CREATING THE NATIONAL PASTIME

Civic and Market at Odds

THESIS: Civic aspirations and market realities created sharp tensions within the game as it grew in popularity and cultural prestige. Promoted as a great civic treasure, something like America's national religion, baseball became more profitable than ever. Financial manipulation from the boardrooms to the playing fields increasingly landed the sport in the courts where its peculiar laws and its civic claim came under scrutiny. By the mid-twenties, however, the commissioner system and the anti-trust exemption had eased, at least in some measure, those tensions. The commissioner system provided an supposedly independent authority - above the owners and pledged to protecting "the best interests of the game." The anti-trust exemption helped the commissioner keep the litigious owners out of the courts for the next two generations.

A crisis of civic and market? A) the black mark of the reserve clause B) What the New York Times would call the "hippodroming of the sport," manipulating it for the purpose of maximizing profit - either by monopolizing, breaking monopoly, or colluding within the monopoly C) the threat of gambling and especially the 1919 fix that focused a spotlight on both A and B.

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"The World Series, along with the thrills of regular season play, the construction of great ballparks of concrete and steel, the nurturing of a legend of baseball's uniquely American origins, and the game's continuing power to bind communities and neighborhoods together, all signified the coming of age of professional baseball." Benjamin Rader, Baseball, 82

Baseball "has been gradually taken away from the spectators and made the plaything of speculative managers," the New York Times editorialized in 1915, and fans resented the "hippodroming" of the sport with "capitalists pulling the wires."

"It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people - with the single mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe." F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

"Betting on the result of games naturally begot collusion between those who bet their money and some of those who played the game. Per consequence, it was soon discovered that unprincipled players, under pretense of accident or inability to make points at critical stages, were 'throwing' games." - Albert Spalding, 1911 (the choice of the word "collusion" is revealing: it means "secret agreement or cooperation for an illegal or deceitful purpose," something the owners themselves did on a regular basis).

The Black Sox fix "occurred at a moment when the aspirations of baseball to become an American cultural icon and the realities of baseball as a business and a sport were thrown into awkward juxtaposition...." G. Edward White, Creating the National Pastime, 92.

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THE TASK AND ITS TIMING
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"No rounders, no rounders": Mills' toast (1889) and Chadwick-Spalding's debate (1905); the Abraham G. Mills' commission (Mills was NL president in 1889 and had claimed that "patriotism and research" confirmed baseball's immaculate American origins) and fraudulent "investigation" (1907), and Spalding's America's National Game (1911)

"the incorporation of America" (Trachtenberg) and "the search for order" (Wiebe): a nation out of immigrants and island communities

a leisure revolution: "eight hours for what we will" (Rosenzweig, Peiss) and a consumer culture (Leach, Ewen)

THE CIVIC SYMBOL

concrete and steel; the new ballparks, 1909-1923; classical motifs, civic monuments, in Cincinnati at least banning advertising (so as not to spoil "the artistic appearance of the yards" - Garry Herrmann); Forbes' triple decks, Ebbets's land acquisition. "They were akin to the great public buildings, skyscrapers, and railway terminals of the day; they were edifices that local residents proudly pointed to as evidence of their city's size and achievements. They also served as retreats from the noise, dirt, and squalor of the industrial city....a nonurban universe of open vistas, green grass, and clean, white boundaries....The parks were important depositories of collective memories; their presence evoked a shared past of heroic deeds and monumental blunders." Rader, 86-7

THE DEAD BALL ERA

the Dead Ball era, 1900-1920; in 1900 a new plate, five-sided and 17 inches across replaced the old 12 inch square, adding perhaps 200 sq. inches to strike zone; foul tips as strikes; soft, discolored balls, some relief pitching, better defense (errors per game: 1876=12.02, 1880=8.67, 1890=6.66, 1900=4.85, 1910=3.55, 1920= 2.83, 1960= 1.75), spitballers, bigger pitchers from "Hippo" Vaughn (6'4", 215 lbs.) to Cy Young (6'2", 210).

