

Baseball's Transition to Professionalism

Aaron Feldman

In baseball recently, much has been said about the problems with baseball as a business. Owners and players are clashing publicly on every imaginable issue while fans watch hopelessly. Paul White of *Baseball Weekly* observed, “Baseball... got beat up. Call it a sport, call it a business, call it an industry. Call it anything that can suffer a black eye,” in his analysis of the conflicts that have marked this off-season.ⁱ The fights might seem new to the casual observer, but they are not. To search for the origin of this conflict one must look back more than a hundred years, to the founding of the National Association of Professional Baseball Players in 1871. Indeed, the most permanent damage to professional baseball was during the period from 1870-1885 when baseball evolved from an amateur game into a professional one. Though some of the blame belongs to the players of this era, the majority of the fault can be attributed to the owners. Owners, lacking no model to guide them by, made the mistake of modeling early franchises after successful industry. Baseball’s early magnates mishandled the sport’s transition from amateur to professional, causing problems with labor relations, gambling, and financial solvency.

Before one can look at the problems faced by baseball in the period from 1870-1885, it is necessary to examine some of the trends that were involved in changing baseball’s shape dramatically. First of all was baseball’s unprecedented rise in popularity. One newspaper of the time called it, “that baseball frenzy” as fan enthusiasm multiplied.ⁱⁱ John Montgomery Ward wrote that, “Like everything else American it came with a rush. The game is suited to the national temperament.”ⁱⁱⁱ With such a natural affinity between baseball and America, it is no

surprise that baseball rapidly became an integral part of American life. As baseball became increasingly a part of American society, it took on some aspects of that society. Baseball formed itself in the image of a business of the time. The success of a team was ascribed to the manager and not to the players who actually took the field.^{iv} Going along with this trend, players were praised for being “quiet and businesslike” or a “hard, steady worker”.^v Commercialism also spread to baseball, mainly propagated by Albert G. Spalding, founder of the Spalding Sporting Goods Company. Spalding paid the National League a dollar for every dozen Spalding balls it used, allowing him to market his balls as the official National League ball.^{vi} With the actions of Spalding can be observed the beginning of the movement towards the constant advertising in baseball today. It was the trend towards more businesslike operations in particular that led to increasing problems in the early professional leagues.

Baseball’s owners’ most decisive response to the problems with baseball was the establishment of the infamous reserve clause. This clause triggered the first labor problems for Major League Baseball. When the National League established it in 1879, the reserve clause allowed teams to ‘reserve’ five players. Reserved players who quit or were suspended were blackballed, unable to be signed by other teams. In 1883, the reserve clause was expanded to encompass the entire team. This allowed teams to sell players without their consent, terminate a player’s contract on 10 days notice, and make a player’s contract binding from year to year.^{vii} The reserve clause was met with much opposition and it found itself challenged from all directions. John Montgomery Ward’s Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players led one of the most successful challenges in 1885. Ward complained, “There is no escape for the player. If he attempts to elude the operation of the rule, he becomes at once a professional outlaw.”^{viii} Ward further protested the reserve clause, saying, “Players have been bought, sold, and

exchanged as though they were sheep instead of American citizens.”^x The Brotherhood founded the Player’s League and set itself up in competition against the National League. Its efforts nearly bankrupted the National League before the two negotiated a peace.^x Another similar challenge was Henry Lucas’s Union Association of Baseball Players. Founded in 1883, it used the same rules as the National League, without the hated reserve clause. Though Lucas had early success in his endeavor, National League Commissioner Abraham Mills employed heavy-handed tactics to bankrupt the Union Association.^{xi} As can be observed from these two examples, any challenge to the reserve clause was put down ruthlessly. For this reason, the reserve clause continued, in the same confining form, until the late nineteen-seventies. As a result, baseball players had no other option but to play under the terms of the hated reserve clause. Players complained that the reserve clause enslaved them, as owners forced players to perform menial tasks like cutting grass and handling tickets, in addition to their playing duties.^{xii} Players had no choice but to do them, since they would be out of baseball if they did not. The reserve clause also gave owners unfair advantages in contract disputes. They were not afraid to take advantage of the leverage it gave them in negotiations. Players who were taken advantage of by the reserve clause include Oscar Walker, O’Rourke, Boyd, Thomas Bond, and saddest of all, Charlie Jones. Walker signed early with Buffalo and found himself unable to leave Buffalo when better offers came.^{xiii} When O’Rourke demanded his release from Boston, he was refused, and soon found himself without a job or a place in the league. Likewise, Boyd was expelled from the league for unstipulated contract violations without so much as a hearing.^{xiv} Thomas Bond was expelled from the league for accusing an opponent, Ferguson, of cheating. When league officials discovered he was unable to prove these allegations, he was summarily removed from the league. Callous league officials rebuffed all his attempts at apology and appeal.^{xv} These four players

