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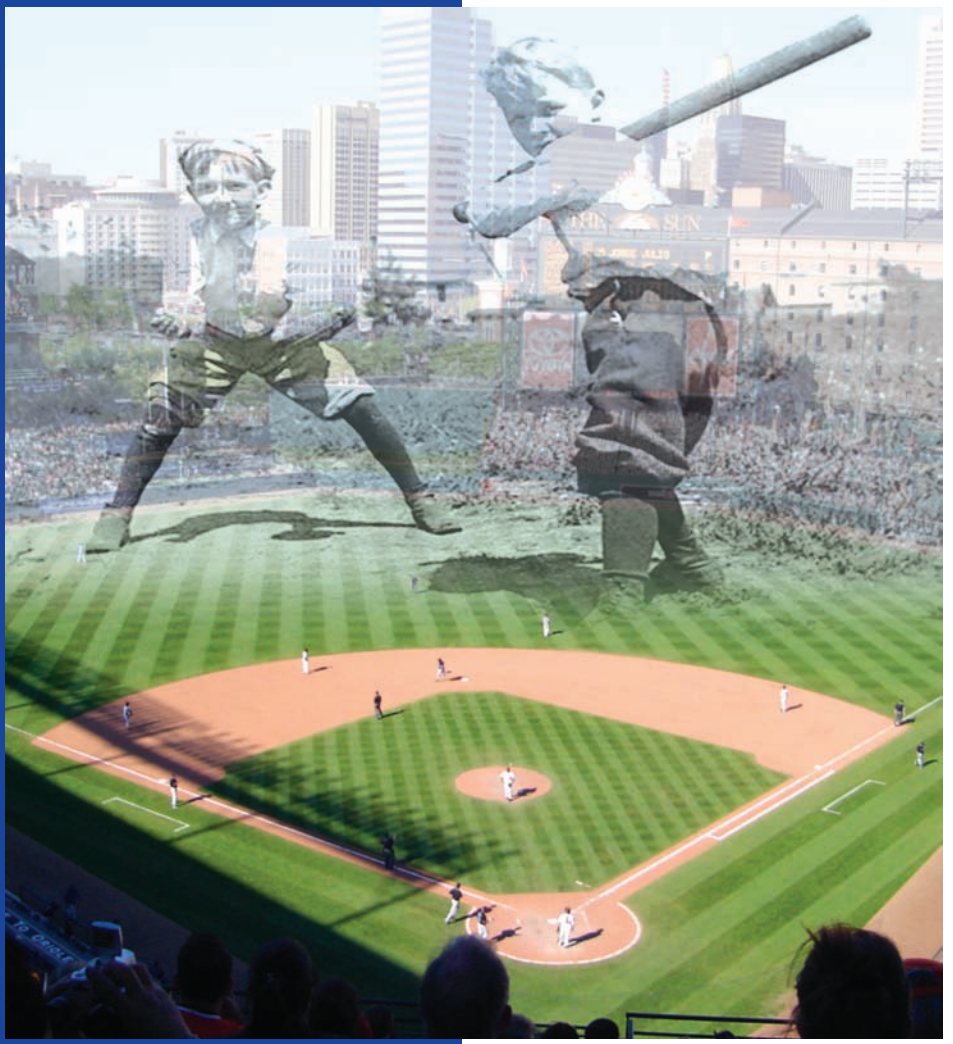
TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME: A HISTORY OF BASEBALL IN AMERICA

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Timothy B. Shutt
KENYON COLLEGE

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A History of Baseball in America

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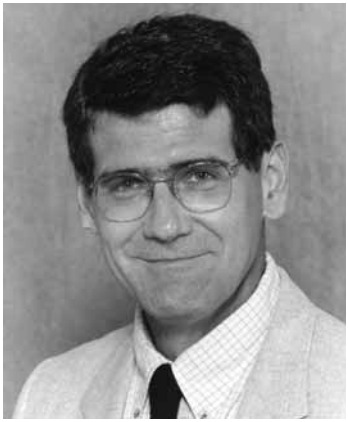

Photo courtesy of Timothy B. Shutt

About Your Professor

Timothy B. Shutt

For twenty years, Professor Timothy Baker Shutt has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. Professor Shutt's courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program of Humane Studies and, before that, in the Department of English, have always been heavily oversubscribed.

Shutt is a native of Ohio, raised in Michigan and schooled in Connecticut. During his high school years at the Hotchkiss School, he was honored as an All-American swimmer and devoted much of his time to drama. He majored in English as an undergraduate at Yale ('72). After three years at St. Mark's School of Texas, where he taught English and history and coached swimming, Shutt went on to graduate school in English, specializing in medieval literature and the history of ideas at the University of Virginia as a Du Pont Fellow. After earning his Ph.D. in 1984, Shutt spent two further years at Virginia as a Mellon Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and took a position at Kenyon in 1986, where he has taught happily ever since, deeply enjoying interaction with his students and the peaceful life of the Ohio countryside.

Shutt is a jovial extrovert and a polymath—a born teacher and lecturer—interested in nearly everything and everybody. In the Integrated Program in Humane Studies, he teaches literature, philosophy, history, art history, religious studies, and, at times, the history of science. He has written on military history, baseball, and birding in addition to his academic studies and gives regular talks at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon on migratory birds and on observational astronomy and the lore of the stars. He also works, when time permits, as a sports announcer for Kenyon football games, and for championship swimming meets nationwide, claiming longtime Detroit Tiger announcer Ernie Harwell as his inspiration. Shutt also travels regularly as a spokesperson for Kenyon, giving talks and lectures on behalf of the college from coast to coast. But his real vocation is reading and the classroom.

Dedication

This course is dedicated to my brothers and brother-in-law—and to all the crew who for twenty or more happy years played sandlot baseball in Bay City, Michigan.

hic victor caestus artemque repono ~Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.484

I would also like to make an explicit and grateful acknowledgement of my immense debt in treating of baseball to the works and ideas—and not least to the crisp and insightful prose—of Bill James, who has transformed not only my own, but our communal understanding of the game.

Introduction

Baseball has been celebrated as “America’s National Pastime” for more than one hundred and fifty years, and on one level it recalls what, at least in retrospect, seems to be an earlier, more innocent age—long summer afternoons and sandlot ball, fresh rural air or brownstone stoops, no matter. In part, I suspect, this is because most of those who love the game played as children and followed their favorite big-league teams as children. It is not a game one grows out of, though, and once smitten, most baseball lovers remain true, passing on their love of the game to their children, and, in a sense, returning to rhythms of childhood themselves—when time is endless and summers are long—whenever they return to the game. And the game itself is ever young, the succession of baseball heroes unbroken. Honus Wagner to Ty Cobb to Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, to Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams, to Henry Aaron, Mickey Mantle, and Willie Mays, to Mike Schmidt, and Cal Ripken, and Tony Gwynn, to the stars of the present, the succession continues, summer after summer. Cy Young, Christy Mathewson, Walter Johnson, Lefty Grove, Bob Feller—Sandy Koufax, Juan Marichal, and Bob Gibson, each generation has its heroes and cherishes the memory of those gone before as part of the texture of life in the past, as an ongoing counterpart to daily life—through the War and the Depression, through the fifties and sixties, and so on to the present day. This course is a celebration of baseball’s rich past—and of a game stronger than ever.

Lecture 1:
Origin and Fundamental Character of the Game

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

Many baseball history books seem to be a bit embarrassed about their subject. Rather than focusing on baseball itself, they focus on something else that seems more sophisticated and more important. Two particular long-term favorites are the history of labor relations in baseball and the history of race relations in baseball. We too will have occasion to take a look at those concerns as we progress—they are indeed important—but our focus will be rather different. This is a course about the history of baseball, and in particular, major-league baseball, in its own right and on its own behalf.

For baseball merits the attention. At root, of course, baseball is play—highly organized play, and play as a business—but that does not detract from its interest. For play is important and games are important. We do not live for bread alone, and, truth be told, except in the most dire straits, we do not focus on bread alone. And within the context of games and play, baseball is unique in several respects—by no means least in its cultural impact on American life. Since the mid-nineteenth century, in fact—well before professional baseball even began—baseball has been celebrated as the "national pastime" and "America's game." And though for a generation at least football and, indeed, basketball, have mounted a persuasive challenge to that claim, the impact of baseball is still substantial, if not, perhaps, unrivaled, and, indeed, despite its problems, professional baseball is thriving as never before—in the ballparks, on television, and even on the minor-league level.

A Singular Game

Baseball is also unique in its susceptibility to careful statistical analysis, and this susceptibility has spawned in its turn a unique array of analysts, historians, computer, dice, and fantasy-league enthusiasts—devotees in a sense not so much to baseball on the field as to baseball in the mind. And baseball has long exerted a disproportionate attraction for intellectuals of one sort or another for just this reason.

But baseball is also unique, or nearly unique, on the field. Games, after all, come in families, and baseball belongs to a strange and a strong one. There is, of course, the race—thus track, horse-racing, auto-racing, swimming, sailing, and the like. There is the fight—boxing, wrestling, fencing, and the various martial arts. There are the various racket games—tennis, squash, ping-pong, and the rest. There is the athletic performance—gymnastics and diving. And then there is the game *par excellence*—we score goals and you try to stop us—manifested in sports whose name is legion, like soccer, basketball,

football, rugby, hockey, field hockey, and lacrosse. And then there is the odd game of golf, weirder even than baseball, and more or less *sui generis* in its challenges and satisfactions. And at last we have baseball—and cricket and softball and various cousins

The fundamental action defining all the games of the family is hitting some moving thing, ordinarily a ball, with a stick, an action which is about as much fun as pretty much anything you can do, this side of biological necessities of one sort or another. Hence a very considerable part of baseball's visceral appeal—the game should be called "batball," or, perhaps even better, "hitball." But there is another complication that makes all the games of the family in some deep sense indirect, an inherent complexity that balances and enriches the atavistic appeal of swinging a bat. For hitting the ball, home runs perhaps aside, does not in itself constitute a score. Instead it *enables* the more or less circular run around the bases, on the part of the batter or previous batters, which constitutes a score. Linear movement—the pitched and hit ball—enables circular movement. Other games have nothing like this. And as the great Bill James observes—the most distinguished baseball theorist and commentator of them all—baseball and its relations are the only sports where the team with the ball is on defense. A very odd pastime in many respects. But a deeply appealing one all the same, for players and spectators alike.

In the Beginning

Where, then, does baseball come from? The 1939 "Centennial Celebration" offered the answer, Civil War hero Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown, New York. But despite the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, few serious students of the game have accepted that response. The true answer seems to be that, unsurprisingly, "batball" goes back a long way. There are batters gracing the margins of medieval manuscripts, though it is not entirely clear exactly what game they are playing. But cricket predates baseball, and in the days when baseball was young, the United States was by and large an Anglo-Saxon country. And then and now, "batball" has spawned all sorts of local variants, stickball and backyard baseball in a bewildering array of varieties (my brother and I happily played one of our own devising for many years). The immediate ancestor of baseball as we know it, however, seems not to have been cricket, but the English game of "rounders," played deep into colonial times in America and played in two variant forms. In New England, they played "Townball," which featured four bases arranged as a square, not a diamond, with the pitcher in the middle and the batter, in effect, in the middle of the line between home and first. In New York, by contrast, they played "New York Ball," or "Base Ball"—diamond arrangement, batter at home. And it is from the "New York game" that baseball directly descends.

So what was baseball like in its formative years? Well, as in contemporary sandlot ball, there was a variable number of players. Pitching was generally underhand—and slow. There were no gloves, so fielding was at a premium, and balls caught either on the first bounce or on the fly were out. Baserunners could put out by being hit with a thrown ball (this was called "soaking" or "plugging the runner") or they could put out by being tagged out, as at present. And, generally, all batters on a side hit each inning. All of these features, differing as they do from contemporary ball, were eminently well-

adapted to players of relatively low skill levels, which were, of course, predominantly those who then played the game at the time. (And it is, perhaps, worth observing that one reason that baseball and its cousins have declined in popularity as participant sports in recent years is their sheer difficulty. You have to do a lot of things passably well to be a ballplayer—throw, catch, run, and hit, at a minimum. The current youth-league choice of soccer is far less demanding at the novice level.)

As baseball developed, and as strong amateur teams and professional teams began to take the field, things didn't change as much as you might suppose. The game looked very much, to cite Bill James once again, like contemporary fast-pitch softball. Pitching was underhand, though fast and crafty, and pitchers threw from forty-five feet. And they ordinarily pitched every game, even into the professional era. Again, though, there were no gloves. And balls were soft, and there were, as a general rule, no outfield fences. So there were lots of singles—and lots of errors.

The Professional Game

Time, then, to move to institutional history and the early development of what would become the professional game. In 1845 the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York, led by Alexander Cartwright, who has as good a claim as any to be father of the game, took the field, among other places, at the Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey. The Knickerbockers were a gentleman's club, but relatively skilled for the time, and they played a game providing, as at present, for three outs per team per inning. Their first "match game," though, proved disappointing, as they took on an all-star, but *ad hoc*, "New York Base Ball Club" at their own home field in Hoboken and lost in four innings by the daunting score of 23–1.

By 1854, New York boasted four constituted gentleman's teams—the Knickerbockers, the Gothams, the Eagles, and the Empires. And shortly thereafter the neighboring city of Brooklyn boasted an answering quartet—the Excelsiors, the Putnams, the Eckfords, and the Atlantics. Other clubs soon followed in their train—the Eclectics, the Charter Oaks, the Unions, the Mutuals, the Manhattans, the Phantoms, Pocahontas, the Metropolitans, and the Aesculapians. Base Ball was all the rage, and other clubs soon followed more or less nationwide: in Detroit, the Franklin Club, the Early Risers, and the Detroits; on the West Coast, the Eagles, the Red Rovers, and the Em Quads; in the DC area, the Potomac Club and the Nationals; and in New England, the Bostons, the Olympics, the Elm Trees, the Green Mountains, and the Hancocks. The year 1858 saw the foundation of the National Association of Base Ball Players, centered at first in New York City, with the Knickerbockers and cohorts leading the way. By 1866, right after the Civil War, the Ball Players' association had more than two hundred member clubs, by 1867, more than three hundred. Meanwhile, in 1859, the first recorded collegiate game took place between Amherst and Williams, with Amherst winning what proved to be a 26-inning contest by the score of 73–32.

By this time high-level, at least putatively amateur games were drawing substantial paying crowds—the first enclosed ball park, the Union and Capitoline Grounds, was built in Brooklyn in 1864 with a seating capacity of about fifteen

hundred. And already, more or less *sub rosa*, some players were being paid. The first admittedly all-professional club, though, was the Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869, led by Harry and George Wright, which during its extensive opening tour garnered fifty-six wins, no losses, and a single tie (the tie came against the Troy (NY) Haymakers, notorious for "hippodroming," or throwing games, who walked off in the sixth, supposedly at the behest of supporters who stood to forfeit their bets should they lose). No undefeated streak lasts forever, though, and after the Red Stockings were finally defeated the following year, attendance declined and they ultimately folded.

