GAMES AND SPORTS IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.

Abstract

Idioms are one of the most interesting part of any language. Colourful and lively, some of them linguistic curiosities, they can tell us a lot not only about the different aspects of life but, more importantly, about the way of thinking and outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that produced them. The present paper is not an attempt to list all English idioms related to the wide subject of games and sports, but to present the probable or possible origin of a few more intriguing or curious ones.

It is hardly by accident that these two appear together in the title. Dictionaries define *game* as an entertaining activity or sport you do for fun that has rules, and that you can win or lose; and *sport* as any activity needing physical effort and skill in which players or teams compete against each other according to rules, played or done for enjoyment and/or as a job. In the UK it can refer to all types of physical activity which people do to keep healthy or for enjoyment.

It is easy to see the similarity in meaning, but if we dig deeper, we also discover another interesting feature they have in common. Following up on the etymology of the words we find that the word *game* was there in its present sense in Middle English – coming from the Anglo-Saxon *gamen*, meaning *sport* (compare cognate forms like the Icelandic *gaman*, Danish *gammen*, Old Swedish *gamman*, Old High German *gaman* – meaning joy, mirth). The word *sport* seems to have got there via a different route: it meant mirth and was the short for *disport*, *desport* from the M.E. verb *disporten*, to amuse, that goes back to the Old French *se desporter*, to amuse oneself, originally 'to cease from labour'. This comes ultimately from the Latin *dis-*, away, and *portare*, to carry – hence, to remove oneself from or cease from labour.

And so did both *game* and *sport* come to refer originally to activities indulged in or performed when people got away from work, mainly for pleasure, fun and entertainment, later on as physical exercise to keep fit, to win prizes and fame or, more recently, to earn money and make a living as a professional. Being so widely popular, it is hardly surprising that many expressions and turns of phrase connected to them became well-known and spread to be used figuratively in all kinds of situations far removed from the original context. Who wouldn't like to be regarded as *a good sport*, or have one as a devoted friend, a pleasant, positive, generous person who always behaves in a reasonable way, is always willing to help and does not complain about things they are asked to do or about games that they lose? They would probably also be *game* – prepared to join in with or try a new, difficult, risky or dangerous activity.

Idioms have often been associated with conversation and informal language. But since the general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage and the so called 'educated usage' has become more flexible and tolerant about what is considered to be correct or acceptable, these idioms have had a *sporting chance* to become an essential part of the

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

vocabulary of English. They appear in formal style as well as in slang, in poetry, in journalism and magazines, where writers are seeking to make their articles and stories more vivid, interesting, and appealing to their readers. They are often used by both journalists and politicians as shorthand ways of expressing opinions or conveying ready-made evaluations. Like idioms in general, they help speakers and writers to be fluent and to get their opinions across effectively, as they have an important role in conveying appraisal and in developing or maintaining interaction.

BOARD GAMES

back to ***square*** *one* = starting over, doing something again because the previous effort has failed
According to one explanations this idiom is connected with the practice in England in the days before televised sport. In the 1920s a map of a football field used to be printed by Radio Times with the field divided into numbered grids or squares so that listeners could locate the area of play and follow the action better. 'Back to square one' meant that an attack had been driven back to where it had begun. The difficulty with this theory is that the football grid was abandoned around 1940 and no record of the phrase predating 1960 has so far been found.
The alternative origin of a board game with numbers for each square, like Snakes and Ladders, hopscotch and several others is more simple and plausible – players are sent back to the start if they land on a certain square.

to leave someone in the ***lurch*** = abandon, desert someone while, particularly in difficult or dangerous circumstances; leave far behind
The key word apparently comes from the French *lourche*, a 16th century dicing game said to have resembled backgammon. The word was also uses to describe a player who was facing a decisive defeat in such a game. The player had no hope of winning – hence was in a helpless unsupported position. To be "in the lurch" is in several games a way of saying a player is far behind; in cribbage, for example, a player who has scored only 31 when his opponent has scored 61 is said to be in the lurch.

to turn the ***tables*** = reverse the situation or the relationship
Literally it is what one did in some games, such as chess, checkers and backgammon, played on a board or table: reverse it to give each player an equal advantage. Doubtless, in the long history of those games there have been boards or tables of the lazy-Susan type that one could turn to reverse positions instead of physically reversing the players.
An alternative explanation suggests that the phrase goes back to the time when table-tops had two surfaces. One was kept smooth and polished and was used for eating and entertaining visitors. The other side was rough and was used as a work surface. So if you did not want to give a guest a warm reception, you turned the rough working surface uppermost.
The saying is so old, however, that the precise origin is lost.