show the autocratic way the reserve clause was wielded by owners to keep the players in their place. In the case of Jones, Jones was a star outfielder for Cincinnati until he was traded to Boston in 1879. Finding himself cheated by the Boston ownership, he sued Boston for \$378, which he won.^{xvi} Angered, the Boston ownership expelled him from the team. After he signed with a team in the rival American Association, he was expelled from that league too, to appease the National League. Jones later suffered from alcoholism and was spotted as an invalid in South Beach, Staten Island in 1909. After that, the former star outfielder just disappeared.^{xvii}

Other examples of problems with labor relations abounded. Players in the National Association were thought to hold significant power, but in actuality the club managers wielded more power. This included even Robert Ferguson, who, though he was the president of the National Association, filled more of an honorary role than anything else.^{xviii} In general, even in the purportedly player-friendly National Association owners and managers manipulated players. Players found their salaries manipulated by owners, who established a salary cap as early as 1889 to prevent player salaries from becoming too large.^{xix} This problem of lack of power was compounded when one considers Albert Spalding's observation that, "no player ever was successful in business while playing baseball."^{xx} Thus the only source of livelihood for players was baseball, a job in which they held no influence. Furthermore, relations between players and management increasingly resembled those in other industries- in an era when unions were increasingly waging battles against big business.^{xxi} The sum effect of these problems was a class of players who found themselves stuck in the traps built by baseball's owners. The exception to this was the elite players, who held all the cards in their hands. Owners seeking to build a championship team often had to pay elite players exorbitant salaries to keep them from jumping

team. However, as a general rule players couldn't command any respect or power from the owners who ruled the game ruthlessly.

Baseball's most significant problem in this era was rampant gambling on games. Baseball betting had been around since the beginning of the history of the game, and it was not long before it was discovered that dishonest players were losing games to make money through gambling.^{xxii} Dishonest play in this manner was greatly accelerated by the innovation of the pool system. In this system, all bets were placed through a central pool, putting thousands of dollars together on a single game. This in turn led to an increased occurrence of rigged games.^{xxiii} With increasing amounts of money in one set of hands, baseball naturally saw a rise in the occurrence of rigged games. A New York area pool seller said, "We go in for all such chances," meaning, "he and others of his class were always ready to buy players."^{xxiv} Gambling was such an integral part of baseball that teams were rated in terms of betting odds. Reporters often betted on games they reported on, and even Henry Chadwick, editor of the *New York Clipper* baseball section and enemy of baseball gambling, often reported betting odds in his columns.^{xxv} This shows how rampant gambling and game fixing was in early baseball. The two were an integral part of the game as it originally took shape, and it took significant effort on the part of the game to get rid their corrupting influences.

Among the most corrupt teams in early baseball were the Troy Haymakers and the New York Mutuals. The Haymakers were owned by John Morrissey, a corrupt New York Senator who also owned gaming houses and a racetrack.^{xxvi} Morrissey trained his team to lose on orders. On August 26, 1869, Morrissey bet seventeen thousand dollars that his team would beat the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the famed professional team that had previously been undefeated. In