What was needed was a more permanent arrangement—something more like a league—and, sure enough, 1871 saw the foundation of the National Association of Professional Baseball Players. This was not a major league in today's sense, exactly. The league varied, during its heyday, between eight and thirteen teams, some of whom, in many years, did not come close to lasting the season. The 1875 Keokuk Westerns, for example, dropped out after compiling the undistinguished record of 1-12. The Fort Wayne Kekiongas, the Middletown Mansfields, and the Elizabeth Resolutes did a little better, but not much. Association teams played each other, to be sure, but they played many other teams as well. And the schedule was, to put the matter gently, flexible. Nonetheless, the Association was clearly more or less organized professional baseball, and the dominant team, from 1872 to 1875 the Boston Red Stockings, was unmistakably the best in the land. They boasted, beside the baseball Wright brothers of former Cincinnati fame, the redoubtable Albert Spalding, who went on to a distinguished career as a sporting goods and baseball magnate, and who during the years in question posted a pitching record of 187 wins against 46 losses, an average of nearly 47 wins a year.

Developments on the field continued apace. By the 1850s, put-outs by throwing at baserunners were abolished, and the 1860s saw the demise of the one-bounce flyout. This, of course, put an enhanced premium on fielding, and by 1875 players had devised both a catcher's mask and the first, very primitive, fielding gloves. The game lasted nine innings and featured three outs per inning per team. But it still looked more like fast-pitch softball than it looked like baseball as we know it.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What makes baseball a worthy subject of study?
2. What aspects of baseball make it unlike any other sport?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

Seymour, Harold. *Baseball. Vol. I, The Early Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Wolff, Rick, ed. dir. *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Lecture 2:
Nineteenth-Century Professional Baseball

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

It was during the later nineteenth century that baseball became the game we now know, both in its organization and, more importantly, on the field. The most influential changes concerned pitching. In 1881 the "pitcher's box" was moved from 45 to 50 feet, and three years later, in 1884, in what was probably the single most influential change of the time, overhand pitching was allowed. Up until 1887, implausibly enough, a batter could request either "high" or "low" pitches, but in that year something very much like the modern strike zone was introduced. Walks, though, or bases on balls, were still fairly hard to come by. Over the course of the 1880s, in a complicated series of maneuvers, the number of balls required for a walk fell from nine, to eight, to seven, to five, and finally, in 1889, to four. In 1887 batters were first allowed to "take their base" after being hit by a pitched ball. And in that year, in what amounted to a one-year special, walks were counted as base hits, leading Tip O'Neill of the St. Louis Browns to the highest full-season average ever recorded, .482 by the then-current rules (and .435 in accordance with the rules previously and afterwards in place). Finally, in 1893, the "pitcher's box" was abolished to be replaced by the current slab or "rubber," a full 60 feet and 6 inches from the plate. And with that adjustment the modern game was essentially in place.

Foul tips were first counted as strikes as in 1895. And balls hit out of the park over fences closer than 210 feet (in 1888) and 235 feet (in 1892) became "ground-rule" doubles rather than home runs, a matter of some significance since Ed (or Ned) Williamson of the Chicago White Stockings had set the pre-Babe Ruth single-season home-run record in Chicago's Lake Front Park, where the right-field foul pole stood a scant 196 feet away, and the left-field foul pole even closer, at 180 feet in 1884—about the distance of the center-field fence in a Little League park. Hence the right-handed Williamson's mark of 27 homers that year was less impressive than might appear at first glance (he only managed 2 the year previous and 3 the year following when the White Stockings moved to a new venue). Finally, in 1884, woodworkers John Hillerich of Louisville made for Pete Browning, third baseman for the local club, the very first "Louisville Slugger."

The National League and the American Association

We concluded our last lecture with a brief look at the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players and their leading team, the Boston Red Stockings. The Association in many senses represented a distinct improvement over the more or less haphazard situation before its foundation, but it was still a fairly catch-as-catch-can outfit. Which irritated William Hulbert of

Chicago, by no means least because of the Association's rather cavalier attitude toward contracts (to say nothing of scheduling). What was needed, he thought, was a well-financed, well-organized, owner-based rather than player-based system of governance. The result was the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs, which first took the field in 1876 and is still very much with us 130 and more years later. Not, however, without a whole series of significant challenges, more or less from the outset and later on as well. Hulbert got things off to a rousing start, to be sure, enthusiastically raiding the Association club in Boston for its stars—among them Albert Spalding—who went 47-13 for Chicago in his last full year of pitching. But after its first season in 1876, the new league was forced to drop two of its eight clubs—New York and Philadelphia, forsooth—for failing on financial grounds to complete their last scheduled western road trip. And soon enough the National League faced another set of problems stemming in large part from the rise of the rival American Association with its center of gravity, and in many years, its strongest teams, in St. Louis and Cincinnati. A leading light of the Association, and in effect, one of its founders, was St. Louis owner Chris Von der Ahe, a larger-than-life, extroverted saloon keeper who loved baseball, among other reasons, for the splendid opportunity it afforded to sell beer. Which highlights one of the key differences, right from the outset, between the League and the Association. They catered, in a sense, to a different crowd. National League teams charged a base price fifty cents for admission—about ten dollars in contemporary currency. Association teams charged half that. League teams did not, and generally *could not* play on Sundays. Blue laws prevented it. Association teams could and did. And then there was the beer—in Association parks only. Part of the difference lay in the local population. St. Louis and Cincinnati in particular were cities with lots of German immigrants who found themselves very much out of sympathy with the enthusiasm for prohibition and the historically Puritan commitment to a rigorously sanctified Sabbath that dominated, by and large, in the older cities of the East.

The Reserve Clause and Territoriality

After some scuffling, however, the two leagues made peace, a peace hinging in large part on their mutual and self-preserving recognition of what is known as the "reserve clause." This is a distinctive feature of baseball player contracts that has been a source of controversy since its inception in 1879 and which, in reinterpreted, if not exactly in modified form, obtains even today. Most disputes in baseball—between leagues, between teams, and between teams and players—have in one sense or another involved the reserve clause ever since. What it stipulates is that a player, in signing a contract for a given year, reserves to the club with which he signs the unique right to offer a contract for the following year. For many years, though not at present, this was in its turn interpreted to suggest that once a player had signed, he was in effect "owned" by his club in perpetuity, or in any case, for as long as his club had any interest in his services. Players were not, in short, free to negotiate with other teams or, perish the thought, with other leagues that might seek their services—and pay them better. Players, understandably enough, have never been happy with such stipulations, and owners, likewise understandably, have over the years done everything in their power to preserve them. That is, in

fact, what baseball "wars" have almost always been about, and the most dangerous "wars," from an owner's perspective, are those resulting from the rise of a high-paying new would-be league. The owners' incentive is very strongly either—and preferably—to drive the new league out of business, or, failing that, to reach an accommodation and keep those salaries under control. And the incentives are very strong. So much so that no baseball "war" has lasted much longer than two years.

The American Association began play in 1882 and reached an accommodation with the National League by 1883—just in time, as things turned out, to drive the one-year Union Association out of business in 1884. It was not, in fact, much of a league.

The Players League

The challenge arising in 1890 with the Players League was very much stiffer. First of all, unlike the Union Association, the Players League was able to sign good players and lots of them. And second, the mover and shaker behind the Players League was one of the most powerful and charismatic figures ever associated with baseball, John Montgomery Ward. Ward in his day was a first-rate pitcher. In the late 1870s he twice won 40 games for the Providence Grays. And after his pitching days were past, he played on for another decade as a starting infielder for New York and Brooklyn, meanwhile, and very much to the point, earning a law degree from Columbia during the off-season. In 1885 he helped to establish the Brotherhood of Professional Baseball Players, drawing with him many of the finest players in the game—many, in fact, his New York teammates. The Players National League of Base Ball Clubs followed in its turn, organized in 1889, and taking the field the following year. The Players even issued a "manifesto," then as now a loaded term. The Players meant business, and the established leagues clearly knew it. And put the Players League out of business, though it proved no easy task, and the financial strain, in fact, led a year later, in 1891, to the demise of the American Association as well. The National League bought out the four weakest Association teams and incorporated the four strongest—and for the rest of the decade fielded an unwieldy twelve-team circuit. It was, in many respects, not a pretty sight.

The 1880s had been a kind of baseball "golden age." Big stars, like the celebrated, exuberant, and highly versatile King Kelly, had made $5,000 a year and more—$100,000 or more in today's currency. From 1883 to 1889 the League and the Association had even conducted a "world series" of sorts, not always conclusive and variable in length—the 1887 contest between the St. Louis Browns and the one-year wonder Detroit Wolverines had gone to 15 games—but generally profitable even so. This was the era of "mighty Casey" at the bat (the poem first appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1888, and was proclaimed, so we learn, by vaudevillians for a generation and more afterward). Players like Big Dan

Adrian Constantine "Cap" Anson
1852–1922

Anson had a remarkable life and a memorable baseball career of twenty-seven years. He won batting titles two times and placed second in the league four times while playing with the Chicago White Stockings. Anson led the majors in RBIs (runs batted in) no less than seven years. Major League Baseball now recognizes him as seventh all-time in hits with 3,418. He was posthumously inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.

Brouthers (and big by the standards of the time he was), Cap Anson, Buck Ewing, and Tim Keefe were household words. In 1884 Charles Gardner "Old Hoss" Radbourn pitched Providence to the world championship with a record of 60-12 over the course of nearly 700 innings, in what, according to Bill James, was the most valuable single-season performance of all-time. The previous year he had won a mere 49. Baseball was big.

The 1890s and Small Ball

The 1890s were in some respects less successful. Most harmful, perhaps, was the later outlawed practice of "syndicate ownership," by which at times the same owners, in a clear conflict of interest, controlled more than a single league team. Cleveland and St. Louis, Baltimore and Brooklyn, and Louisville and Pittsburgh all suffered in this way, and suffer they did since the temptation was to stock one team at the expense of the other. The culmination of this trend was the notorious Cleveland Spiders of 1899, who compiled a record of 20 and 134, establishing a record for losses that has never really been approached. It was, in fact, worse than it sounds. They had been a good team. In 1895 and '96, for instance, they had placed second, led by first-rate players like infielder Cupid Childs, batting champion, Jesse Burkett (hitting .423 and then .410), with Cy Young himself on the mound. By 1899 all were playing for St. Louis, and the deplorable Spiders more or less quit playing home games altogether because attendance was so very low.

There were other issues. It is hard to know how seriously to take this, but by all accounts during the 1890s cheating, fighting, and really vicious, hate-speech-style heckling reached some sort of all-time high. There is no question that sports events can spin out of control—the problem at present seems most pronounced in the world of soccer. And during the 1890s baseball seemed headed in that direction. It was part of the ethos of the game. And not least on the very best teams.

To be sure, the most dominant team of the nineties, the five-time champion Boston Beaneaters, led by Kid Nichols on the mound, perhaps the most overlooked of truly great pitchers, smooth and splendid third-baseman Jimmy Collins, and hard-hitting outfielder Hugh Duffy, still the holder of the single-season batting record with a .438 average in 1894, were cleaner than some. But it was not the Beaneaters, despite the merits, who dominated in the imagination of posterity—or, for that matter, seemed to set the tone at the time.

The team from the era that is best remembered is the Baltimore Orioles, league champions from 1894 through 1896. This is at least in part because two prominent members of the team, genial catcher Wilbert Robinson and, above all, pugnacious team sparkplug (or co-sparkplug) John McGraw, went on in later years to long and extremely well-publicized careers as managers in New York of the Dodgers and Giants respectively. Be that as it may, though, the Orioles played rough, liked playing rough, and were in fact proud of how rough they played. Not so much Wee Willie Keeler, perhaps, though shortstop (and co-sparkplug) Hughie Jennings was just as relentless as McGraw. And, to be fair, they played smart as well. And, in fact, playing smart—"scientific" ball or "inside" ball, as it then was called—is the other keynote of the era. Bunting, hit and run plays, the stolen base—connoisseurs

on field and in the stands alike relished every aspect of what we would now, with a nod to Whitey Herzog, think of as “small” ball.

Then, though, there was nothing “small” about it, and in fact the rhetoric of the time moves in an entirely different direction. The idea seemed to be that this kind of baseball was some sort of arcane “secret” that only the brightest and most sophisticated had the capacity to understand. I have, for my own part, never found anything particularly arcane about a sacrifice bunt, but in the nineties folks seem to have felt differently. It was cutting edge. The latest thing.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were some of the differences between the National League and the American Association?
2. What was the major problem with “syndicate ownership”?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

Seymour, Harold. *Baseball. Vol. I, The Early Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Wolff, Rick, ed. dir. *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Lecture 3:
The Early 1900s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Charles C. Alexander's *Our Game: An American Baseball History.*

The year 1901 saw the beginning of yet another baseball "war," though this time the results were probably happier than ever before. The nineteenth century ended with a twelve-team National League, and the new century began with some much-needed consolidation as the League simply bought out and folded the four weakest teams, Cleveland, Louisville, Washington, and Baltimore. This was a sensible move, but in one sense at least a little surprising, since Baltimore in 1900 was a considerably bigger city than either Cincinnati or Pittsburgh, both of whom remained in the League.

Ban Johnson and the Formation of the American League

Soon enough, though, the newly streamlined Nationals faced another challenge, this time at the hands of Byron Bancroft "Ban" Johnson and the incipient American League. Johnson was a Midwesterner—he had attended both Marietta College and Oberlin in Ohio, and in the late 1890s he took over the Western League, a very high-level minor, consisting shortly after he took over of franchises in Indianapolis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Detroit, Toledo, Grand Rapids, and St. Paul. His hope was to build the league into a major league rival of the National League itself, and in 1899 he renamed it the "American League" in pursuit of his national ambitions, meanwhile dropping such relatively small cities as Toledo and Grand Rapids, and replacing them with Cleveland and Chicago. By 1901, Johnson was prepared to challenge the National League head on with teams now established not only in Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago, but also in the East in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston. In 1902, the Milwaukee franchise moved to St. Louis and in 1903 the Baltimore team went to New York, to become the Highlanders, and ultimately the Yankees. And for the next fifty years, until 1953, the major league franchises were in place. Once again, there was a bidding war, and once again, it didn't last long. Fan enthusiasm for the American League quickly put the National Leaguers in a negotiating mood, and by 1903 the two leagues had made peace and established the so-called "National Commission" as a ruling body for "organized baseball," consisting of the two league presidents and, as a third, Cincinnati owner Garry Herrmann. The arrangement would remain in place for nearly twenty years.

The American League, once again, proved very successful right from the outset, both on the field, and, even more so, at the box office. In part this was because from early on Johnson had intended to counter some of the problems that had marred the National League during the nineties by providing "clean" ball in his new league, with rowdyism, umpire-baiting, and the like strictly curtailed. His measures worked, and their influence spread.

Cy Young
(1867–1955)

Young won 511 major league games; more than any other pitcher. The outstanding nature of his achievement is recognized to this day through the Cy Young Award, which honors the best pitchers in baseball.

Otherwise, though, in most respects, the game on the field wasn't much different from what it had been, and the custom of dating the "modern" game from 1901 has more to do with the rise of the American League than with any major change in play. If at any specifiable time, the modern game began when the pitching distance was moved back to 60′ 6″ in the mid-nineties, and nineties stars like Cy Young and Ed Delahanty made the transition from one century to the next with no apparent sign of strain.