CARD GAMES

above ***board*** = honest, straight

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

The 16th century term *under board* literally meant 'under the table', the place for dogs, food scraps and gentlemen who had drunk too much. But before long the dishonest practices of gamesters who would drop their hands below the board, or tabletop, to exchange unfavourable cards brought about the figurative sense of 'in an underhand way, dishonestly'. (The modern idiom is *under the table*.) The insistence was that players should keep their hands above the board to ensure fair play.

BRIDGE & WHIST

to come up / turn up ***trumps*** = unexpectedly produce just what is needed at the last moment; to turn out well after all

to play a ***trump*** *card* = make a move that should gain you victory or an advantage

Trump is a corruption of 'triumph', the name of a 16th century card game similar to whist. Then, as today in whist or bridge, trump was any card in the suit which, for the duration of the hand, temporarily outranked all other suits and could be defeated only by a higher trump. Such a card was therefore a lucky thing for you to *'turn up'* when you had a mediocre hand, and might prove a devastating weapon when played.

POKER

to pass the ***buck*** = shift responsibility (to someone else)

This was originally a poker term. The *buck* was a marker (perhaps a piece of buckshot or a knife with a buckhorn handle) passed from one card player to another to indicate the next dealer, who also had the unwelcome task of betting the initial stake. When the buck was passed on, the responsibility for dealing went with it.

A well-known variation was used by President Henry S Truman, US president between 1945-53, who kept on his White House desk a small sign which read "The buck stops here." It meant that the responsibility would not be passed on to others, but that he would accept ultimate liability. The phrase, however, was not coined by the President; the plaque was given to him by a friend who had seen a similar one at the Federal Reformatory at El Reno, Oklahoma. Nevertheless, Truman often referred to it in his speeches and later presidents since have also stood by the phrase.

(to have) an ***ace*** *up his sleeve* = a surprise, a hidden weapon

The cardsharp, who depended for his living on winning at cards, was known to slip winning cards (of which the ace is the highest) up his sleeve, to be pulled out and played when they would do the most good. This particular way of putting the thought probably goes back to the bad old days of the game, when cardsharps were rampant. However, the thought of concealing something useful up one's sleeve is much older, at least from the 16th century when sleeves were cut so wide that it was easy to stow or even secrete things away in their folds.

blue ***chip*** = reliable, giving the highest return

In the game of poker counters, or chips, of different colours are used to represent money, with the *blue* chip having the highest value. In the early 20th century Wall Street, doubtless reasoning that most people will only bet on a certainty, began to describe stocks with stable growth and a

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

history of paying dividends as *blue chip*. Thus a *blue chip investment* is one that promises a good return while a *blue chip company* is nationally or internationally known and considered financially secure.
When the same ***chips*** *are down*, the bet has been made and the player is committed to win or lose with his hand, that is, the situation is urgent and we have to deal with it.

to call someone's ***bluff*** = to test someone's claims on suspicion of falsehood; to challenge him to carry out a seemingly empty threat or prove something apparently dubious he has said
This phrase was coined around the poker tables of the 19th century America and is all to do with deception. In poker, when a player makes a bet on the cards he holds, he might try *to bluff*, 'to trick', his opponents into believing that his hand is better than it really is, by his body language, voice tone or by bidding boldly upon it, perhaps deterring an opponent with better cards from pushing what probably would be a winning hand. If his *bluff is called*, he is forced to expose his cards and show himself true or false.
"Bluff" in this sense may come from the Dutch verb *bluffen*, meaning to boast.