managers and free swingers; tactics and the inside game; Connie Mack and John McGraw, a study in contrasts, but both play the inside game, discouraging free swinging. Look sometime at the career leaders in assists for catchers; it's all players from this era.

a cast of characters; Waddell, Johnson, Mathewson, Cobb, Wagner; "king of the loafers" and the "leading sousepaw" vs. muscular Christianity and the college boys

BASEBALL'S CRISES OF CIVIC AND MARKET

the National Commission (1903-1920); Johnson's three-man judicial board; legislative power remained with individual clubs

the Players' Fraternity (1912) and The Federal League challenge (1914-1915); falling salaries after 1903, then doubled between 1913-1915; new money, from mass production, mass marketing industries, into the game; the Ward brothers (Tip-Top bread), Phil Ball (ice), Otto Stefel (brewing), Charles Weeghman (luncheonettes), Phil Wrigley (chewing gum). Settlement brings in several of these as new owners of Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Browns.

Baker's "work or fight" rule (1918): shortened season, marginal players; the shipyard teams as baseball fumbles a genuine occasion for civic relevance.

THE FIX AND THE "INVESTIGATION"

the $100,000 conspiracy; Cicotte and the gamblers; Comiskey and his players, the eight (Cicotti, Williams, Risberg, Gandil, Jackson, Weaver, Felsch, McMullin); Arnold Rothstein the ringleader.

Comiskey's strategy; the $10,000 reward and controlling the investigation; the missing confessions

little Billy Maharg and the grand jury report (1921): Maharg was a former player and disgruntled small fry in on the fix who spilled the beans, leading to an investigation and grand jury. "Baseball is more than a national game," reported the Cook County grand jury that investigated the fix, "it is an American institution." "In the deplorable absence of military training in this country," the grand jury report continued, "baseball and other games having 'team play' spirit offer the American youth an agency for the development that would be entirely lacking were it relegated to the position to which horse racing and boxing have fallen." Baseball promoted "respect for proper authority, self-confidence, fairmindedness, quick judgment and self-control," the report concluded.

the urban demimonde and the Hal Chases of the world; McGraw and the 1908 pennant race (bribing Phillies and Braves), the Cobb-Lajoie-Chalmers affair, Chase's own checkered career, Cobb and Speaker in 1926.

ENTER COMMISSIONER LANDIS

background to commissioner plan: struggles over player contracts; anger at Herrmann as Ban Johnson's tool, the Mays' affair and the new AL owners (esp. Frazee and the Colonels who had no allegiance to Johnson); the Colonels into court over Mays.

the Lasker plan and Judge Landis; Lasker, famous advertising executive and "public relations" pioneer, and after 1918 "publicity czar" of the Republican National Committee (whose great contribution to history was the Harding slogan "Let's be done with wiggle and wobble"), came

up with a plan to place baseball in the hands of an independent commission; why Landis? Landis and Standard Oil ($29 million fine for rebates, 1907 - the trust-busting judge, often overruled as in this case) and the Federal League challenge “Both sides must understand that any blows at the thing called baseball would be regarded by this court as a blow to a national institution.” 1915)

“the best interests of the game”; a public trust or a private one? “Baseball (the business) stands indicted.” - Hugh Fullerton in The New Republic, 1920; Only “by placing the supreme jurisdiction in a group of men not financially interested in the game” could it be saved. - editorial in The Nation, 1920; the Will Hays model from the movie industry, someone not financially interested but who pays the salary? (The owners, of course.) the FTC model - keeping the cartel out of the courts; Landis as a “skillful and ruthless cartel enforcer”; the 1922 Supreme Court decision granting anti-trust exemption (arising from Federal League suit): Justice Holmes: Baseball was not a “trade or commerce in the commonly-accepted use of the words.”; results in baseball’s “private self-government”: Landis on banishment of the eight: “regardless of the verdict of juries, baseball is entirely competent to protect itself....The only thing on anybody’s mind now is to make and keep baseball what millions of fans...want it to be.”