Nevertheless, there were some changes, and the most significant was the initiation in the National League in 1901 and the American League in 1903 of the current foul strike rule. At present, the first two fouls or foul tips in any given at bat are counted as strikes. Before the rule change, though, none were—and skilled batters could accordingly foul off pitches more or less at will until they at last found a pitch to their liking. For that and other reasons—the new ruling clearly favored the defense—this was the prototype age of the pitcher, the so-called "deadball era," and batting averages were low and runs were scarce. Home runs in particular were rare. Ballfields were generally constructed to take advantage of the available urban space, and outfields were frequently huge. In the Huntington Avenue Grounds, where the Red Sox played at the time, the centerfield fence was 530 feet from the plate. At the West Side Grounds, where the Cubs played in Chicago, centerfield was 560 feet deep. No one can hit home runs to center in a field 560 feet deep. Not every field was so expansive, and distances down the lines were much shorter, but still such parks very seldom invited power hitting.

More to the point, perhaps, pitchers of the time were allowed to employ all sorts of trick pitches, spitballs and "emery" balls in particular, in addition to the usual array of fastballs, change-ups, and curves. Pitchers customarily scuffed and dirtied the ball before putting it in play to make it as responsive to their wiles and as difficult to see as possible, and spectators were expected to return balls hit into the stands (and were sometimes at least threatened with prosecution if they didn't). As a result batters virtually never saw the bright white, fresh, tight ball they see at present.

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that "small ball" continued to dominate. Big innings and extra bases were hard to come by, and the bunt, the hit and run, and the stolen base continued to reign supreme. In such an environment, really overpowering pitchers did not have to give their all with every pitch, and in fact, they made no bones about it. "*Pitching in a Pinch*" was what counted, to quote the title of Christy Mathewson's autobiography, and a pitcher could accordingly pace himself.

Players of the Era

Christy Mathewson

Mathewson, indeed, was the most celebrated player of the era. A gentlemanly and strikingly handsome collegian from Bucknell, he was also a media darling, and helped lead John McGraw's New York Giants to two

back-to-back pennants during the decade, and the 1905 world championship in the second real World Series ever played. Matty won more than 30 games both years, and indeed, won 30 or more in two other seasons with his celebrated "fadeaway" or reverse curve—what we would now call a "screwball"—but what did most to establish his reputation was his three shutout victories in the 1905 Series that brought a world title to New York. For then, just as much as now, playing in New York made a big difference. Matty became something very close to the prototypical baseball hero, known and admired nationwide, appearing in thinly fictionalized, manly guise in all sorts of edifying boys' tales, and shining all the brighter in happy contrast to his famously pugnacious and hard-driving manager John McGraw.

For the New York Giants had deep and long-standing connections with Tammany Hall—one reason that Ban Johnson initially hesitated to put an American League team in New York was his fear that wherever he decided to play, the city government would simply put a road through the venue to give the Giants a helping hand (for a good many years, threading the needle, the Yankees simply rented from the Giants). And part-owner McGraw was very much involved in such doings and a variety of other edgy ventures. Matty, though, was a golden boy—more or less in real life as well as in the papers—and somehow seemed to stand apart.

Rube Waddell

A very different sort of pitcher was the ace of Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics, likewise twice pennant winners—and the losers in the Series of 1905—the eccentric and wayward Rube Waddell. Connie Mack had other fine pitchers, Eddie Plank and "Chief" Bender among them, but Waddell was something different, a man with a blazing fastball and the leading strikeout pitcher of his era—and an era, let it be said, when strikeouts were not easy to come by. He was also, very much unlike Mathewson, an exceedingly difficult player to handle. The record suggests—and the horde of stories about Waddell tend to confirm—that despite his manifest physical gifts, Waddell was only marginally functional in terms of what might now be called "life skills" and had real problems with impulse control. His enthusiastic drinking didn't help matters, but that doesn't explain things like the tales of opposing players bringing interesting toys to the park in the hope of distracting him. Or his infatuation with fire engines. Or the time he was purportedly late to the park after a stint of unpaid and volunteer alligator wrestling. Unsurprisingly, and sadly, he died young, in his late thirties, already well past his prime as a player.

Honus Wagner

The greatest player of this pitcher-dominated era, though, and by a wide margin—indeed, probably one of the three greatest players of all time—was not himself a pitcher, but was instead the Pittsburgh shortstop Honus Wagner, by consensus judgment one of the best hitters and quite simply the most effective shortstop who ever played. His numbers, out of context, admittedly do not look quite as impressive as those of some other players compiled in far more hitter-friendly eras. But in contrast to what others were then doing, in comparison with others of his own time, he simply towers above the field. His greatest season, in 1908, when he led the Pirates to within a game of the league title in

what was at least arguably the most hair-raising pennant race of all time (they won four other years during the decade) is by some accountings the most dominant of the twentieth century. He was simply that much better than his peers. And not just with the bat. He was bandy-legged and broad-shouldered and in pictures at least looks more thickset and heavily muscled than his listed weight of 200 pounds would suggest—he came from the coalfields, and he looked it—but despite that he was by all reports very quick and devastatingly effective at a position more traditionally held by all-field, more or less no-hit whippets. And despite his imposing on-field presence, he was, so we are told, affable and gentle in his off-field life—and beloved in Pittsburgh as long as he lived, nearly forty years after he retired at the age of 43.

Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown

The keynote team of the era, however, was not the Athletics, the Pirates, or the Giants—and not the Detroit Tigers either, who won closely contested titles from 1907 through 1909, in large part because of the efforts of their young outfielder Ty Cobb. It was the Chicago Cubs, who compiled a 116-36 record, for a winning percentage of .763, in 1906, and who in the next two years won the World Series 4–0 and 4–1, beating Cobb and the Tigers on each occasion. The best Chicago player in those years was probably Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown, who threw a wicked curve with the right hand he had mangled as a child in a farming accident (hence his unflattering nickname). In 1906 Brown compiled a 1.04 earned-run average, and stayed under 1.50 for four years straight, but he was by no means alone as an outstanding pitcher on his team.

"Tinker to Evers to Chance"

The rest of the staff was also very good, and beyond that, the team boasted the famous double-play combination of "Tinker to Evers to Chance," later—and uniquely—inducted into the Hall of Fame as a unit. They were probably not quite as good as their reputation—well-publicized doggerel poems, in such a context, have a greater impact than one might suppose—and as a matter of fact, and Tinker and Evers are said to have loathed one another (no one, evidently, found the tiny and combative Johnny Evers easy to deal with). Frank Chance, however, was in his day a very effective player and was a four-time pennant winner as a player-manager as well. Ineffective players, it might be observed, very seldom earn monikers like Chance's "the Peerless Leader."

Baseball's Sad Lexicon

These are the saddest of possible words:
"Tinker to Evers to Chance."
Trio of bear cubs, and fleeter than birds,
Tinker and Evers and Chance.
Ruthlessly pricking our gonfalon* bubble,
Making a Giant hit into a double—
Words that are heavy with nothing but trouble:
"Tinker to Evers to Chance."

~Franklin Pierce Adams, 1910

*A gonfalon is a pennant or flag, referring in this context to the National League title.

New Venues for a Growing Pastime

Newspaper coverage of baseball was at the time very extensive; even decades later major urban dailies would devote up to ten times the ink now expended on local coverage, and would describe games not only batter by batter, but at times, even pitch by pitch. This was the era when "*Take Me Out to the Ballgame*" was composed (a song which, among other merits, has probably succeeded more or less single-handedly in keeping "Cracker Jacks" on the shelves for a century and more). And the success of baseball led to heavy investment in infrastructure. The first quasi-modern ballpark—at least partially made of steel and concrete—was Al Reach's Huntington Avenue Grounds in Philadelphia, built in 1887, which remained in use, subject to renovation and various unhappy accidents, for another fifty years as the so-called Baker Bowl, tempting generations of Phillie sluggers or would-be sluggers with its 270-odd right-field fence. The first fully modern parks, though, one among them—Fenway Park in Boston—still in deeply cherished operation, were built at this time, and built, astonishingly enough, by private investment. No vexatious bond issues here. First among them was Shibe Park, home of the Athletics in Philadelphia, and Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, Navin Field (later Briggs and then Tiger Stadium) in Detroit, and legendary Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, among others, quickly followed in their train. It was a good decade for the game.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What factors contributed to making the early 1900s the age of the pitcher?
2. What made Christy Mathewson a prototypical baseball hero?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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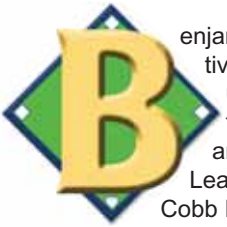
Lecture 4:
The 1910s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series.*



enjamin F. Shibe (1838–1922) was an American League executive and half-owner of the Philadelphia Athletics from 1901 until his death. He developed a relatively lively cork-centered baseball in 1909, which was adopted, in one guise or another, by the American League in 1911 and the National League in 1912. The effects were immediate and striking. Ty Cobb hit .420, Joe Jackson .408, and for the moment at least, the "dead-ball" era moderated until the ever-resourceful pitchers regained control. But despite that flash of offensive brilliance, the teens were not, on the whole, a happy era for the game.

First of all, in 1914, war broke out not only—and of course far more significantly—in Europe and on the Western Front, but within the baseball world as well, as the relatively well-financed Federal League attempted to join the major-league party. This had a deeply destabilizing effect on the game. Second, despite the best efforts of Woodrow Wilson, the United States in 1917 was drawn into the conflict against the Central Powers, and organized baseball was, inevitably, forced in to respond in its way to the strain. And third, for a variety of reasons, baseball fell victim to a kind of pervasive, slow dry rot that found its most conspicuous, but by no means its only expression, in what has come to be known as the "Black Sox" scandal of 1919.

The Federal League

But first things first. Baseball had done so very well in the first decade of the twentieth century—splendid new stadiums mushrooming right and left on the owners' profits and expectations of future growth—that it was only to be expected that someone would come up with the idea of testing the market for a third major league. The Federal League, in operation for two seasons—1914 and 1915—was the result. This was no fly-by-night operation. Backers like Henry Sinclair, Charles Weeghman (who built what is now Wrigley Field for his Federal League team), and Phil Ball of St. Louis most emphatically meant business. And as always, ballplayers were more than happy to sell their services to the most generous available buyer when they could. The result was a ferocious bidding war, with the predictable result that, for the time being at least, no one but the players made much money. Connie Mack, in fact, the co-owner and manager of the Athletics, who had built up in Philadelphia one of the greatest teams ever to play, had to sell off his star players to remain solvent, with the result that the Athletics went within two seasons from the top of the standings to the very bottom, there to remain for the rest of the decade and beyond. Jack Dunn, the highly successful owner of the now minor-league Baltimore Orioles, had, in competing with the

Baltimore Terrapins of the Federal League, to sell off his dazzling new, home-grown pitcher to the Red Sox—the young George Herman Ruth.

The players, however, did very well indeed—as long as the bidding war lasted. When the Federal League collapsed, however, the bidding war and salaries collapsed with it, in some cases to only a third or so of their "wartime" levels. The result was cynicism and bitterness, which found expression in a variety of ways that came at last to threaten the very foundations of the game.

And it was not only the players who were incensed. In the most influential court case ever arising from the game, the Federal League club of Baltimore in 1915 filed suit against "organized baseball" in the United States District Count of Northern Illinois, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis presiding, under the Sherman anti-trust act, maintaining that the *de facto* monopoly of organized baseball constituted an illegal restraint of interstate commerce. Judge Landis won the enduring—and soon fulsomely expressed—gratitude of the existing magnates by simply sitting on the case, which was not in fact decided for seven years until 1922 Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Supreme Court found in favor of the powers that be on the grounds that "interstate commerce" was not exactly what professional baseball was involved in.

Baseball and World War I

All of this, though, left an ongoing bad taste in everyone's mouth, and things only proceeded to get more complicated when the United States entered the wider world conflict. Since the end of World War II, for two generations now, the United States has fought only limited wars, and it is surprising from that perspective to learn how very seriously America took its participation in World War I. In the end American casualties were relatively light compared to what the European powers suffered, but that is a function not so much of lack of commitment as lack of time. America mobilized and mobilized hard. Lots of players were drafted or entered the service as volunteers (Christy Mathewson, for instance, suffered injuries that led to complications which ultimately killed him); lots more found war work of one sort or another, and both the 1918 and 1919 seasons were curtailed. Only in 1920 was organized baseball able to resume full-scale operations. And by then the game faced other problems.

The 1919 "Black Sox"

Problems like corruption and gambling—and here the "Black Sox" scandal is not far from being but the tip of the iceberg. The scandal resulted in the permanent "black-listing" of "Shoeless Joe" Jackson, Eddie Cicotte, Buck Weaver, and their "Black Sox" peers, for attempting to throw the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds, but they were anything but alone in throwing games and consorting with gamblers at the time. No doubt the salary fluctuations ensuing from the Federal League brouhaha played their part. It is unsettling to lose two-thirds of one's income at a stroke. And here, as in many other cases, the most thoroughgoing culprits, the real movers and shakers, had the wherewithal and sophistication to escape prosecution entirely. It is, on the whole, about as profoundly unedifying a story as I have ever encountered. The deepest malefactors in the story, so far as can be told, were first-baseman Hal Chase, the unindicted but most notorious game thrower of all time, and profes-

sional gambler, Arnold Rothstein, interestingly enough, a professional associate of John McGraw, who appears in fictionalized guise as “Meyer Wolfsheim” in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*. The truth of the matter seems to be that when things began to get a little hot, Rothstein hired his immensely sophisticated lawyer, William A. Fallon, to go to bat for him, and shortly thereafter sworn evidence began mysteriously to disappear from the district attorney’s office and, not only that, former prosecutors began inexplicably to appear working for the defense. Money talks. When push came to shove, in August 1921, all indicted players were acquitted for lack of evidence, because their sworn confessions had quite simply vanished. After generations of practice, one is forced to conclude, Tammany Hall and friends had long since learned how to cover their own implicating tracks.

Meanwhile, though, the owners, understandably concerned that the paying public might lose confidence in their product, had decided, with the usual bickering, to take action on their own. They knew from the Baltimore anti-trust case that they had a friend in Judge Landis, and after appropriate compensation had been arranged for him—$50,000 a year, plus the continuation of his $7,500 salary as a judge, well more than a million a year in today’s currency—Judge Landis took over as Commissioner of Baseball, and promptly banned the “Black Sox,” and, in fact, a good many others, for life, despite their acquittal in the courts. He was politic enough, however, not to inquire too closely in several other cases that appeared on his docket in his new role. It is unwise to bite the hand that feeds you.

Players of the Era

Ty Cobb

In any case, though, the game on the field was still very good. The dominant player of the era, and some would argue—though, I think, finally unpersuasively—of any era, was the Georgia-born outfielder Tyrus Raymond Cobb (1886–1961). He was notoriously and ferociously, *relentlessly* competitive, famous for sharpening his spikes before games the better to impale opposing infielders who impeded his route to a score on the basepaths. I cannot avoid the impression that despite his manifest intelligence (he died an old, rich man) and despite his physical gifts, he suffered from some character problem, something, perhaps, not unlike Asperger’s syndrome, or a mild form of autism. He certainly had no ascertainable gift for social relations. And being a Georgian, given his temperament, probably didn’t help matters much. The Civil War, when Cobb was a young player, was as much in living memory as World War II is at present, and Cobb, despite his many years in Detroit, seems never to have gotten over the results. All that being said, though, he was a tremendous and a tremendously resourceful player.