DICING
The ***die*** *is cast* = the decision has been made and it cannot be changed; an irrevocable step has been taken and there is no drawing back (usu. implying that it will have an important effect on the future)
This is the 'die' that forms one of a pair of dice, though the singular is rarely used nowadays. All dice games carry an element of chance and, once the die has been thrown, the player must abide by the result, whether favourable or not.
The biographers of Caesar quote him as saying "Jacta alea est!" – let the die be cast – as he was about to cross the river Rubicon in 49 BC to come to grips with Pompey. Although it is his momentous use of the expression which we recognise, Caesar was in fact alluding to a Greek metaphor to be found in the writings of Herodotus (c.445 BC) and Meander (c. 300 BC). Plutarch even suggests that Caesar uttered the phrase, then already a proverb, in Greek.

to make no ***bones*** *about it* = not hesitate about doing something difficult or unpleasant; speak plainly, not shrink from voicing one's misgiving or scruples about a matter; take direct action
The phrase is so old that the origin is obscure. One theory for the etymology of the phrase is connected with gaming. Even today, one might hear *roll those bones*, meaning 'dice'. *Bones* with this sense goes back to the 14th century. A suggestion is that if you *make no bones* you are not trying to influence the dice, urging them to come up right with all the different superstitious practices of ardent gamblers (chants and invocations, blowing on them, rolling them in the hands, etc.), but simply throw them.

On the other hand, proverbial *bones* are generally problems and difficulties (to have a *bone* to pick; a *bone* of contention). A 15th century phrase for 'to hit upon difficulties' was *to find bones in*, an allusion to coming across bones in one's broth that make it difficult to eat. The derived expression *to make bones about*, which dates from the 16th century, therefore meant 'to make objections, to have misgivings'. However, the absence of bones in a bowl of soup that

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

was served would make the soup palatable and easy to swallow quickly – something done straightforward.

The usual shaking of the dice before throwing them is also at the origin of expressions like *a fair* ***shake*** = a reasonable opportunity, usually for an opponent; honourable treatment of an adversary; or *no great* ***shakes***, said about deprecatingly about something ordinary, mediocre.

within an ***ace*** *of* = close; a near success or disaster
The 'ace' is the single pip on a single die; "ambsace", an archaic term, was the lowest throw possible with a pair of dice: two single pips. To be 'within an ace' is to be close to the lowest possible point.

BALL GAMES
off the wall = unconventional, unusual, impromptu
One senses an origin in handball, squash or racquetball, where a ball coming off the wall can call for some nimble and unplanned manoeuvres by a player.

to ***bandy*** *words with someone* = to wrangle, to argue with someone
Bandy in the 16th century meant 'to hit a ball back and forth' – in tennis, for example. Before long the term was being applied figuratively and words and ideas were also being *bandied about*. Since ball games are often played with dogged determination, to *bandy words* doesn't just mean 'to exchange reproaches', but 'to argue obstinately'.
During the 17th century a game evolved in Ireland which involved striking a ball to and fro with a curved stick. This precursor of hockey was known as *bandy* because of the way that the ball was *bandied about*. Thereafter people with bowed legs came to be described as *bandy*-legged, the shape of their legs being reminiscent of the curved bandy sticks.

CRICKET
That's not ***cricket*** = unfair; unsportsmanlike; against the rules
The game of cricket is ancient and its rules are well known in Great Britain and the former British colonies

(to be on a) sticky ***wicket*** = a touchy or difficult situation
In cricket the wicket (27" x 8") is not only the structure the bowler aims at and the batman defends, but is also a general term for the playing field. A 'sticky wicket' is wet or soft and so changes the place of the bowler's ball (which usually reaches the batman in one bounce). The condition makes things tougher for the bowler, the batsman or the fielder, depending on who adapts least well to the situation.