order to ensure success, Morrissey bribed a Red Stocking player to throw the game. In the wild competition that followed, the Haymakers and the Red Stockings ended the game in a tie, although the umpires declared a victory for the Red Stockings. Corrupt New York City political boss William Marcy Tweed owned the Mutuals, or “Mutes”. Although the team was generally successful, their history was marred by many suspicious losses. They also boasted baseball’s first major gambling scandal. In 1869, Thomas Devyr, William Wansley, and Edward Duffy confessed to selling games. The trio was expelled from the Mutuals, but the Mutes soon re-signed Devyr and the Fulton club hired Wansley. The incident, baseball’s first to get nationwide attention, showed how ineffectively baseball policed gambling in its ranks. In another incident, the Mutes led five-nothing after five innings, only to lose because of multiple errors by Dick Higham and John Hatfield. [xxvii](#) In another game only a month later, a Mutual player was reported being seen with Chicago gambler MacDonald before the game. Five innings into the game, the Mutuals again held a commanding lead, when their pitcher was replaced by John Hatfield, an infielder who had never pitched before. Assisted once more by errors by Higham and Tom Carey, the Chicago team rallied to beat the Mutes under suspicious circumstances. Carey, Higham, and Hatfield were implicated in the scandal, but none was punished. [xxviii](#) In yet another Mutuals scandal, Baltimore beat the heavily favored Mutuals four to one on October 29, 1872. Though there was heavy betting on Baltimore, no investigation developed. In a game between the two teams the next year, the umpires were convinced that third baseman John Hatfield and catcher Nat Hicks were throwing the game, but again, no investigation ensued. [xxix](#) It was baseball’s lack of enforcement power in these incidents that was most damaging to the sport’s reputation.

Gambling was most prominent in the National Association, the professional league that pre-dated the National League, with games played from 1871 until 1875. Interestingly, at the start, gamblers feared that the new professional league would pay its players enough that they would not be as easily bought. They soon discovered, however, that the new professionals could be bought just as easily as the amateurs they replaced. Albert Spalding commented that no game was played in the National Association without some sort of betting. Henry Chadwick went so far as to say that the National Association, “Died of pool-selling.”^{xxx} As a result of the constant gambling, the practice of players throwing games, known as “hippodroming”, was alarmingly common.^{xxxi} The National Association’s entire 1874 season was a financial flop due to rampant accusations of gambling.^{xxxii} As a result of this season, the National Association strengthened the wording of its antigambling rule, but the new rule, like the previous one, was not enforced.^{xxxiii} In 1875 the Brooklyn Eagle named an “All Star Team of Rogues”, listing the most corrupt players in baseball.^{xxxiv} These were players whose names appeared multiple times in connection with throwing games, and the surprising thing is that the vast majority of them were established starters and even stars. These players were allowed to continue playing and to continue throwing games in the laissez-faire National Association. In Brooklyn, gambling was so common that one area of the stands was called The Gold Board since the exchange of money was comparable to the stock market.^{xxxv} As a result of payments from gamblers, players lived like princes, with jewelry, champagne, and other luxuries. This was the nature of the corrupt play in the National Association.

Though the National League promised to end such abuses, their attempts were largely unsuccessful. An article in the *New York Clipper* noted that 1876 was marked by numerous instances of “crooked work”, while the public sought “an honest contest”.^{xxxvi} Meanwhile, the

Philadelphias team that was excluded from the National League because of rumors about gambling said that, “players, whose dishonest acts were the common talk of all lovers of the game throughout the country, have been allowed to sell game after game.”^{xxxvii} The most prominent National League gambling scandal was the Louisville scandal of 1877. The Louisville club was securely in first place until they “mysteriously” lost eight straight games.^{xxxviii} Some players were observed wearing expensive diamond stickpins, and the Louisville Courier-Journal soon became suspicious.^{xxxix} Owner Charles Chase finally caught four players, and the league expelled George Hall, Bill Craver, Jim Devlin, and Al Nichols for their roles in the scandal.^{xl} Nonetheless, in general the National League failed to remove ‘suspected players’ and lacked sufficient rules to eliminate gambling and game fixing.^{xli}