Tris Speaker

Almost as good, a better fielder, and a good deal more agreeable, was Boston and Cleveland outfielder, Tris Speaker. He hit very nearly as well as Cobb, and was, by all accounts, the best centerfielder before Willie Mays, if not, indeed, of all time.

Eddie Collins

Mainstay of the Athletics, meanwhile, and of the so-called "clean Sox" thereafter, was second baseman Eddie Collins. Collins, like Mathewson, was a college man, in his case from Columbia, and he was, by virtue of character and intelligence—to say nothing of his skills as a fielder and batter—about as valuable a player as ever took the field. Good teams seemed to crystallize around him, and Connie Mack, for instance, swore by him.

Grover Cleveland "Pete" Alexander

But pitchers still dominated, and the best were very good indeed. Grover Cleveland "Pete" Alexander, for instance, a pitcher with pin-point control as well as speed, in 1915 led the Phillies to their only pennant in more than half a century with a record of 31-10 and a 1.22 earned-run average. The next year, as the Phillies finished second, three games behind Brooklyn, Alexander was even better, 33-12, with only 50 walks in more than 380 innings. More impressive still, he pitched an all-time single-season record of 16 shutouts—a mark all the more dazzling because his home park was the legendarily hitter-friendly Baker Bowl. Despite his various personal problems, among them, we're told, a finally incorrigible fondness for drink, "Old Pete" was still pitching effectively a decade later as he helped to lead the Cardinals to a pair of pennants and a world title in the famous 1926 Series against the Yankees.

Walter "The Big Train" Johnson

Better still—in fact, by most reckonings, the greatest of them all—was "The Big Train," Walter Johnson of Humboldt, Kansas, for twenty years the unshakable anchor of the Washington staff. For much of the period, the "Senators," or to use their official name of the time, the "Nationals," were a mediocre team or worse (though late in his career Johnson was, in fact, able to pitch in a pair of World Series), but throughout the teens and beyond, Johnson was effective year in and year out. Bruce Catton, the Civil War historian (and baseball fan) claimed years ago that Johnson had "nothing much in his repertoire except an unhittable fastball." To which one might respond, "except." His greatest year came in 1913, when he pitched the Senators to a second-place finish behind Connie Mack's As, probably the best team of the time, and one of the great teams of any time. Johnson's record that year was, by most measures, the most dominant by any pitcher of the twentieth century, 36-7, with a 1.09 earned average and a mere 38 walks. Johnson was, beyond that, a soft-spoken, kindly, and upright man, highly esteemed by the Washington fans, who in commemoration, among other gestures, named in his honor a suburban Bethesda high school.

Walter P. "The Big Train" Johnson
(1887–1946)

Johnson was immortalized in the poem "Lineup for Yesterday," by Ogden Nash:

J is for Johnson.
The Big Train in his prime,
So fast he could throw
Three strikes at a time.

George Herman "Babe" Ruth

But the greatest and most celebrated of them all, even then, before he fully hit his stride was George Herman Ruth. Jack Dunn's "Babe" was first signed in Baltimore, where he had grown up. He was not an orphan, in fact, but he did sign with the Orioles, who shortly thereafter sold him to Boston, from the Catholic home for wayward boys where he had spent his adolescence. In Boston, he was sensational, in the first instance as a pitcher, not quite of the caliber of "Alex" and Johnson, but very close. He was, for instance, never defeated in his three World Series starts for Boston, compiling a cumulative earned run average of 0.87, while Boston, during his years on the team, won no less than three world titles. But it was with his bat that he spoke loudest. As a more or less full-time pitcher, playing some outfield in his off days, he had in 1918 tied for the league lead in home runs with 11. The next year, in 1919, he still took the mound for 15 starts, but spent even more time in the outfield, and galvanized the baseball world by hitting the truly staggering total of 29 home runs en route. Ed Williamson had hit 27 a generation before, almost all of them back in his short-fielded home park in Chicago. Ruth's home runs, though, were something different, jaw-dropping, powering drives that looped like rockets, and at the time it was thought no one would ever hit so many again. The baseball world, very shortly, was to learn otherwise.

George Herman "Babe" Ruth, Jr.
(1895–1948)

As with Walter Johnson, Babe Ruth was immortalized in the poem "Lineup for Yesterday," by Ogden Nash:

R is for Ruth.
To tell you the truth,
There's no more to be said,
Just R is for Ruth.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did baseball's owners take action against the widespread corruption in the game?
2. What pitch was the Big Train's claim to fame?

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Lecture 5:
The 1920s: The First Golden Age

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is William Curran's *Big Sticks: The Phenomenal Decade of Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, and Hornsby.*

ver the course of the years in major-league baseball offense and defense have tended to move in waves or cycles. In part, this is a function of rules changes and equipment adjustments. When either offense or defense seems to have taken excessive control, the powers that be tend to take corrective action. *De facto* balance, over the years, seems to be something like eight or nine total runs per game and a universal, all-players batting average in the .260 to .270 range. In the dead-ball era, defense dominated and offensive figures stood well below that. That is one reason why the pitching records of the era look so very impressive. Alexander and Johnson and their peers were indeed very good. But they also pitched in a good era for pitchers. In the twenties, however, the tide shifted sharply, and it was, as the title of one study puts it, the era of "*Big Sticks,*" and the records that look really eye-popping are not those of pitchers, but those of hitters. As a result, we see, instead of 30-game winners and 1.20 earned-runs averages, people batting .400 and hitting home runs in then-unprecedented numbers.

The effect was far from unnoticed at the time—people loved the new power game and swarmed to the park like never before. And though traditionalists complained that the decline of "inside" baseball and the rise of the home run cheapened the game, the spinning turnstiles told another story. One contributing factor, though not as important a factor as was generally supposed, was the so-called "jack-rabbit" ball. It is true that after the War, better quality, more resilient yarn was available, and that may have had some effect. The real difference, though, was the banning of the spitball and other "trick" pitches, and, even more important, the new practice of keeping new balls in the game. The impetus here was not in the first instance any desire to increase offense.

A Fatal Beaning

It was a reaction to a fatal on-field injury, the only one in major-league history thus far. In 1920, during the course of a tight pennant race between Cleveland, Chicago, and New York, the surly, but effective, New York sidearmer Carl Mays fatally beaned Cleveland shortstop Ray Chapman, a good player hitting .303 at the time. A ball traveling at 90 mph can do a lot of damage, and quite a few players, over the years, have suffered career-shortening or even career-ending injuries after a beaning. But only Chapman actually died as a result. Mays was, by all accounts, not a particularly pleasant person, and continued pitching, effective and undismayed, for nearly a decade after the incident, but there is no evidence that he was intentionally trying to kill Chapman. Intimidate, yes. But not injure or kill. Nevertheless, the rules were changed in response. "Trick" pitches were banned—with the proviso that

those spitballers then in the majors who depended on the pitch could continue throwing it. The last of them, Burleigh Grimes, was still plying his trade in 1934, and plenty of pitchers since that time have made use of the spitter on occasion, legal or no. But the regular introduction of clean, new balls into play was consistent, unlike enforcement of the "no-tricks" rule, and that, above all, was what made the difference. That and the fact that, once expectations had changed, hitters began to approach their task a little differently—to try to hit the ball hard, and out if they could, rather than to bunt or to place it.

The Babe and the "Curse of the Bambino"

No one did it better than Babe Ruth. Even taken out of context, his records are astonishing, and in the context of his time, they are even more so. He really was vastly better than his peers and really did, more or less single-handedly, change the game—not so much by trying to do so, as by doing what he did and being what he was. And he gained the appropriate reward. Babe Ruth has been dead for more than half a century now, and it has been more than seventy years since he played, but he is still, even now, far and away, without real competition, the most famous player of all time.

The hoopla began in 1920. Harry Frazee, the owner of the Boston Red Sox, who had won four world titles in the teens, was a theater-buff, and, indeed, a regular and often money-losing investor in Broadway shows. One way to raise money—in this instance, so we are told, in order to finance *No, No, Nanette*, featuring the still-famous song, "Tea for Two—was to sell ballplayers. Colonels Huston and Ruppert of the Yankees had money. And soon enough, in addition to other distinguished Boston players, they had the pennant and Babe Ruth for the then-astonishing price of $125,000, plus a friendly $350,000 mortgage on Fenway Park as a helping hand. This is the origin of the often-mentioned "Curse of the Bambino," said for decades to have plagued the Boston faithful.

The Yankees did not plan to use Ruth as a pitcher—indeed, he pitched in only four more games in the fifteen remaining years of his career. What they wanted was his bat. But even they had no idea just how potent that bat would prove. Fenway Park is not a bad home-run park, though it favors right-handers, but the Polo Grounds, where the Yankees rented from the Giants at the time, was a good deal better for a left-hander like Ruth, with a right field porch only 250-odd feet from the plate. It did not require Ruthian power to reach that, but even Ruth found the friendly confines helpful. Only 9 of his record 29 homers the previous year had come at home. The next year, in New York, he did vastly better, hitting the mind-numbing total of 54, and indeed, 59 in the year following. No one had ever seen anything like it. Baseball historians sometimes go to rather tiresome lengths trying to make clear how revolutionary, how utterly different all this was, pointing out—which is true enough—that in 1920 Ruth outhomered every other *team* in the league. But it is, in a way, simpler than that. Cheerfully, instinctively, without much thinking about it, just playing the game, Ruth redefined the limits of the possible, and changed the game forever in the process. It happens occasionally in other fields, even in other sports. But it doesn't happen very often, and only the greatest bring such changes about.

Branch Rickey: Baseball "Farmer"

The other really big transformation of the twenties was worked by a very different sort of person, not a man of vast appetites and vast talents, but a man of vast cleverness, persistence, and patience, the baseball executive, Branch Rickey. Rickey himself had been a relatively undistinguished major-league player, compiling a .239 average in his brief career after leaving Ohio Wesleyan University (OWU), but he had done better as a coach both at OWU and the University of Michigan, where he studied law, better still as a major-league manager, and best of all as a major-league executive. After beginning his career with the American League St. Louis Browns (where he was instrumental in securing for them their all-time most celebrated hitter, George Sisler, formerly a Michigan player), he transferred his efforts to the National League Cardinals, who had been, for many years, a very bad team indeed. There he faced an intractable problem—how, with no money and low attendance and no real prospect for great attendance, could he possibly compete with teams like the Yankees and the Giants, who had lots of money and drew from a population base more or less an order of magnitude greater than what he was faced with? On the face of things, an insuperable problem, but Rickey solved it, and in doing so, made of the Cardinals, from his day to our own, one of the most distinguished franchises of baseball. The secret was the "farm system." Rich teams—like the Yankees, for instance—bought good players. Poor teams sold them. But what if—*what if* Rickey could gain control of a series of minor-league teams to *develop* them? Then he and the Cardinals could keep the best of them and sell the rest. And that is just what he did. By the late twenties the Cardinals were world champions, and with a very few interruptions have remained a strong team ever since. And because of the farm system they made money selling players whether the Cards were good or not. (Supposedly, in fact, during the Depression, one of the Cardinal's top farms, the Columbus Red Birds, outdrew the mother club—the only time this has ever happened. No matter though. The system worked and the Cards stayed solvent anyhow.) Other teams followed suit, of course. And at present the minors consist almost entirely of "farm" teams of one sort or another. But not everyone had Branch Rickey's eye for talent.

Other Teams and Players of the Era

Rickey's efforts transformed the minor leagues, which up until his time had been more or less independent—progressively less so, as time went on, but still much more independent than at present. And very probably the greatest minor-league team of all time—featuring during the early 1920s one of the greatest pitchers of all time and the most dominant pitcher of the era—was Babe Ruth's own Baltimore Orioles under the leadership of Jack Dunn. During the 1920s, there were three top-level minor leagues, and during the first years of the decade, Dunn's Orioles absolutely dominated one of them, the International League, with teams which, I suspect, would have finished in the middle of the pack in the majors.

"Lefty" Grove

The Orioles' best player was Maryland native Robert Moses "Lefty" Grove, who between 1929 and 1931 led the Philadelphia Athletics to three pennants, and who, from 1920 to 1924 won 109 games against 36 losses for the Orioles. Dunn finally sold him to Connie Mack for $100,600, and he was a bargain at the price.

New York: The Yankees and Giants

But the dominant team of the era was, of course, above all the Yankees, and the most celebrated team of all-time was the '27 Yankees, featuring Ruth's 60 home runs, and the breakout season of Lou Gehrig, who managed only 47 homers, but compensated by hitting .373 and batting in 175 runs. The era also saw the last heyday of John McGraw's Giants, dominant in the City for a quarter century and more, and most reluctant to yield to the upstart Yankees. Between 1921 and 1923 both the Giants and the Yankees won their respective pennants, and it was not until 1923—when Ruth by some statistical measures had his greatest season of all, hitting a career-high .393—that the Yankees finally managed to win the crown.

Dazzy Vance

But there were other fine teams and fine players. Grove, perhaps, aside, the most dominant pitcher of the era is the now almost-forgotten Dazzy Vance. Because of arm trouble he didn't become a regular starting pitcher in the majors until his 30s, but thereafter he was spectacular for a series of fair-to-middling Brooklyn teams, a strikeout pitcher with a blazing fastball in what was still a low-strikeout era.

Rogers Hornsby

The most outstanding hitter, Ruth and Gehrig aside, was Rogers Hornsby of St. Louis, another bad-tempered and unpleasant person of more or less the Ty Cobb mold, who nonetheless racked up some astonishing numbers for the Cardinals, and indeed for the Giants and the Braves after he had worn out his welcome in St. Louis. Hornsby three times hit over .400, and unlike any other .400-hitter save Ted Williams, he hit .400 with real power, notching 42 homers in 1922 and 39 in 1925.

Into the Depression

Attendance improved over the troubled teens by a whopping 66 percent, and despite Man O' War, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, and Red Grange—and despite the birth in 1922 of what would become the National Football League—baseball occupied center stage as never before, and perhaps never since. It was truly a golden era. But the Depression lay around the corner.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the impetus of banning spitball and “trick” pitches and keeping new balls in the game?
2. What was astonishing about Rogers Hornsby being a .400 hitter?

Suggested Reading

Curran, William. *Big Sticks: The Phenomenal Decade of Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, and Hornsby*. New York: Harper, 1991.

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Lecture 6:
The 1930s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

have always had a special fondness for the baseball of the thirties. There is something appealingly unprepossessing, something flinty, and, at least seemingly, clear-sighted in the faces that appear in those faded photographs. It is as if everyone in the decade was somehow squinting into the sun. My father spent much of his childhood in Wilmington, Delaware, as a long-suffering Philadelphia fan, and thirties baseball is accordingly the earliest for which I have at least secondhand living memory. My father's late-thirties heroes were Bob Johnson and Wally Moses, the best Athletics of the time, but what most impressed him—and what he told us about when we were young—was the great thrill of seeing Pepper Martin and Dizzy Dean and the St. Louis "Gas House Gang" and Carl Hubbell and Mel Ott of the Giants. So they were, in a sense, my heroes too, part of my life for as long as I can remember. And they were good. But others were just as good or better in what was in fact a difficult decade not only—and unsurprisingly—for baseball, but for pretty much everyone else.