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CIVIC AND MARKET IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY BASEBALL

"Is there any other experience in modern life in which multitudes of men so completely and intensely lose their individual selves in the larger life which they call their city?" Morris Cohen asked in 1919. Comparing the “national religion” to Greek drama, Cohen argued that baseball "purifies all of our emotions, cultivating hope and courage when we are behind, fairness for the other team when we are ahead, charity for the umpire and above all zest for combat and conquest." Alluding to William James's famous call for "a moral equivalent of war," Cohen insisted that "baseball already embodied all the moral value of war." What "more can a reasonable man expect in this imperfect world," he concluded, "than an open chance to do his best in a free and fair fight." Civic pride and civic virtue were central to Cohen's defense of baseball.

Ironically Cohen penned his panegyric just months before the scandalous fix of the 1919 World Series. Again ironically the scandal, which broke in 1920 and was a product of the game's commercial side, redoubled the effort to defend baseball as a crucial civic and national institution. “Baseball is more than a national game,” reported the Cook County grand jury that investigated the fix, “it is an American institution.” “In the deplorable absence of military training in this country,” the grand jury report continued, “baseball and other games having ‘team play’ spirit offer the American youth an agency for the development that would be entirely lacking were it relegated to the position to which horse racing and boxing have fallen.” Baseball promoted “respect for proper authority, self-confidence, fair mindedness, quick judgment and self-control,” the report concluded. But professional baseball had hardly been handled in a way conducive to such a weighty role.

The 1919 fix was a scandal waiting to happen. Whistling in the dark began amidst the unseemly scramble for dollars occasioned by the Federal League challenge to the major league's monopoly in 1914-1915. Anyone who really knew the game, Irving Sanborn reported in Everybody's Magazine, was certain that "the sport itself is honest." This essential honestly, he continued, was in spite of there being "more ball-players who would 'throw' a game for personal profit, than there are bank clerks who would pinch a $10,000 stack from the teller cage if they could get away with it." There were also more promoters, went on this rather odd defense of baseball's integrity, "who would manipulate games so as to increase their own profits, than there are presidents of banks who would misappropriate deposits to bolster up their private investments." Honesty was simply the result of "the impossibility of being crooked without the absolute certainty of detection in the end." The game could not be fixed without the collusion of the players. And the unpredictability of the game itself, making it impossible to know on whose play - fielder, pitcher, or batter - the contest would hinge, meant that a large number of players were essential to a fix. Any of these players later disgruntled for any of a number of reasons were liable to expose the fix.

This was hardly a stirring endorsement of the integrity of the game (or of the nation's banking system!). In the background stood the gamblers, who were convinced in 1914 that the major league owners themselves had conspired to bring the pennant to the Miracle Braves (who went from last place on July 18th to the world championship on October 13th) because "it would mean a lot of money to the club owners to have a new deal." Gamblers had learned little, Everybody's continued, from their costly error in 1913 when they assumed that the $46,000 in tickets sold for the fifth game of the World Series would insure that the Philadelphia A's would not sweep the series in four games (which they did). Such mistakes were meant to point to the game's inviolability. That wasn't the conclusion gamblers drew. In 1919 the gamblers, rather than trying to figure out the owners' own manipulations, orchestrated a fix of their own.

The possibility of a fix that hovered uncomfortably over Sanborn's analysis was, for him, not the real problem. Commercialism was crowding sportsmanship out of the game. The promoters behind the Federal League challenge, experienced hands in the world of mass production and advertising, claimed to be on a campaign to "free diamond athletes from slavery and to bust an iniquitous trust for the benefit of the fans." But it was clear that their real purpose was to win admittance to baseball's profitable monopoly. The "steady procession of injunctions and incrimination, damage-suits and defamations" revealed that the "dollar-sign" had replaced the "green diamond as the trademark" of baseball. Where "the magnates and lawyers left off nauseating the public, the players began." Increased competition for players' service meant that with "their salaries for the coming season assured, no matter what happened, it made no difference to most of the players how the scoreboard looked." Players of integrity remained but by and large there was "general indifference on the field."

