

BASEBALL'S TWO REVOLUTIONS; Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, and the Modern Game

“Even the lies about him are true.” - teammate Joe Dugan on Babe Ruth

“It would be possible for Ruth to serve under Miller Huggins and yet produce home-runs in quantity....My suggestion would be that before each game Miller Huggins should stand at home plate in full sight of all the multitude and that Babe Ruth should thereupon advance slowly and vindictively and knock the manager down with a left-hand swing to the mouth. Such a diversion if regularly practiced would make Ruth's whole day and set him into so cheerful and sprightly a mood that none of the fences would be too distant to defy his long drives.” - Heywood Broun, 1926

"He joked and hammed around, played first base, and even got a hit. It was a minstrel show transferred to the base ball field a show Paige had acted out a thousand times before, and which had kept body and soul together for close to half a century." Tristram Potter Coffin quoted in Rader, 148.

"How do you think I felt when I saw a one-armed [white, big-league] outfielder?" Negro League star Chet Brewer on Pete Gray's wartime big league career

“If a black boy can make it in Okinawa and Guadalcanal, hell, he can make it in baseball.” Commissioner “Happy” Chandler to the black reporter in 1945

"Every time daddy went on one of those early trips we had fears that he would be assassinated!" recollection of Robinson's daughter, Sharon.

Campanella, Mays, Campanella, Newcombe, Aaron, Banks, Banks: NL MVP's 1953-1959

THE GAME THAT RUTH BUILT

the hitting revolution (see chart in Rader, 113): the 1920-1941 offensive spike; four theories: rabbit ball, banning spitter, more balls per game hence cleaner, harder balls (in wake of Carl Mays's fatal beaming of Chapman), or free swinging. The lively ball conspiracy theory: why hide? Bureau of Standards test; problem of timing - 1919 is only Ruth; 1920 is only AL. Cushioned-cork ball of 1926 may, however, have abetted revolution. Spitballers grandfathered in. Clean balls, yes, but only after 1920. It's the full, free, Ruthian swing that generated not only more home runs but higher batting averages, and it took a while to spread through the AL and then into the NL.

the life that Ruth built: rags to riches- and riotous excess - in era of bureaucracy and incorporation; from St. Mary's Industrial School to the bright lights of Broadway; freedom, release, fun and the Jazz age; Ruth and the consumer culture, celebrity culture, public relations; Ruth and Huggins - labor-management in the age of the Hawthorne experiments; Ruth's stature - the Hoover story, 1930.

baseball's scientific managers: anecdote about Ruth's breathing technique and the Columbia University scientists - they said he wasn't breathing right and he was not impressed; McCarthy's assembly line techniques; Rickey and his efficiency courses and baseball college

an age of dynasties: the big cities dynasties: New York, Philadelphia and Chicago (but limits of Mack and Comiskey) and the Yankees (biggest market, owners with deepest pockets; greatest draw and the House that Ruth Built). Sharing ticket revenues only on base price (visitors' share averages 21% in 1929), so greater revenues to buy players.

The Cardinals' farm system dynasty: small market divided with Browns, so how compete? Working relations with minor league teams, in wake of collapse of drafting system. The National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues pulls out of NA in 1919; new NA of 1921 allows only drafting of one man per team, or none if minor league (as did AA, PCL, IL, WA, III) agrees not to draft from lower leagues (this produced the golden age of minor league ball); so huge sums for minor league players that only Yankee-types can pay. Cardinal system from 5 teams in 1929 to 28 by mid-thirties (bargain depression-era salaries, and top minor leagues have option of four-year opt out of draft, allowing clubs to protect their investments in farm team players). Signs dozens, sells some, plays others allowing Rickey to trade veterans (the system produced three times the number of major-league caliber players needed). Landis opposed the farm system as undermining minors and interrupting players' smooth rise. But Yankees and others follow suit in '30s. After WWII the major leagues limited the number of players a club could control and teams scaled back their farm systems to five or six teams.

surviving the depression: the dynasties turn some profit; Mack sells players; but basically little innovation or imagination; resist night baseball; ignore example of KMOX and radio building regional following; but elevate greatest players to stars (1933- All-Star Games) and Dead Ball stars to legends and heroes (Hall of Fame); also MVP and Cy Young awards.

BASEBALL'S GREATEST HOUR: JACKIE ROBINSON AND INTEGRATION

The Negro Leagues: the color line goes up in the 1890s, in baseball as across the South; barnstorming and clowning teams, marketing black stereotypes; 1920 Rube Foster's Negro National League, organized barnstorming teams into somewhat regular league but often had to cancel games and were always at mercy of white ballpark owners. In 1930s Gus Greenlee and other gamblers organized the Negro American League. Both leagues play an important role in

northern ghettos as both business opportunities and sources of community cohesion. (Consider here the argument in Harold Cruse, Plural But Equal.).

the style of the Negro Leagues: a version of "inside," or scientific" baseball, longer lasting; with special emphasis on speed, daring, trickery in part a holdover from the (Harlem Globetrotting-style) clowning teams; showmanship essential and Satchel Paige the master of it; Paige, hired out by Greenlee by the game, especially to keep struggling teams afloat financially, was the Babe Ruth (drawing card as well as rags-to-riches story) of the Negro Leagues. But best players (Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, Buck Leonard, Paige) are fully as good, if not better, than the white stars as their performance on barnstorming tours attests.

factors making the Robinson experiment possible; black migration out of cotton South to war industries of the North; black votes traded for stronger stands on civil rights; LaGuardia's committee on race relations as one fruit of that (it examined discrimination by Giants, Dodgers, Yankees); thus part of early Northern civil rights movement that preceded the southern movement, demanding equal access to public accommodations and recreations in a "consumers' republic"; wartime crusade against Nazi racism highlights American dilemma and Randolph-style protests keep pressure on (stop bullets, why not baseballs?) Rickey begins experiment 13 days after the end of the war; Landis' death removes major obstacle; former KY. Governor Chandler "gets" the point of WWII (if they made it on Guadalcanal, they can make it in the big leagues).