Jerome Hanna "Dizzy" Dean (1910–1974)

"Dizzy" Dean pitched in the major leagues from 1930 to 1941, most notably for the St. Louis Cardinals.

The nickname "Dizzy" was tagged on Dean when, during the fourth game of the 1934 World Series against the Detroit Tigers, Dean was utilized as a pinch-runner. In trying to break up a double play that would have ended the inning, Dean was hit in the head and knocked unconscious as the ball was thrown to first. A sports-section newspaper headline the next day read, "X-ray of Dean's Head Shows Nothing."

Dean was the last National League pitcher to win thirty games, doing so in 1934 when his record was 30-7.

"Dizzy's" on-field career was shortened by injuries he sustained over the years, but he went on to become a famous baseball sportscaster known for his colorful game descriptions and personal reminiscences.

National League Records

Despite the stock market crash of October 1929, though, and despite the deepening depression that followed, in the baseball world at least the decade started with a bang—or if not precisely with a bang, in the National League at least, with the most explosive offensive year of the twentieth century. For much of the 1920s the National League had lagged a bit behind the American League in both offense and in attendance, and for whatever reason and by whatever means, it certainly appears that 1929—and even more so in 1930—the League made some sort of quasi-covert offensive adjustment. Without question, the league made a counter-adjustment in 1931 to slow things down just a bit. But it was sure fun while it lasted. In 1930, six of eight National League *teams* hit over .300, and the League as a whole hit .303. Several players that year posted numbers, in that most hitter-friendly of contexts, that would secure them slots in

the Hall of Fame, most notably Giant first baseman Bill Terry's .401 batting average, and Cub center fielder Hack Wilson's 56 home runs and single-season record of 190 (as long listed) or 191 (as currently recalculated) runs batted in. Neither achievement, as it happened, was enough to lead the franchise to the pennant, which went, in a tight race, to a Cardinal team that featured, among other merits, no fewer than *three* part-time outfielders—leaving the two better-fielding regulars out of account—who each hit better than .370, a figure that under the circumstances proved insufficient to nail down a starting job. It was that kind of year. Just for the record, Babe Herman, of the fourth-place Brooklyn Robins (so named for manager Wilbert Robinson, the erstwhile teammate of John McGraw) weighed in with a career-high .393 and 35 home runs. And the Phillies' Chuck Klein, on a team mired solidly in last place, took advantage of the friendly Baker Bowl to fashion an average of .386, with 40 home runs and 170 runs batted in as further contributions to the cause.

Lewis Robert "Hack" Wilson
(1900–1948)

Wilson was a center fielder for the Chicago Cubs from 1926 to 1931. He was best known for his record-setting 191-RBI season in 1930. At only five feet six inches tall, officially weighing 190 pounds, "Hack" had an eighteen inch neck, a barrel chest, short, thick arms, stumpy legs, and wore a size six shoe. His Major League RBI record stands to this day.

A heavy drinker, Wilson's career plummeted after his stellar 1930 season. One story is told that former Cubs manager Joe McCarthy approached Wilson one day and said, "If I drop a worm in a glass of water, it swims around. If I drop it in a glass of whiskey, the worm dies. What does that prove?" Wilson responded, "If you drink whiskey, you'll never get worms."

The Philadelphia Athletics

The best team of the early thirties, though—and the best by a considerable margin—did not rely exclusively on big bats to do their work for them. From the mid-1920s, Connie Mack began to rebuild the Athletics team that had dominated in the early teens and been decimated by financial difficulties ensuing from the Federal League war of 1914-15. By 1927, after seven long years in the cellar, and some years *deep* in the cellar, the retooled Athletics were a second-place team. By 1928, they were second again—but this time sixteen games closer to the pennant. And from 1929 to 1931 they were victorious, twice Series winners, and second again in 1932, when the Depression forced Mack once again to start selling off his assets. In the interval, the Athletics were one of the best teams ever to play, taking on and defeating for three consecutive years the Yankees of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, and winning, in large part, on the basis of superior pitching—winning in large part, not to put too fine a point upon it, on the basis of the pitching of Robert Moses "Lefty" Grove. In 1927, Grove was 20-12; in 1928, 24-8; in 1929, 20-6. Then he really got going. In 1930, he went 28-5, with an earned-run average three-quarters of a run better than any other starter in the league. The year after that, in 1931, he was even better, going 31-4, with a league-leading earned-run average half a run better even than his glittering mark of the year before. Then he cooled off—to yet another ERA crown and a record of 25-10 in 1932. The Yankees had nothing to match him. The Yankees, as a matter of fact, have in the past century never really had a pitcher to match him, but then, neither has pretty much anyone else. (This leaves, designedly, out of

account, the 41-12 mark that Happy Jack Chesbro recorded for the then-Highlanders back in the primeval ooze of 1904.)

But it wasn't just Grove, tall and overpowering as he was. The whole Athletics staff was good—Connie Mack knew talent and knew pitching—and the offense too was formidable by pretty much any but '27 Yankee standards, featuring Mickey Cochrane behind the plate, one of the best catchers ever to play, who went on later in the 30s, after Connie Mack's great sell-off, to help the Tigers to two pennants, and, in center field, Al Simmons (or, to use his birth name, Alois Szymanski), who in a long career hit as high as .390—with power. But the heart of the Athletics' attack was yet another Marylander (like Babe Ruth, and like Grove himself), the formidable Jimmie Foxx, who in his best year, 1932, hit 58 home runs, and, so it is claimed, some very long outs, which in 1927, when the Babe had hit his 60, would, because of intervening changes in park layout, have gone out five years before, giving the record, to make matters explicit, to Jimmie Foxx rather than Ruth. Be that as it may, Foxx finished his career ranked as the most prolific right-handed power hitter in history, number two on the all-time home run charts—a position that he held until the sixties.

The Overpowering Yankees

In the later thirties, the dominant team was once again the Yankees. Babe Ruth's last pennant year for New York was 1932, when the Yankees swept the Cubs in the World Series, the year of Ruth's famous "called shot" against Cub pitcher Charlie Root, when Ruth purportedly pointed with his bat to where he intended to send the ball and promptly did so. A scratchy film of the event in fact survives, and it is clear that Ruth did something—and something which was, no doubt, highly irritating to the Cubs and their fans—but whether he really called his shot, well, that remains open.

By 1936, when the Yankees won again, Babe Ruth was gone, but, not coincidentally, the Yankees benefited from the services of their graceful new center fielder from San Francisco, Joe DiMaggio. And the still-healthy Lou Gehrig chipped in with 49 homers and 152 runs batted in. The Yankees were in fact world champions for four years straight, until 1939, compiling a World Series record, in the interval, of 16-3, and there are those who believe that this version of the Yankees was even better than the twenties model. Certainly the catching was better, in the capable hands of Bill Dickey. And Lefty Gomez and Red Ruffing stood among the best pitchers of the time, so if they were not better, the Yankees of the late thirties were certainly more balanced than their late twenties counterparts.

Pirates, Giants, and Cubs

In the National League, until the very end of the decade, the Cubs, Giants, and Cardinals divided the championships among them, with the Pirates, often bridesmaids, but never the bride, in pursuit. The Pirates of the time benefited from the services of a pair of line-drive hitting outfielders, two brothers from Oklahoma, Paul and Lloyd Waner, known respectively as "Big and Little Poison." Paul hit lots of doubles and triples, if not all that many home runs. Lloyd hit pretty much singles and nothing else. But he hit a lot of them. The best player on the team, though, and one of the best-hitting shortstops of all

time—who had some power, walked a lot, and in 1935 led the league with a .385 batting average—was the now almost forgotten Joseph Floyd "Arky" Vaughn. The nickname has a distinctly "dustbowl" ring to it by the way—Vaughn came from Arkansas, and "Arky" is the Arkansavian counterpart of "Okie." Not, as I take it, meant to be unambiguously complimentary.

The mainstays of the Cubs, as the decade progressed, were splendid infielders, Billy Herman and Stan Hack, and catcher Gabby Hartnett—the thirties were, in fact, a great age for catchers in general with Hartnett, Cochrane, and Dickey, each one among the best ever, all in their prime. Bill Terry, Mel Ott, and Carl Hubbell, a left-handed screwball pitcher and control artist, who rivaled Grove himself as the outstanding pitcher of the era, anchored the Giants.

"Dizzy" Dean and the "Gas House Gang"

And then we have the "Gas House Gang." Narrowly understood, the "Gas House Gang" is the world champion Cardinals of 1934, led by Jerome Hannah, "Dizzy" Dean, yet another country boy, born in Arkansas, and indeed, by self-fashioning something not far removed from the "*ur*-country boy," the country boy to end all country boys. No one ever, I think, this side of, say, Dolly Parton (more power to her), got more mileage out of being "country" than Dizzy Dean. And at least so far as the press was concerned, Dean and his brother Paul (as in "me'n Paul'll take care of it") set the tone for the team. More broadly considered, the "Gas House Gang" lasted as long as Dean stayed in St. Louis and maintained his effectiveness, which was, for all practical purposes, until a line-drive broke his toe in the 1937 All-Star game. This was Branch Rickey's farm system at work with a vengeance. In 1934, Dean won 30 games and brother Paul 19, with Joe "Ducky" Medwick and Rip Collins providing offense, Leo Durocher, at shortstop, providing crisp defense and preparing, so we must presume, for the long managerial career that would make him famous, and my father's favorite, Pepper Martin, the so-called "Wild Hoss of the Osage," providing, if nothing else, energy and color.

They took on the pennant-winning Tigers, led, once again, by Mickey Cochrane, steady, reliable Charlie Gehringer at second, and, at first, the young Hank Greenberg, who would go on to hit 58 single-season homers a few years later. The Series was a memorable one, the seventh game in particular, in which, as the Cardinals romped to an 11–0 victory in Detroit, unappreciative Tiger fans so pelted Joe Medwick with fruit and bottles that an incensed Commissioner Landis felt compelled to remove him from the game for his own protection.

All in all, it was a rough decade. Attendance went down and stayed down as the Depression abated, but just wouldn't lift, and as, beyond the purview of baseball, the world situation grew darker and darker.

Cooperstown: Baseball's Hall of Fame and the First Inductees

Despite such concerns, if not to answer them, baseball decided to celebrate the "centennial" of the game in 1939, attributing its foundation to Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown, and all team uniforms that year featured a commemorative centennial patch. More substantial was the foundation of the

Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, whose first honorees, selected in 1936, were, sensibly enough, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and Walter Johnson—who very probably were, as advertised, the best more or less long-retired major leaguers to have played the game thus far. It was a good start.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How were the late 1930s Yankees different from the great Yankees teams of the late 1920s?
2. In what ways were the 1930s a rough decade for the sport of baseball?

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Lecture 7:
The Negro Leagues

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Robert Peterson's *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams.*

To rectify past injustices, well-meaning people sometimes indulge in a sort of retrospective "affirmative action," assessing past figures on the basis not so much of what they achieved in their own time, but on the basis of what they would have or could have achieved had those conditions been different. At its most questionable, this kind of procedure can result in a kind of fictionalized vision of a virtual past—a past as it would have been and should have been—had our own values then been in force rather than those that for good or for ill in fact dominated at the time. And at first glance it might appear that discussions of the Negro Leagues at least face the danger of this sort of beneficent exaggeration and reconceptualization. But in fact, that is not so. For we are here dealing not with what could have been or should have been, but with what was. We are dealing with real achievements in the broad light of day—or, as it happens, at least at times, in some of the earliest night games on record, for the Negro Leagues were nothing if not innovative. The best players in the Negro Leagues were the equals, or indeed, in many instances, the superiors of their white major-league counterparts. That is what all the evidence suggests. They stand, by any reasonable reckoning, among the very best players of all time.

That being said, though, the Negro Leagues, as *leagues*, were not the precise counterparts to the American and National Leagues that the designation would seem to imply. That is not to say the players were worse. In many instances they were better. It is to say, though, that for perfectly understandable reasons the financial backing and infrastructure of the Negro Leagues, and hence their stability and record-keeping, were of an entirely different order than what obtained in the established majors. The four most important Negro Leagues—the Negro National League of 1920 to 1930, founded by former pitcher and organizational wizard Andrew "Rube" Foster, the Eastern Colored League of 1923 to 1929, the Negro National League of 1933 to 1947, and the Negro American League of 1937 to 1950—were comparable in this regard not so much to the American and National Leagues as to the old National Association of the early 1870s. Their schedules were flexible; they played a tremendous number of non-league games, and a good many teams failed to complete their schedules or simply folded up before the season was concluded. All of this is hardly surprising, given the constraints under which such leagues operated. With largely rural Southern players, they played to largely black, urban audiences that were not in the 1920s or 1930s, or even in the 1940s, nearly as large or nearly as prosperous as they later would become. What is astonishing is not so much that the Negro Leagues had

financial problems as that they did as well as they did. The quality of play was, of course, high, and often superlatively high, as the later performance of African-American players, among them Negro League veterans, in the major leagues unmistakably reveals. During the first generation after the major-league color line fell, African-American players in fact dominated in the formerly all-white majors. I can remember with my brother one day during the 1960s noting that seventeen out of the twenty leading major-league hitters in the current batting lists were black. That doesn't happen quite so much anymore, I suspect because many of the best African-American athletes now play basketball or football. Baseball doesn't have the luster in the black community that it once did. But, most assuredly, it once did. It was the only game in town. And the best black athletes dominated accordingly.

The Same Game Played Differently

The game on the field was somewhat different than in the white leagues. It was faster—stolen bases and the like never fell quite so far out of favor as they did in the white leagues during the home-run barrage. The officiating, at times at least, wasn't quite so tight, and more often than not walks didn't loom so large. Negro League players ordinarily wanted to swing when they came to bat. There was not much premium on milking a walk—not that milking a walk was an overvalued skill even in the white leagues of the time. Otherwise, though, it was the same game, and the best players were superb.

A Paucity of Records

Tracing out the records of what was accomplished, though, has proved a very difficult task—a task that was not even undertaken in any systematic sense until about a generation ago. As a general rule, the white press paid little to no attention to Negro League games, and the most prominent black newspapers, in particular, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courie*, were weeklies and often not preserved or archived, to put it mildly, with the rigor of the white metropolitan dailies. There was no central organization for correlating records or statistics, and they were not kept systematically even at the time. All of this has posed a real challenge for would-be researchers.

Beyond that, the world of top-level African-American professional baseball was by no means confined exclusively to the Negro Leagues. There were very fine teams with first-rate players barnstorming and taking on semi-pro teams and anyone else willing to pay their fee or split the take long before any league was established, and even during the heyday of the Negro Leagues, there were independent teams of equal or nearly equal caliber. And the leagues themselves never played anything close to a 154-game or 162-game league schedule. Most didn't play half that. That is not to say that they didn't play nearly every day for as long as they could manage. They just played a great many non-league games. The first imperative was not statistical, but financial. But that poses another challenge. The quality of the best players didn't vary, but the quality of their opposition did. For all of these reasons, interpreting the records that have so carefully been pieced together in retrospect is not an easy or straightforward task. Best attested, for obvious reasons, are the twenties, the late thirties, and the forties, when the Negro Leagues were at their peak. But that doesn't mean that at other times no one of comparable

skill was playing, and where the best remaining evidence is the anecdotal recollection of competent observers—well, that is what we have to rely on.

