive ideas of the *Naturfreunde*, but culturally and linguistically became more "Americanized." In a parallel development, also fistball was deteriorating during the late 1950s and 1960s. In historical documents as well as in the memories of (not only) "old-timers" it has survived, though: When I revisited Camp Midvale in 2012, I met Jon Berry (now President of the The Highlands Nature Friends, Inc.²⁰), who had spent his early childhood at the Camp in the 1950s. On our tour of what has remained of the old Camp,²¹ from memory Jon gladly pointed out the exact sites of the three fistball courts—and thus highlighted what up to the 1950s and 1960s even in terms of sports had been a major German-American contact zone.

Dr. Klaus-Dieter Gross
Eichendorffstr. 3a
D-93051 Regensburg
dieter.gross@naturfreunde-bayern.de

²⁰ <http://www.highlandsnaturefriends.org/> (Oct. 21, 2014).

²¹ Cf. <http://www.highlandsnaturalpool.org/index.html>(Oct. 21, 2014).