BOWLING
there's the ***rub*** = that's where the difficulty is; that's the problem
"*Rub*" as a noun has several meanings, among them an obstruction or impediment, including at one time anything that interfered with the ball (or bowl) in the game of bowls. The expression

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

has stuck in the language because of Shakespeare, who has Hamlet say in his renowned soliloquy:

> To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, …

to knock something into a ***cocked hat*** = to defeat roundly; to be much better than something
The phrase alludes to the bowling game of skittles (ninepins) in which three skittles (pins) were set up thirty-six inches apart in a triangular shape, reminiscent of the three-cornered cocked hat worn in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. When all the skittles apart from these three had been knocked down, the game could be said to have been knocked into a cocked hat – in other words, not to be of any real worth any more.

BASEBALL

take a ***rain****-check (on something)* = retain the option of accepting an invitation or doing something at a later date
A rain-check was the stub, a part of a ticket for an outdoor event. Today it is connected mainly with sporting events, esp. US professional baseball games. The stub is retained by a spectator, enabling them to claim a refund of entrance money or admission to a later performance or replay of an event if it was cancelled or interrupted because of rain.

BOXING

Boxing has been a sport particularly prolific in providing the language with idioms, a testimony to its popularity from its beginning in the early 18th century, when it enjoyed aristocratic patronage, to the present. When in great difficulty, on the brink of failure or defeat you are *on the* ***ropes***, a suggestive image of a fighter so dizzy from being knocked about, that he has to hold on to the *ropes* delineating the boxing or wrestling ring for support. On the other hand, if you can adjust to adversity and take things as they come, you *roll with the* ***punch****(es)* like a good boxer, by shifting his body to avoid the full force of a blow.
However, you *throw in the* ***towel*** or *the sponge* if you can't take it any more, when you give up or lose all hope and admit defeat – it is what a boxer's second does as a sign of surrender and acknowledgement of defeat, and the boxer is disqualified, which is usually after his opponent has hit him once too often *straight from the* ***shoulder***, i.e. directly; without sham or deception. As a spectator, you would probably like to have a *ringside seat*, the best seat in the house, closest to where all the action is. If you listened to the broadcast, radio reporters in the America of the 1930s at the ringside of a big fight would describe the boxing match literally *blow by blow* as it happened. Today the expression means 'scrupulously detailed' and can precede not only 'description' but also 'report' or 'account'.

(to hit someone) below the ***belt*** = (to act) unfairly or against the rules; sometimes unscrupulously or cowardly

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

In 1865 lightweight boxer John G. Chamber rewrote the code of conduct for the sport of boxing, which was eventually published in 1867 under the patronage of John Sholto Douglas, the 8th Marquis of Queensberry (1844-1900). One of the twelve 'Queensberry rules' forbade contestants from hitting one another below the belt line of their trunks, or shorts (i.e. in the groin) – a thoroughly understandable requirement for any gentleman.

(come) up to ***scratch*** = reach an acceptable or satisfactory standard
The expression was originally *come up to the scratch*, the 'scratch' being a line drawn as a starting or meeting point in several sports. Early boxing (or prize-fighting) knew none of the sophisticated rules of the sport today. Bouts took place in the open air and contestants fought with their bare fists. Both began the bout with their left foot on the *scratch*. The fight was not divided up into rounds but went on until one contestant was knocked down. A pause of thirty seconds then followed, then they were given a count of eight during which they had to reach once more the mark that had been scratched in the middle of the ring. The fighter who failed to do so was regarded as being unable to fight any longer and so the other fighter was declared the winner.
The same sort of 'scratch' gave rise to the term *start from* ***scratch*** = from the very beginning with no help or advantage – or handicap. In a number of sports there exists a handicapping system which allows the less good an advantage over the skilled. The point from which the most accomplished start is *scratch*. In the second half of the 19th century this starting point for the best player is found in tennis, athletics, cycling and other sports. A *scratch* golfer plays against opponents with handicaps, who are given a specified number of strokes in order to make the contest more even. Today, the meaning has widened still further to include starting from the very beginning of a project or plan, often after an initial failed attempt.

the real *McCoy* = the authentic, the genuine article; the real thing
There are various possibilities for the derivation of this phrase, from both sides of the Atlantic: take your pick.