The Players

Records are particularly spotty for the period before Rube Foster's Negro National League and the Eastern Colored League were established. That was when Rube Foster himself worked as a pitcher, and that was the heyday of the great John Henry "Pop" Lloyd, who according to Connie Mack, equaled Honus Wagner both as a shortstop and as a hitter. We'll never know for sure, but Lloyd hit well over .350 during the period when at least part of his record is accessible—beginning in his late thirties. He played on until he was nearly fifty. Another glittering figure from the dead-ball era is Smokey Joe Williams, a fastball-pitching, big, tall Texan who pitched well into his late forties, compiling a record of 78-47 for the years of which we have records, long after his prime had passed. Two other relatively early figures who merit mention are Bingo DeMoss and Louis Santop. DeMoss was a second baseman of legendary defensive skills, reportedly an early counterpart to Bill Mazerowski, who played in his prime for the Chicago American Giants, one of the great teams of the era, and whose skills must have been dazzling to justify his long career as starter considering his distinctly lackluster batting record. The huge Louis Santop, 6′4″, weighing in at well over 240 in an era when the average player stood roughly 5′9″ was an extremely hard-hitting and capable catcher.

Another big man with a big bat was Dobie Moore, who played for the early Kansas City Monarchs, and whose lifetime batting average, insofar as it can be reconstructed, was .365. He was a shortstop and played, by all accounts, exceedingly well despite his 230-pound frame. He was also a high liver, whose career ended early and abruptly after he was shot in the leg while visiting some acquaintances in a Kansas City house of ill-fame. Another big man—again 230 or more, and big ballplayers, then and now, tend to report their weights a bit low—was John Beckwith, probably the best Negro League hitter not to make it into the Hall of Fame. He seems to have been a player not unlike the later Dick Allen, a man of superlative skills whose truculence and sometimes lackadaisical attitude often made him more trouble than he was worth, despite his gifts.

The greatest of the relatively early players, though, and a player who has his defenders as the greatest all-around who ever lived, was Oscar Charleston, nearly an exact contemporary of Babe Ruth, who played into his mid-forties. The general package is reminiscent of Willie Mays. He was a burly, barrel-chested man, an absolutely superlative center fielder, self-controlled and smart, on the field and off, a great base stealer, a power-hitter, and a lifetime .350 hitter in a long and unusually well-attested career. At times a teammate and almost as good, though his career was a good deal shorter, was the Cuban Christobel Torriente.

There was a whole array of very long-service great Negro-League infielders—think Ozzie Smith or Cal Ripken to get the picture—among them Newt Allen and Newt Joseph, who began their careers playing second and third to Dobie Moore's short, but long outlasted him. Better still, so far as can be told, were shortstop Dick Lundy and third baseman Judy Johnson. A differ-

ent sort of infielder, and one of my favorites, was the stocky, combative Jud "Boojum" Wilson. The "Boojum" is accented on the last syllable, by the way, and reportedly represents the sound of the wickedly hard-hit ball careening off his bat. His glove at third was often his body—he'd just let line drives hit him and then throw 'em out. But he could hit. The best of them all, though, for my money, and probably the best shortstop of the late twenties and early thirties, bar none, was Willie "Devil" Wells. Wells played from 1924 to 1948, lived into his eighties, fielded like a dream, and hit with power. It's not easy to ask for more.

The great Oscar Charleston aside, who was then, ever so gradually, slowing down, the best hitters of the Negro League glory days were probably the intense and wiry Turkey Stearnes, who played at his best for the Detroit Stars, and, despite his relatively slight frame, was a devastating power hitter in the Henry Aaron mold, and genial and placid George "Mule" Suttles, another favorite, only adequate as a fielder, either at first or in left, but a high-average hitter who regularly connected for really towering home runs. "Kick, Mule!" the fans would intone, and kick he would. He seems to have been, in presence and temperament, a higher-average parallel to Frank Howard, or, even closer, to Willie McCovey. And this leaves out of account "Chino" Smith, so-called because of his purportedly "Chinese-looking" eyes—who before he died, evidently from yellow fever and certainly before he was thirty, compiled the highest average of them all, a mind-numbing .428.

A more familiar sort of player was Cool Papa Bell, who died only recently, near the age of ninety, and who played a graceful center field for a near quarter-century, silky and speedy and much in the mold of players like Lou Brock or Kenny Lofton. Biz Mackey, another big catcher, who played for well more than a quarter century, was not only a fine hitter, but a fine teacher of his craft and a fine handler of pitchers. Which leaves us, before turning to pitchers, with the unclassifiable Martin Dihigo, who played as much of his career in Latin America as in the Negro Leagues, and who is the only player ever of whom it is plausibly maintained that he could—and indeed did—play at one point or another *all* positions at the highest level.

There were, of course, many fine Negro League pitchers, Chet Brewer, Connie Rector, Hilton Smith, and Ted "Big Florida" Trent among them. But three seem to me in one sense or another to stand apart, Bullet Joe Rogan, Bill (or Willie) Foster, and, of course, the legendary Satchel Paige. Rogan was not only one of the best Negro League pitchers ever to play, he was also a very fine hitter who played the outfield on his off days and compiled, in that dual capacity, an average of .343. Bill Foster, the much younger half-brother of Negro League magnate and founder Rube Foster, was the greatest left-hander of the Negro Leagues, and rivaled Lefty Grove as the best left-hander of the era. And Satchel Paige, who did, in fact, play in the white majors,

Leroy Robert "Satchel" Paige
(1906–1982)

The long and productive baseball career of Satchel Paige is legendary. He began playing for the Chatanooga Black Lookouts for fifty dollars a month in 1926, and finished his last game with the Kansas City Athletics in 1965—thirty-nine years. He went on to coach and hold other positions in professional baseball. While still involved in baseball he played a role in a movie, ran for elected office, and toured for charity as well as for-profit events around the world.

and played for five years, after the color bar fell when he was already forty, half a generation after his prime, is a *bona fide* contender as the greatest pitcher of all time.

The last round of Negro League players, those born, by and large, in the teens or later, many of whom did go on to play in white majors after 1947, are in many respects the best attested. Many were still around to give interviews and to talk with baseball historians when over the course of the past few decades interest in the Negro Leagues began to intensify. So here we stand on firmer ground. There is no doubt about the achievements of Josh Gibson, the dazzling catcher and power hitter of the last two decades of the Negro Leagues, who is generally acknowledged to stand with Babe Ruth, Henry Aaron, and Barry Bonds as the greatest power hitter of all time. Nor about those of his Homestead Grays teammate, Buck Leonard, or those of Ray Dandridge or Buck O'Neil. They are still, though not, sad to say, for too much longer, a part of living memory. And so, even more, their counterparts who did go on to play in the white leagues, Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Monte Irvin, Luke Easter, Minnie Minoso, and Sam Jethroe. And those born a bit later whose careers were longer—like Ernie Banks and Willie Mays. There is no excusing the restrictions that forced the Negro Leagues into being. But they form a glorious legacy even so.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the major structural differences between the Negro Leagues and the all-white major leagues?
2. Why is it so difficult to trace the statistics of Negro League players?

Suggested Reading

Peterson, Robert. *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Other Books of Interest

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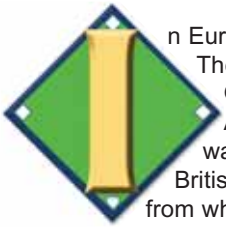
Websites to Visit

The Center for Negro League Baseball Research (Carrollton, TX) provides an excellent resource site for information and photographs about the Negro Leagues — http://www.cnlbr.org

Lecture 8:
The 1940s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Robert W. Creamer's *Baseball (and Other Matters) in 1941.*



In Europe, the Great War, World War I, changed everything. The Romanovs, the Hohenzollerns, the Habsburgs, and the Ottomans disappeared into history, to be replaced by Ataturk, by Lenin and Stalin, and by Hitler. The trench warfare of the Western Front was a trauma from which the British escaped only within this generation, and it is a trauma from which the French, at least arguably, have even yet fully to recover. In the United States, though, things were different. We were latecomers to World War I. Latecomers to World War II as well, though not quite as late, do what we would. And for us, for Americans, it was World War II that changed everything.

The baseball of the pre-war 1940s—pre-war, in any case, from an American perspective—was accordingly very much the same as the baseball of the 1930s. Same teams, same stars, same style of play. The baseball of the post-war 1940s was very different. And the baseball of the war years was different again—different, strange, and, not to put too fine a point upon it, inferior. There were no significant rule changes during the period, and on a major-league level, there were no franchise shifts at all. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade the baseball landscape had changed in some respects at least virtually out of recognition, and in many respects the wider world changed with it.

It was New York and a revivified, pitching-heavy Cincinnati team led by Bucky Walters and Paul Derringer that won the last pennants of the 1930s, and Cincinnati won again 1940 with pretty much the same cast, while New York and Joe DiMaggio fell to Hank Greenberg and Detroit in a very tight pennant race, with Cleveland—Bob Feller, Lou Boudreau, and Hal Trosky—and the Red Sox, featuring Joe Cronin, the still-potent Jimmie Foxx, and, in his rookie year, Ted Williams, close behind.

Theodore Samuel (Ted) Williams
(1918–2002)

Over his baseball career Ted Williams was known by several nicknames: "The Kid," "The Splendid Splinter," "Teddy Ballgame," and "The Thumper," among them.

His nineteen seasons with the Boston Red Sox (1939 to 1960) were twice interrupted by military service as a Marine Corps pilot: in World War II, from 1942 to 1946, and again in the Korean War, from 1952 to 1953.

Williams was twice voted the major league's most valuable player and, in two separate years, won baseball's Triple Crown.

Dodger-Yankee Rivalry

The year 1941 marked the first instance of what would become a cherished Gotham tradition—a Yankee-Dodgers Series, the first of ten more to come. To this day there is nothing that the New York—and now the Los Angeles—media love more than a match-up between Dodger blue and Yankee pinstripes. The '41 Series was famous among Brooklyn fans, among other things, for catcher Mickey Owen's ninth-inning dropped third strike against Yankee batter Tommy Henrich in the fourth game at Ebbets Field, which led to four Yankee runs, a 3–1 Yankee lead in the Series, and laid the foundation, according to the faithful, to a series of misfortunes that would not end until 1955 when the Dodgers at last, on their sixth try, won a series.

The leading Yankee player of the '41 season was, of course, Joe DiMaggio—who that year fashioned his (extremely) well-celebrated 56-game hitting streak. It was DiMaggio's sixth year as a Yankee headliner, and, truth be told, though he would play well, he would never again play at quite the same level. It was his performance in that era, if not perhaps the streak itself, that so imprinted him on Tri-State Area sensibilities that Newark NJ-born songster Paul Simon (born in fact a week after the '41 series) would a generation later lament his departure—"Where you have gone?"—as a nationwide symbol of yearning and loss.

The performance of Ted Williams of the Red Sox that year, though, was even more impressive, as he became the last .400 hitter, with an average of .406, famously choosing to play at the end of the season, even when his average already rounded up to precisely .400, and so—though in the end with success—willingly putting his achievement at risk. And garnering 37 homers and 135 walks to boot.

The leader for Brooklyn, meanwhile, was the much beloved Peter Reiser, whose penchant for crashing headfirst into outfield fences while pursuing fly balls would sharply curtail the length and productivity of his career, even while endearing him to Brooklyn fans, who admired his manifest enthusiasm.

The year 1941, though, was the last year in which America remained at peace, and though it was decided, for the sake of morale, that major league baseball should continue during the war years, being a player did not exempt you from the draft and beyond that, of course, many players volunteered. The quality of play suffered accordingly. By Bill James's estimate, about 40 percent of the wartime players were of genuine major-league quality. And though you don't hear much about it, I suspect that there was some decline in quality of equipment. Certainly home run totals declined, and more sharply as the war continued.

One effect that one might expect would be to find inflated totals in the records of the genuine major-leaguers who, for one reason or another, were still playing. But the case of a few pitchers, perhaps, aside, that really doesn't seem to have happened much. The Ted Williams and Joe Gordon of 1942 look a lot like the Ted Williams and Joe Gordon of 1941, a little better, a little worse, but not radically different. No more than ordinarily year-to-year fluctuation. What seems instead to have happened is that the whole picture grays out a little bit.

Cardinals Dominate

In any event, the dominant team of the war years and immediately thereafter was the St. Louis Cardinals, who took the pennant in 1942, 1943, and 1944, and again in 1946. Three times they won the World Series as well. The dominant player in St. Louis was the young Stan Musial, and even more so as time passed. It is no accident that the one war year in which St. Louis didn't win was the one year when Musial didn't play. Even then, though, the Cardinals were close. As it happens, Musial was even better after the war, at his absolute peak during the late 1940s and early 1950s, though he played on afterward for a decade. The other outstanding St. Louis players were in 1942 and 1946, Enos Slaughter, through the wartime pennant years, pitcher Mort Cooper, and throughout the period, satin-smooth defensive specialist at shortstop, Marty Marion.

One Time, It Was All St. Louis

The least successful team in the majors had for many years been the American League St. Louis Browns, who during the thirties on at least one occasion had failed to draw even 100,000 fans over the course of a full season. They had come close once in the twenties during one of Babe Ruth's few off years, when a Browns team led by George Sisler, Kenny Williams, and pitcher Urban Shocker had come within a game of the Yankees. In 1944, though, the Browns did well enough against the attenuated competition to nip the Tigers by a single game and the Yankees by a full six. The best Browns player was power-hitting shortstop, Vern Stephens, who would go on in later years to play even better for the Red Sox. It is revealing of the conditions of the time that Stephens's 20 homers that year took him within two of the homer title. And the Cardinals, in any event, took care of matters without too much difficulty in the only all-St. Louis World Series.

Next year it was the turn of the Tigers, who, war or no war, had really outstanding pitching, led by Hal Newhouser and Dizzy Trout, who in 1944 and 1945 combined to win 99 games and in 1945, a world title against the Cubs. Hank Greenberg returned to the Tigers mid-season, and that was enough to supplement the hitting of Rudy York, and, that year at least, Ray Cullenbine.

Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey Break the Color Line

And then things changed. Not so much, to be sure, in 1946, as the armed forces gradually demobilized in what was increasingly revealed as a changed, bipolar world. Stan Musial returned to St. Louis to lead the Cardinals to another pennant, and Ted Williams did the same for the Red Sox, with Greenberg and Newhouser still in top form in Detroit. In 1947, however, Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey broke the color-line, and by the end of the season Larry Doby and Bill Veeck had done the same in Cleveland. Baseball would never be the same again.