Baseball was a business, but a business dependent on the production of sport. Sanborn was

no opponent of the commercial game or even of the monopoly. Baseball had "developed a clean, healthful sport into what Judge Landis [in the course of the Federal League's anti-trust suit against the major leagues] called a 'national institution,'" Sanborn wrote. "And experience has shown that professional baseball cannot exist healthily without some monopolistic features." But its very commercialism had to be disguised - and here was the logic of the anti-trust exemption - because commercial success would not be forthcoming "when the public see things being manipulated solely to uplift revenues." The novelty of financial manipulation might attract a few new fans (which free agent celebrities surely did at the end of the century) "but there must be something else to hold them. The kind of baseball given the public last year will not." Only a strong dose of financial adversity, Sanborn concluded, could save baseball from itself. "Save the game and the dollars will take care of themselves; but when commerce stalks in at the front door sport flies out the back window."

For years friends of the owners had been fighting a rearguard defense. Challenging the perception of the baseball magnate as "a rank land-pirate who fattens on the public and grinds down his ballplayers," William Phelon insisted in 1913 that he had never known an owner, not even "the coldest business man to remain one, or to escape the fascination of the game." Old charges of syndicate ball (a system of cross-ownership that often sacrificed one team's fortunes to the success of another) had surfaced again in a sport that championed competition but whose profitability demanded at least some collusion. Dutifully, Phelon insisted that "the spirit of the Game" was "far different ...from that of other sports or of business life." Unlike the world of horse racing where stable mates recognized the "principle that, somehow or other, the money must be won for the stable," the world of baseball was one of unrelenting competition. Despite rumors of common ownership of the NL's Philadelphia and Chicago teams, Phelon pointed out, the Phillies knocked the Cubs out of the race. Greed might prevail in other sports or in the business world, but the spirit of baseball was "the spirit of ambition and the desire for glory." For owners like Ebbets of the Brooklyn club, financial success meant little while the "microbe of ambition keeps right on gnawing." Comiskey's response to the fix - to protect the players and his own investments while appearing to lead the investigation - suggested otherwise.

Yet the 1919 fix provided an occasion for a reassertion of baseball's civic importance, while the commissioner system and the Supreme Court's 1922 anti-trust exemption appeared to insure the game's integrity. In the wake of the fix "Baseball (the business) stands indicted," Hugh Fullerton wrote in The New Republic. Only "by placing the supreme jurisdiction in a group of men not financially interested in the game could it be saved," The Nation editorialized. Although the owners paid Landis' salary, the commissioner was to look after "the best interests of the game," transforming a private trust into a public one. Landis did act ruthlessly to discipline players and sometimes owners. But his greatest skill was as a "skillful and ruthless cartel enforcer," preventing disputes over territories and players from reaching the courts where baseball might lose control. Then in 1922 Supreme Court granted baseball an anti-trust exemption in a decision arising from Federal League challenge to the baseball monopoly. Justice Holmes argued that baseball was not a "trade or commerce in the commonly-accepted use of the

words." Now the highest court had agreed that baseball law was a law unto itself, a decision that ratified baseball's "private self-government." Landis statement on banishment of the eight - "regardless of the verdict of juries, baseball is entirely competent to protect itself" - confirmed the new status. "The only thing on anybody's mind now is to make and keep baseball what millions of fans...want it to be," Landis concluded. It would be more accurate to say that the financial manipulation of the sport would henceforth be kept behind closed doors - so as not to undercut the civic moralizing that helped keep the profits flowing.