Early professional baseball also had serious problems with financial solvency. The National Association had its share of problems with bankruptcy. The ten-dollar fee it charged for entry in the association was not enough to keep teams from leaving the league easily.^{xlii} Teams that were not making ends meet would withdraw rather than continue to lose money, and the ten-dollar investment was not incentive enough to keep them. ‘Revolving’, the practice of jumping from team to team in search of more money, was also a serious threat to financial stability in the National Association.^{xliii} As a result of revolving and weak contractual ties between players and clubs, fans couldn’t count on stars remaining with their hometown team. As a result, building a devoted fan base was a challenging task in the fiscally feeble National Association. However, the National League that replaced the National Association and tried to fix these problems was no better off. Thirty different teams played in the National League from 1876 until 1900, but only eight remained in 1900.^{xliv} Until the late 1880s, almost every team lost money. In fact, the situation was so bad that the National League didn’t have the same teams two years in a row

until 1881 and 1882. ^{xlv} Historian Glenn Dickey noted that, “There was little continuity in the league beyond its name.” ^{xlvi} As president of the National League, A.G. Mills refused to write club names on his letterhead since they changed so frequently. ^{xlvii} As a result of the near-constant shifting in teams, it was difficult for baseball to grow. It struggled to introduce stability, but fell far short of that goal. In 1876, the Philadelphia Athletics and New York Mutuals failed to complete the season. Neither team had enough money to pay salaries, and they were unable to defray the costs of an unprofitable western trip. ^{xlviii} No team received sufficient gate money from the Mutuals, and the teams were kicked out of the league after the season. ^{xlix} The result was disastrous for the National League, which had to play a shortened season due to the absence of the Mutuals and Athletics. ^l The Cincinnati team fell into similar trouble by June 1877, and announced that it was disbanding the team. Once more, this caused trouble with the league’s schedule and standings. ^{li} The Hartford Dark Blues went bankrupt in 1877, the Indianapolis Blues, Milwaukee Grays, and Syracuse Stars went bankrupt in 1878, the Providence Grays and Buffalo Bisons followed suit in 1885, while the Kansas City Cowboys and Detroit Wolverines folded in 1886 and 1888, respectively. ^{lii} With such weakness, the National League was ripe to be attacked, and indeed a solid challenge was put up by the American Association, the so-called “Beer and Whiskey League”, which aimed to threaten the ‘fat cats’ who ruled the National League. The American Association would have succeeded in destroying the National League had the National League not negotiated a peace settlement with its rival. ^{liii} This is not to say that no teams were successful in the National League. Success, according to an 1876 *New York Clipper* article, requires training and discipline. ^{liv} The problem with the National League was that so few teams actually employed these tactics. The Athletics team that folded in 1876 was given a special monopoly of the Philadelphia market, but it still went bankrupt before the season ended. ^{lv} This

shows the severity of the economic problems faced by the teams of the National League. The National League's attempt to combat this problem, with a rule allowing only teams in cities with populations larger than 75,000, backfired, as it cost them franchises in smaller cities like Hartford, a city of sixty thousand where teams regularly outdrew teams in Chicago. ^{lvi} Overall, the early professional leagues were severely lacking in stability, a major source of problems for baseball in years to come.

The professional baseball that was born in the 1870s was unlike anything America had ever seen before. Charting a course in unknown waters, owners were forced to rely on business instincts to dictate the path baseball would take. Their path may have seemed clear at the time, but in hindsight the many mistakes they made are obvious. Baseball has had many more labor problems than other professional sports, and those labor conflicts have often been more protracted. The strikes of the seventies, eighties, and nineties trace their roots to the reserve clause established in 1879. Gambling has plagued the game as well, with stars including Hal Chase, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Leo Durocher, and Pete Rose falling victim to the seduction of professional gamblers. How did baseball change in the 1870s? The main difference is simple. In that decade, baseball went from being a game to being a business, and it hasn't been the same since. Players seek ever-larger salaries as owners seek to increase their own shares of the profits, to the general dismay of the game's fans. The most tremendous irony is that back in 1876, the same year the National League was founded, Henry Chadwick proposed the best solution to baseball's ills:

“Say what you will, gentlemen of the League, you must come down in your prices... and you must proportionately lower your salaries... Bring your salaries down, lower your

price of admission, and above all, *throw out all suspected players*, and baseball stock will continue to rise in the market; otherwise it will continue at a discount”^{lvii}

Had baseball magnates listened to Chadwick’s advice, the problems the game now faces would be nonexistent. It is to their great discredit that they persisted in their attempts to steal from both the players and their fans. . As they now resort to contraction, salary caps, and collusion to solve their problems, they should remember Henry Chadwick’s advice to the owners of his generation. The actions of the owners in the 1870s set a number of precedents that dominated baseball for the next century.

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