Rickey's plan: a serious man, a religious man; motivated by sense of fair play and decency and by his own (may I say CIVIC) ambition; but also seeing untapped fan base and untapped talent base. Sees prejudice as result of ignorance, believes right person can win over his white players to integration; so intelligent, disciplined college graduate, used to interracial competition: Jackie Robinson perhaps not the best player, but the most likely to succeed.

Robinson's reception: hard, very hard; but white uprisings on Brooklyn and St. Louis teams dealt with quickly and firmly by Rickey and Frick. Robinson himself is exceptional person and exceptional player, doesn't retaliate and slowly but surely wins more and more over. Meanwhile for good and bad reasons he is a major draw of both white and black fans. By the end of the year, he's named Rookie of the Year and voted second most admired man in America (behind Bing Crosby!)

The impact: both leagues slow to follow; by 1953 still only six teams have black players, but then by 1959 the last team, Boston Red Sox, finally integrates. Doby of Indians the first in the AL; From 1953-1959 black players win every NL MVP award, perhaps in part a sign that only truly exceptional black players given the chance, while putting to the lie any stupidity about black inferiority and inability to make it in the bigs; stacked by position few middle infielders or pitchers or catchers. A 1987 study shows 15 of 26 teams have no black management personnel.

RICKEY, ROBINSON, AND THE PUBLIC REALM

An important underlying theme of much of what I have had to say this week is that baseball preserves something of the spirit and the possibilities of "the public realm" that was central to the ancient Greek polis (the realm of freedom and of politics, where ambition and honor were more important than mundane economic interests). The occasional references to baseball as an important civic institution, indeed as America's civic religion, that dot its history, as well as the commercial game's exploitation of and dependence on civic pride and civic rivalry, suggest as much. But I think the link is more organic than that. The idea of a public realm of virtuous men transcending mere material concerns came down to our founding fathers via the republican tradition of Renaissance Italy and early modern England (see J.G.A. Pocock's influential The Machiavellian Moment or, the more accessible study by Gordon Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution). But fairly early on in the history of the American republic the opportunities and the distractions of the marketplace and the rise of a profession of interest-oriented politics raised doubts about the existence of an unitary public good independent of the material interests of groups and individuals. The public good, if anything, seemed less a product of the disinterested actions of virtuous citizens than the product of the competition among selfish interests. Rather than a matter of virtue, imagination, ambition, politics became a process of compromise, the art of the possible as delimited by interests.

It is in this context, in the 1840's and 1850's, that baseball began to emerge (see Norbert Elias on the link between state-building and sports). The development of organized forms of play coincided with what the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga has described as the gradual eradication of the play element from most other cultural forms, from religion to work, and, as I try to suggest above, from politics. The rationalization of such activities, historian Christopher Lasch argues, left "little room for the spirit of arbitrary invention or the disposition to leave things to chance. Risk, daring, uncertainty - important components of play - have no place in industry or in activities infiltrated by industrial standards, which seek precisely to predict and control the future and to eliminate risk." Sports, of course, celebrated exactly these threatened attributes of risk, daring, uncertainty (and baseball, in particular, attracted clerks and artisans who felt most acutely the impact of industrial discipline and standards). The appeal of sports, notwithstanding their increasingly commercialized nature, owed a great deal to their transcendence of purely rational, instrumental, and pecuniary matters. Glory, honor, inventiveness and imagination remained central virtues in the world of sports.

Thus sports inherited something of the qualities of the classical public. Perhaps the best indication of this is that a variety of political problems in American society have been more frankly and more playfully approached through baseball than through formal political institutions. Racial segregation is, of course, the most famous and most important example. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, Jules Tygiel writes, "developments on southern playing fields spearheaded the attack on segregation. The acceptance of blacks in interracial competition

dented Jim Crow's armor, and in many instances, caused people, particularly business leaders, to re-evaluate the efficacy and wisdom of southern racial policies. Even as resistance to integration escalated, the baseball diamond remained an oasis of relative enlightenment amidst and increasingly hostile environment." Moreover the essence of the more modern public (that thing which we call public opinion) is the capacity for debate, deliberation, and decision (for talk), as such scholars as Jurgen Habermas and Benjamin Barber argue. Here again baseball touches on the political. There are few things about which we talk more and more freely and in those discussions we address issues of profound importance. Again listen to Tygiel and note the emphasis on the telling of tales: "The saga of Robinson's first season has become a part of American mythology - sacrosanct in its memory, magnificent in its retelling. It remains a drama which thrills and fascinates, combining the central themes of the illusive Great American Novel: the undertones of Horatio Alger, the interracial comradery of nineteenth-century fiction, the sage advisor and his youthful apprentice, and the rugged and righteous individual confronting the angry mob. It is a tale of courage, heroics, and triumph. Epic in its proportions, the Robinson legend has persevered - and will continue to do so - because the myth, which rarely deviates from reality, fits our national perceptions of fair play and social progress." Myth can enlighten as well as mislead (as Joe Dugan reminds us in his comment about Ruth - "Even the lies about him are true").