Many authorities subscribe to the theory that it refers to an American boxer famous in the late 19th century. He fought under the name of Kid McCoy and was so good that other fighters adopted the name, whereupon he had to bill himself as "the real McCoy". According to another story on one occasion he was being provoked by a drunk who would not accept that this was really the lightweight champion. Eventually the boxer, goaded beyond endurance, punched the drunk and knocked him out. The man's first words as he came to were, 'You're the real McCoy.'

A second American, Bill McCoy, may be another source. This infamous smuggler in the Prohibition period brought in hard liquor down the Atlantic coast of America from Canada. Hence, anything described as 'the real McCoy' was the genuine article, not a home-brewed or distilled substitute.

Scotland provides two slightly earlier derivations. In the late 1800s a man named Mackay advertised his particular brand of whisky (made by A. & M. MacKay of Glasgow) as 'the real Mackay', to distinguish it from another product of the same name. The whisky was exported

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

both to the US and Canada where people of Scottish origin drank the whisky and kept the phrase alive.

Yet another story tells of family feuds. There were two branches of the MacKay clan in dispute over which was the senior. Eventually it was established that the MacKays of Reay, the *Reay MacKays*, held this honour.

The evidence points to a British origin. Then the phrase spread far and wide: there is a mention of it in an Irish ballad of the 1880s and it was recorded in Australia in 1903. It would surely have reached the New World also, where one or more of the colourful McCoys at least influenced the spelling of the phrase.

MISCELLANEOUS

(it is) not all beer and ***skittles*** = not an unmixed pleasure

Skittles is an old game in which one attempts to knock down nine wooden pins set in a square on a wooden base by pitching or sliding a wooden disk at them. Beer was a natural accompaniment to the pleasant hours spent at the game.

high jinks = frolic; revelry

This was the name for what people sometimes did at drinking parties in the 17th and 18th century: a throw of the dice determined who should do a stunt for the group or chugalug a goodly quantity of liquor.

to play ***musical chairs*** = compete for position; move people in and out of places of authority or responsibility

The expression comes from a child's game (not always played only by children) in which the participants walk around a circle of chairs (fewer chairs than people) to the accompaniment of music. When the music stops, everybody scrambles to get into an empty chair.

Aunt Sally = a scapegoat, an easy target of blame

Aunt Sally originated as a game common to fairs and racecourses around Britain in the middle of the 19th century. The wooden head of an old woman would be mounted on a pole in the ground. Players standing at a distance of twenty or thirty yards would then throw sticks or cudgels to try to hit the nose of the figure or smash the clay pipe she held in her mouth. By the end of the century poor abused Aunt Sally had slipped into idiomatic use to denote 'an object of unreasonable criticism'.

Aunt is a term used both to express a particular form of kinship and, more likely here, to denote an elderly woman. But the origin of the effigy itself is a mystery. There has been speculation that it evolved from a black-faced doll, also known as Aunt Sally, which was popular in the early 19th century and which was also frequently hung outside the premises of marine stores and second-hand clothes dealers. According to Jonathon Green (*Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*, 1998), the doll represented Black Sal, a character from Pierce Egan's sensational *Life in London* (1821-28), racy accounts of the pleasures of Regency London. Indeed, Black Sal was widely known in a variety of other contexts in the 19th century and earlier. She was, and still is, the companion of the Green Man in the pagan festival of Beltane on 1 May

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)

each year. Jack-in-the-Green, covered in luxuriant green foliage, parades with his black-faced consort and is ultimately killed, in order to release the spirit of summer. And Black Sal is also a 19th century dance.

Black Sal, then, was undoubtedly well known, in one guise or another, in the 19th century, and it is a relatively easy step to connect her with the various realisations of Aunt Sally in the same period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Courtney, Rosemary 1994, *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs,* Essex England: Longman Group UK Limited

Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.

Rogers, James 1994, *The Dictionary of Clichés*, New Jersey: Wings Books

Seidl, Jennifer 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tăbăcaru, Octavian 1999, *Dicţionar de expresii idiomatice al limbii engleze*, Bucureşti: Editura Niculescu SRL

Warren, Helen 1994, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 1999, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms 1994, Penguin Books Ltd.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms 1993, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase &Fable 1993, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

BDD-A23738 © 2007 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:23 UTC)