The color-line was at least a little permeable very early in major-league history. The first African-American to play in the majors was not, in fact, Jackie Robinson, but Moses Fleetwood Walker, who had played for 42 games in 1884 for the Toledo Blue Stockings of the American Association. But objections from Cap Anson, then the dominant player in the league, and various like-minded others in the Jim Crow era had closed the door. And

Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis likewise opposed overturning the so-called "gentleman's agreement," all the while denying that any such thing existed. Bill Veeck had flirted with the idea of buying the bankrupt Philadelphia Phillies in 1943 and stocking the team with Negro League players, but his plans were thwarted. John McGraw had, indeed, in his day and to his credit, toyed with the notion of attempting to "pass" black players as Latinos or Native Americans. No one doubted that African-American players could in fact play—white major leaguers had been playing against Negro Leaguers for years in the off-season. But even so it remained to Branch Rickey, now with the Dodgers, to bring about the end of the color line. Judge Landis died in 1944, still Commissioner, and he was replaced by Kentuckian A. P. "Happy" Chandler, who proved more amenable to changing things. Jackie Robinson had in 1945 hit .387 while playing shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs. Rickey signed to a Dodger contract and assigned him the next year to Montreal, where he became International League player of the year. The next year he started for the Dodgers. He took, of course, a great-deal of strikingly mean-spirited guff, and one reason that Rickey had chosen Robinson for the immensely difficult task was Rickey's assessment that Robinson would be able to handle the pressure, not only as a player, but as a person. As it turned out he was, but the process was anything but easy.

Jack Roosevelt (Jackie) Robinson
(1919–1972)

Among Jackie Robinson's career highlights are his being chosen as the National League's Rookie of the Year in 1947 and Most Valuable Player in 1949. In his ten seasons with the Dodgers, Robinson compiled a career batting average of .311, hit 137 home runs, 1,518 hits, and was six times selected for the National League All Star team. His uniform number 42 was retired by Major League Baseball in 1997 to honor the fiftieth anniversary of his first major-league game.

Nonetheless, the Dodgers prospered. They won the pennant in 1947, again in 1949, again four more times in the 1950s, and indeed went on, ever since, to become one of the most successful sports franchises of all time. And Rickey's move and Robinson's achievement also made of the Dodgers something special—rooting for them became, for many, not just a matter of local pride, but a political statement. Dodger fans had always been noted for their enthusiasm and eagerness. Dodgerhood, now, beyond that, took on a progressive moral meaning in the minds of many fans, and the effect has not entirely dissipated even yet. This is, truth be told, yet another reason why baseball has had a particular appeal for intellectuals, who have gathered disproportionately, for most of the past century at least, on the leftward half of the political spectrum.

Branch Rickey himself, however, as always, seems primarily to have been interested in talent, and if there was untapped baseball talent in the Negro Leagues, then he was more than happy to gain a fair leg up on the competition once the death of Landis opened the possibility. On one level it is as simple as that. And the strategy worked. By 1948, Roy Campanella was playing for the Dodgers. By 1949, so was Don Newcombe. And the Dodgers never looked back.

Other teams did not react with equal quickness or enthusiasm. Some, like Cleveland, followed suit almost immediately, and shortly thereafter, so did the

New York Giants and the Boston Braves, who in fact won the pennant in 1948. Others were much slower to respond, among them the Red Sox, the Tigers, the Cardinals, and the Yankees. On the whole, the National League was more enthusiastic in signing black players than the American, which led, over the next two decades, to a real shift in the balance of power. Almost since its inception, the American had been the stronger of the two major leagues. That began to change, and by the 1960s, if not before, the National League was clearly and unambiguously the stronger. From 1910 to 1949, counting World Series and All-Star Game victories, the American League led 39–17. From 1950 to 1979, the figures are almost reversed, National League leading 40–22. The 1980s were about a wash. And since 1990, the American League has once again become the stronger, 23–9, as has likewise been demonstrated in regular interleague play.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the effect on play during the war years?
2. How did a change of commissioner help to break down baseball's color barrier?

Suggested Reading

Creamer, Robert W. *Baseball (and Other Matters) in 1941*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 9:
The 1950s: The Second Golden Age

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

My own earliest baseball memory, a premature and strikingly unsuccessful little-league tryout aside, is watching the 1957 World Series between Henry Aaron and the Braves and Mickey Mantle and the Yankees on black and white television. I don't think I understood much, but I knew that it was baseball, I knew that it was the World Series, and I knew at least who the Yankees were. As well I should have, for this was the Yankees' most dominant decade, when they won eight pennants and six World Series, the era, appropriately enough, ot the musical *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*. "Ya gotta have heart."

New York Teams

Despite the beneficent influence of a whole wave of exciting young black players—among them, in addition to Aaron, Ernie Banks, Roberto Clemente, and, above all, Willie Mays, the fifties were not unambiguously a prosperous or trouble-free decade for baseball. This was, from one perspective, the golden era of golden eras, with six—count 'em, six—straight "Subway Series" between the Yankees and either the Dodgers or the Giants. Those of my vintage who grew up in New York have never quite recovered from the exhilaration, and from that point of view the early fifties live on as a glorious set point of baseball rectitude. "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!" So goes the often-replayed refrain of Bobby Thomson's pennant-winning shot off the Dodgers' Ralph Branca at the Polo Grounds. But not all baseball fans live in New York, and the monotonous dominance of teams from Gotham was not received with equal delight in the hinterlands.

Old Parks, New Media, More Pro Sports

Beyond that, there was another problem. The baseball parks of the 1950s had been built, by and large, a generation or so earlier. Some were getting a little ragged. But beyond even that, the urban environment itself had changed. A subway series is fine if you have subways and live close by, but a good deal less appealing if you don't. In 1915, pretty much everybody did. By 1955, though, most didn't, save perhaps in New York or in Brooklyn. The old ballparks had been built before the real rise of the automobile at a time when no one gave much thought to parking. What, after all, were streetcars for? That made the parks inconvenient to get to if, by chance, you lived in the suburbs, and by the fifties, more and more would-be fans did. And beyond even that, for a whole variety of reasons, by the 1950s the inner-city neighborhoods in which the old parks resided were themselves in an accelerating state of decline. They became progressively less and less enticing to non-residents, and attendance was accordingly threatened.

Another problem was the fact that since the allocation of major-league franchises had crystallized in 1903, the population pattern had shifted. In 1900, Los Angeles, for instance, had a population of just over 100,000 people. By 1950 the figure was nearly 2,000,000. True enough, including teams from the West Coast in the majors would not really have been feasible in the days of rail travel. But by the mid-1950s commercial aviation was rapidly making great strides. That changed the equation.

Yet another problem was television. Would broadcasting games destroy attendance? Or would it stir up interest and enhance attendance? Could television revenue, in fact, become a major revenue stream in its own right? Half a century and a whole lot of changes later, the answers are clear. But they were anything but clear at the time.

And then there was football. Up to the mid-fifties or so, baseball had the field pretty much to itself as a major professional spectator sport. There was horse-racing, but big events like the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont aside, it attracted a rather different crowd and was closely associated with gambling. And there was boxing, still a big deal—much more so than at present. Nothing was bigger in those days than a heavyweight title fight. But boxing suffered from many of the same disabilities as racing, though the gambling was not quite so overt. College football was big. But it was big, by and large, for collegians, who in pre-G.I. Bill days were a distinct minority. And up until the fifties, professional football didn't amount to much. That began to change with television. Football was—and is—a great television game, probably the best television game. And by the sixties, when color television, ever so gradually, became an accepted, ordinary part of at least middle-class life, football offered a major challenge to baseball.

Some Big Moves

Baseball responded to these changes, in the first instance, by moving franchises for the first time in two generations. The Braves, after a relatively undistinguished long-term history, had enjoyed some recent success, gaining second 1947, and winning the pennant, behind the efforts of Warren Spahn, Johnny Sain, and third baseman Bob Elliott in 1948. By 1952, though, they had fallen back again, and drew only 281,000 in Boston. They moved to Milwaukee, where in 1953 they drew more than 2,000,000, helped in no small measure by the heroics of twenty-two-year-old Eddie Mathews, in his second year on the team, who chimed in with 47 home runs. The following year, Henry Aaron would join him, and the Braves went on to become, along with the Dodgers, one of the strongest National League teams of the times, winning pennants in 1957 and 1958, and taking the world title in 1957. People took notice. A more than 600 percent increase in attendance tends to attract a certain measure of attention.

The following year the St. Louis Browns departed St. Louis for Baltimore. Boston and St. Louis were the smallest of the two-team cities in the arrangement that had lasted for fifty years, and in both cases were the perennial weak sister in the arrangement, consistently outdrawn by their more respective favored twins. It took the reborn Baltimore Orioles a good longer to prosper than it did the Braves, but prosper they did in the sixties and seventies, becoming one of the strongest teams in the league.

The situation was a bit different in Philadelphia. At their best the Philadelphia Athletics had stood high among baseball's elite, and the Phillies had a less distinguished long-record, though both teams had spent plenty of time in the cellar. The Phillies, though, had more recent success, winning the pennant in 1950, powered by the performance of Robin Roberts, the best all-around pitcher of the early 1950s, outfielders Richie Ashburn, and that season in particular, Del Ennis, and the relief performance of one-year wonder Jim Konstanty. So it was the Athletics who left town. Their performance in Kansas City, though, remained disappointing, and they did not hit their competitive stride again until they moved to Oakland.

In each such case thus far, the teams who moved to a new venue were troubled, faced with poor attendance and other problems. That was by no means so obviously the case with the next two teams to depart for greener pastures. The New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers had split the first six years of the decade between them, the Giants taking two pennants and the Dodgers four. They both drew well, though in recent years the Giants in particular had fallen off just a bit. They both had long and storied traditions. The Giants, indeed, for generations, had been baseball's most celebrated franchise. It was accordingly a real shock to New Yorkers when both teams departed for the West Coast, taking their long-term rivalry with them. The case of the Dodgers was particularly bitter, since they seemed in so many ways to represent, at least for their partisans, what was best about lively, progressive New York. They thrived, of course, in their new venues, the Giants in San Francisco and the Dodgers in Los Angeles. But the sense of betrayal remained, to be allayed only in part by the arrival, a few years later, of the Mets.

Thus far, though, we have not talked very much about the Yankees—and they stayed in place, and this was their decade, if any was. They were, in short, very good indeed. Their keynote player, famous as he is, remains to some extent undervalued. People tend to forget just how astonishing the young Mickey Mantle really was. He was the man who was supposed to break Babe Ruth's single-season homer record, and though he came close, he never did it. That is part of it. And due to injuries, though he had a long and productive career, he was at his absolute best for a relatively short time. That best, though, was really spectacular. He hit, he walked, he ran, he fielded, and he hit for tremendous power. At the very peak of his abilities he probably outshone even Willie Mays, and that was no easy task. But he did not play alone. The most consistent and distinguished of his teammates is likewise a bit undervalued. Having given your name to a cartoon character and having become a byword for happy malapropisms is not the best way to generate respect for your on-field skills. But three-time most valuable player, catcher Yogi Berra, most assuredly had them. Phil Rizzuto was a fine shortstop. And as the decade progressed, lefthander Whitey Ford was as good a pitcher as the Yankees ever had.

The most storied team of the time, though, and perhaps of any time, was the Jackie Robinson Dodgers—the true blue *Boys of Summer*, up close and personal. They featured, of course Jackie Robinson himself and Roy Campenalla—and Gil Hodges, Peewee Reese, and the, again undervalued,

Duke Snider. People forget that it was, if not exactly an open question, a not-unreasonable question, which of the New York teams had the very best center fielder during the early fifties. Mantle and Mays come as no surprise to anyone, but that Snider could even briefly stand the comparison is something that has more or less passed out of memory. "Even briefly," admittedly, but he could. And the Dodgers won again in 1959, let us not forget, even after their betrayal and departure, in the very process of reinventing themselves not as Ebbets-Field-style sluggers, but as an Angeleno team based on pitching, led in that year by Don Drysdale and Johnny Podres, with the still-mastering-his-craft Sandy Koufax in the wings.

> *"Those Dodgers-Giants games weren't baseball. They were civil war."*
>
> **~Andy "Handy Andy" Pafko**
> **Brooklyn Dodgers center fielder**
> **1951–1952**

The Giants, too, won twice, and in 1954 playing the pitching-rich Cleveland Indians in a humiliating (for the Indians) four-game sweep in the Series, Willie Mays in game one, delivered probably the most famous single play on record, with a running over-the-shoulder catch of a 440-foot drive to deep center from the bat of Vic Wertz, which saved the game, and thereby saved the sweep. That Indians team, which won more games than the '27 Yankees before encountering the Giants, is worthy of mention in its own right as one of a series of Cleveland teams boasting the best pitching staff ever gathered before the Atlanta teams of recent years, featuring, in addition to the still-dangerous fastballer, Bob Feller, Early Wynn, Mike Garcia, and Bob Lemon at the height of their powers, and beside Larry Doby on offense, fielding the formidable Al Rosen, at his brief peak about as effective as any third baseman ever to play.

The Power of the Bat

But as Bill James reminds us, none of these teams precisely captures the characteristic flavor of the fifties game, which featured, above all, walks, homers, and strikeouts, and the signature player of the fifties is the big, slow, high-strikeout power hitter. The best of the breed was probably Pittsburgh outfielder Ralph Kiner, who during the late forties and early fifties nailed down seven straight home run crowns, peaking out in 1949 with 54. This, in those days, was a good deal rarer feat than at present—the 50-homer club didn't have many members. These folks don't get that much respect now, but I, for one, have always had a fondness for home-run-hitters, however big and however slow. More power to the Hank Sauers, the Andy Pafkos, the Walt Dropos, the Joe Adcocks, the Gus Zernials, the Bobby Thomsons, and the Ted Kluszewskis of the world. The 1950s were their era, and there are certainly worse ways to play the game.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What factors posed threats to baseball attendance in the 1950s?
2. Why might Mickey Mantle's career be undervalued?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

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Lecture 10:
The 1960s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

I really became a baseball fan in the sixties. In fact, to be more precise, I really became a baseball fan in 1963, listening to Sandy Koufax pitching in the Series against the Yankees. And I am a lifelong Tigers fan. The team, accordingly, which I know best, is probably the Tigers of the sixties, but I will do my best not to let that state of affairs unbalance my account here.

The baseball of the sixties—in particular, of the late sixties—recalled the baseball of the deadball era. Not in all respects, of course. There were still lots of home runs. But batting averages were low. Batting averages were exceedingly low. In 1968, in fact, Carl Yaztremski won the American League batting title with an average of .301, the lowest winning average on record. And pitchers were accordingly dominant and compiled records that have since not been matched. At the end of the sixties, after 1968, rulesmakers responded to the hitting dearth by lowering the pitcher's mound to only 10″ higher than the surrounding field, and rather surprisingly, that worked, and hitters began slowly to recover.

On the Move

Meanwhile, in response to essentially the same factors, the sixties saw even more franchise shifts than the fifties. To begin with, the American League expanded to ten teams in 1961, reconfiguring the schedule so that each team played a 162-game rather than the traditional 154-game season. The American League too entered Los Angeles with the Angels, and the long-standing American League franchise in Washington moved to the Twin Cities in Minnesota, becoming the Twins, while the American League assembled a new Senators franchise for Washington. This was unfortunate for Washington fans, since after decades of mediocrity, the Senators were improving and would, indeed, go on to win a pennant in Minnesota in 1965. The new Senators, by contrast, were just as lackluster as the old Senators had been for so long. In 1962, the National League followed suit, reentering New York with the Mets, and entering Houston with the Colt .45s, soon to be renamed the Astros in a testament to NASA headquarters in Houston.

In 1966, the Braves moved again, abandoning Milwaukee for Atlanta, and in 1968, the Athletics left Kansas City for Oakland. Finally, in 1969, both leagues expanded to twelve teams, for the first time introducing divisional playoffs and accepting the likelihood that sooner or later—in the event, it happened within a few years—that the team compiling the best regular-season record would not play in the World Series, as the cost of involving more teams in a race for the title. The American League, with a year's delay,

replaced the Athletics with the Royals in Kansas City, and placed the Pilots in Seattle, who the following year moved to Milwaukee as the Brewers. The National League in its turn placed the Padres in San Diego and the Expos in Montreal, the first major-league franchise to be housed outside the United States.

These franchise shifts and introductions in their turn necessitated the building of a whole array of new ballparks, one of which, the Astrodome in Houston, was entirely enclosed in order to allow for air-conditioning. This in turn necessitated the introduction of "Astroturf" since the grass wouldn't grow effectively indoors, and "turf," which was adopted by many teams in the decade that followed, in turn began to change the way the game was played. As a human-made product, turf lacked the variation of even the most carefully manicured natural infield, which in that regard made fielding easier. On the other hand, though, it was harder and faster than natural grass, which led to more short hits, and, indirectly, to a more speed-based game altogether. As time passed, more National League teams adopted turf than American League teams, which widened existing differences in prevailing style of play between the two leagues, the National League becoming more inclined to favor speed and "smallball," the American League continuing, on the whole, to favor the power game.

All this, though, lay in the future as the decade began, and the 1960 World Series, between the still effectively Mantle and Ford-led New York Yankees and the resurgent Pittsburgh Pirates, out of the doldrums at last, proved strange and memorable. Strange because the Pirates, led by Roberto Clemente, shortstop Dick Groat, and fielding wizard Bill Mazeroski, somehow managed to win the Series despite losing in the three games that they lost by the daunting total score of 38–3. Memorable above all because the Pirates finally proved victorious, despite all, after Mazeroski's walk-off ninth-inning homer in game seven, which won the 10–9 game for the Pirates.

1961*

The year 1961 proved even more memorable on several counts. Major league baseball had not expanded within living memory, and fans and baseball writers alike feared that expansion might dilute talent and, heaven forfend, lead to "cheap records." Talent was, in fact, to some degree diluted, and whether or not the ensuing record was "cheap" was a topic of highly impassioned debate at the time. For in 1961, both Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris mounted an attack on Babe Ruth's hallowed single-season home-run mark, running more or less neck and neck for much of the season. This was all right. Mantle was an established star and had been expected to challenge the record. When Roger Maris began to pull ahead, though, feelings changed sharply. For though he had been named American League MVP the year before, Maris was not a .300 hitter—not then or ever—and just did not seem a big enough star to give the Babe a run for his money. The whole thing seemed a bit demeaning. And what was even worse, the 1961 season was 162 games long rather than the traditional 154. It seemed to give Maris an unfair chance. It seemed, in short, cheap. The baseball commissioner at the time was Ford Frick, who in his younger days had been Babe Ruth's ghostwriter and who was nothing if not loyal to the memory of his erstwhile

benefactor. He ruled that unless Maris broke Ruth's record within 154 games, his new mark would have to bear an asterisk to indicate that it wasn't the "real" Ruthian record. And that, of course, is just what happened, as Maris finally wound up with 61, but only 59 within the requisite 154 games.

Despite all the hoopla, the Yankees won without too much trouble over a solid Detroit team anchored that year by a dazzling season by first-baseman Norm Cash. And they took care of Frank Robinson and the Reds in a relatively one-sided five-game Series.

Into the 1960s

Things were a bit different in 1962. Stolen bases, and the running game more generally, had been in a long slow decline since the deadball era. Steals were about a third to a quarter as frequent as they had been in the days of Honus Wagner and Ty Cobb, and Cobb's 1915, modern-era record of 96 steals in a season was considered unassailable. The Negro Leagues, to be sure, had always featured the running game, and during the fifties things began to pick up a bit once again, led in large part by players like Jackie Robinson, Sam Jethroe, and Willie Mays. The pennant-winning 1959 "Go-go" Sox of Chicago had placed a good deal of emphasis on the running game, led by shortstop Luis Aparicio and his 56 steals that game (35 steals more than anyone else in the league could muster). But 56 is a long way from 96, so when Dodger shortstop Maury Wills stole 104 in 1962, it was very big news. And the Dodgers, with major contributions from Tommie Davis, Willie Davis, big Frank Howard, and Don Drysdale, in fact tied the Giants for the regular-season crown. The Giants, however, led by Orlando Cepeda and Willie Mays in one of his very best seasons, proved victorious in a three-game playoff for the title, only to fall, four games to three, to a Yankee team consisting of a slightly weaker version of the team from the previous year.

Thereafter the pitchers really hit their stride. The phenomenon was game-wide. In 1962, league earned-run averages stood in both leagues just under 4.00 per game. By 1968, league earned-run averages, again in both leagues, stood just under 3.00, a 25 percent drop in offense over the course of just six years. And the pitchers in those years were just overwhelming. Everyone who is interested in baseball at all remembers the names of the most dominant—Sandy Koufax going 25-5, 26-8, and 27-9 and setting, in 1966, a new single-season record with 382 strikeouts; high-kicking and wily Juan Marichal of the Giants just behind, and outdueling Koufax more often than not when they chanced to meet head to head, and the fierce and fast Bob Gibson of the Cardinals with his earned-run average of 1.12 in 1968. No one had seen such doings since the days of Walter Johnson and Christy Mathewson.

And it wasn't just the all-time greats who were racking up numbers. The best pitcher in baseball in 1964 was probably the unheralded Dean Chance. Sudden Sam McDowell of the Indians struck out 325. Teammate Luis Tiant in '68 compiled an earned-run average of 1.60, and a whole array of players came home with ERAs under 2.00, among them Joel Horlen, Gary Peters, knuckleballer Phil Niekro, Bob Bolin, Dave McNally, and the notorious Denny McLain, who as a prequel to his long subsequent career of malfeasance and scams won 31 games for the pennant-winning Tigers in 1968, the last pitcher

ever to do so—like the unfortunate Maris in the process garnering an honor that most fans had expected to fall elsewhere, in this instance, to Sandy Koufax.

In the American League, meanwhile, the Yankee dynasty at least momentarily collapsed, after a run, since 1921, of 29 titles in 44 years. After 1964, it would be twelve years until the Yankees again won so much as a divisional title, and for the rest of the decade, long-term also-rans Minnesota, Baltimore, Boston, Detroit, and, once again, Baltimore enjoyed their moments in the sun (a sequence all the more remarkable when one considers that in their previous lives the Twins had been the humble Senators and the Orioles the even-more-humble St. Louis Browns).

The best team of the group was probably Baltimore, who won in 1966 and again in 1969, taking the Series too both times. The team developed into a perennial pitching powerhouse that would enjoy success for a decade or more to come, led from 1968 on by the canny Earl Weaver, who oversaw a staff that by 1969 boasted Mike Cuellar in addition to Dave McNally and Jim Palmer. The best offensive player for Baltimore, and indeed, quite simply, one of the best ever, was Frank Robinson, with slick-fielding Brooks Robinson at third base and big Boog Powell at first. The '66 team featured Luis Aparicio at short, who as he faded was replaced by Mark Belanger, about as weak a hitter (lifetime average .228) as you can be as an offensive player and still have a real career, but at shortstop more or less the reincarnation of Marty Marion or Rabbit Maranville.

The Tigers too had a team that would achieve success later as well as in 1968. The Tiger mainstay was outfielder Al Kaline, with Bill Freehan behind the plate, the vivacious, power-hitting Norm Cash at first, and the strong and amiable, if none too speedy, Willie Horton in the outfield. The headline pitcher early on was McLain, but as time passed it was laid-back lefthander Mickey Lolich who emerged as the real ace of the staff. In the '68 series, the Tigers' rivals, the St. Louis Cardinals, were led by Bob Gibson at his intimidating peak. In game one he absolutely humiliated McLain and the Tigers, striking out a record 17 of them to break Koufax's mark of 15 set against the Yankees five years before. He looked superhuman. But in the end it was the Tigers who took the seven-game contest and the workman Lolich who won three games.

Albert William Kaline
(b. 1934)

In the fifth game of the 1968 World Series on October 7, 1968, Detroit Tigers right fielder Al Kaline came to bat against the St. Louis Cardinals with the bases loaded and his team a run behind the Cards. Kaline hit a single that drove in what turned out to be the tying and winning runs.

Kaline (known to Tigers fans as "Mr. Tiger"), is shown here with pitcher Mickey Lolich (left) who not only pitched the winning game, but started the seventh inning rally off with a single that set up Kaline's three-run hit. Lolich pitched three complete games (winning each) to lead the Tigers to their first victory since 1945.

The 1967 American League race was one of the closest on record, with four teams in contention in the final week, and three in contention on the final day. One was the Twins, led by Tony Oliva and Rob Carew and the redoubtable slugger Harmon Killebrew. Another was the forementioned Tigers. But the victor proved to be the unheralded Boston Red Sox, led by

triple-crown winner Carl Yaztremski (in fact tying Killebrew as home-run king), having the best season of his career. The Red Sox, too, faced the Cardinals, and fell to Gibson and friends in four games, Gibson himself winning three of them with a 1.00 ERA.

The other great pennant race of the decade took place in the National League in 1964. As the season drew to a close, the surprising Phillies, sparked by young third baseman Dick (or as he was then known, Richie) Allen, seemed to have things all wrapped up. But then came the famous, or notorious, Phillie Phold, as the team simply went into free fall, allowing the fast-closing Reds to tie them, and the Cardinals to pull into first by a single game.

And then, at the conclusion of the decade, we have Casey Stengel and the "Amazin' Mets." In 1962, the expansion-year Mets were better than the 1899 Cleveland Spiders, who, you will recall, were so thoroughly dreadful that they stopped playing home games altogether. But they still managed to finish 19 games behind the ninth-place Cubs. By 1969, though, things had changed. Nolan Ryan took longer to hit his stride, but by 1969, Tom Seaver was already pitching at full power. The nicknames "Tom Terrific" and "The Franchise" about get it right. And the Mets went a good way toward consoling at least Long Island fans for the loss of the Giants and Dodgers a decade before.

It was entirely off the field, though, that one of the most far-reaching developments of the 1960s took place, for in 1966 the Major League Players Association hired Marvin Miller as their point man in negotiations with the baseball owners, and he would prove, in that capacity, effective in ways, in decades to come, that would revolutionize the structure of baseball.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What do Roger Maris and Denny McLain have in common?
2. Why was the success of Minnesota and Baltimore in the 1960s so surprising?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

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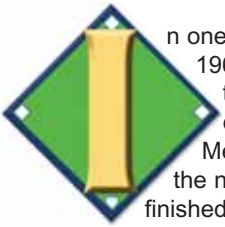
Lecture 11:
The 1970s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*



In one sense 1968 saw the last traditional pennant race, and in 1969 both leagues were divided into East and West Divisions, the pennant to be decided by a playoff between divisional champions, who then went on to the World Series. The Mets and the Orioles were the first two teams to win under the new arrangement, though as it happens, both would have finished first in any event on the basis of regular-season record. The object of the plan, of course, was to give more teams a chance at a title in the hopes of enhancing both fan interest and attendance, and in that it quite clearly succeeded.

The seventies were, in the wider world, in many respects a difficult decade, as the nation confronted inflation, recession, and a whole series of woes. In baseball, though, it was a good decade, both on the field and off. Attendance rose, for example, by nearly 50 percent, and television rights and the like proved ever more lucrative. Baseball's prosperity, though, set the stage for a real revolution in how the game was conducted. Marvin Miller and the Players Association had already secured for players the right to make use of agents in contract negotiations and the right to binding arbitration in the case of disputes. It was the latter which, very late in 1975, blew the structure of the game wide open.

Free Agency

The reserve clause, which as interpreted, had been taken to "reserve" to a player's team, once the player signed a contract, the unique right to negotiate for his services in the future for as long as the team wished, had been a contractual mainstay of the game since the nineteenth century. In 1975 it came under challenge. Andy Messersmith, who had in the previous two years won 39 games for the Dodgers, and Dave McNally, who after a distinguished career with the Orioles, as things turned out, would not pitch major-league ball again, wished not to sign with current teams but instead to sell their services to the highest bidder. Players had, of course, wished for the same thing for generations. But they could not subject their dispute to binding arbitration. By 1975, thanks in large part to the energetic advocacy of Marvin Miller, that had changed. The cases were submitted to arbitrator Peter Seitz, who found in favor of the players and declared them "free agents."

Messersmith went on to sign with Atlanta—and, sad to say, to win only 18 games in the remaining four years of his career. But a new precedent had been set.

The reserve clause itself was not overturned. It was rather reinterpreted. Previously the "reservation" of a player for the following year had been taken

to extend to each year in succession. As reinterpreted, it extended only to the next year. After a bit more negotiation players and owners reached a sort of compromise. After six years with a given club, after taking the requisite steps, a veteran player could become a free agent. The result was that player salaries went up sharply and went up quick. Since the late nineteenth century real stars had gained salaries worth about $100,000 in contemporary currency. The very greatest had done a bit better. Babe Ruth did better still, and peaked at a salary of $80,000 a year, the equivalent of a bit less than a million in today's currency. But by the end of the decade players, who, though very good, were not Babe Ruth, were making that, and that was only the beginning. At present, major-league salaries are more or less routinely ten times that or more. The Messersmith case marked a radical transformation not so much of baseball on the field as of baseball as a business, and as a business, major league baseball would never be the same again.

Double-knit Uniforms and Cookie-Cutter Stadiums

In 1970, the expansion Seattle Pilots moved to Milwaukee to become the Brewers, and in 1972 the new Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers, playing in Arlington in the Dallas/Ft. Worth "Metroplex." And in 1977 the American League expanded again, putting the Blue Jays in Toronto and the new Mariners in Seattle. What most affected baseball on the field, however, was the construction of a whole series of new multi-purpose "cookie-cutter" stadiums. All featured infields with artificial turf—in Cincinnati, in Pittsburgh, in Philadelphia, and in Kansas City, and as we have seen, artificial turf affected the game in and of itself.

The 1970s, being the 1970s, also featured a striking new look in colorful double-knit baseball uniforms, the on-field equivalent of the leisure suit. These, in later years, have been regarded with something not far from awed horror. But at the time, they were the latest thing and only the most tradition-oriented franchises—the Yankees, the Dodgers, the Tigers, the Red Sox, and their ilk—held out against the trend.

On the field, the seventies game was balanced and interesting. Neither pitching nor hitting, neither the speed game nor the power game dominated, and different teams, depending on their home park and their inclination, offered noticeably different styles of play.

The greatest team of the decade, and probably the greatest eight-man team ever to play, was the "Big Red Machine," the Cincinnati Reds, who over the course of the decade won five division titles, four pennants, and at their peak, in 1975 and '76, back to back World Series. Their pitching was never up to the standard of their hitting and fielding—otherwise they would have been the greatest team ever quite simply—but they were exceedingly impressive even so. Their mainstays were catcher Johnny Bench and, after 1972, second baseman Joe Morgan, both viable candidates as the most accomplished ever to play at their respective positions, and with them all-time major-league hits leader Pete Rose. Rose lacked the defensive polish of Morgan and Bench, but he was a relentless, unremittingly competitive player who day in and day out wrestled every bit from the talent he had. Their second-tier players were also almost as good, runs-batted-in machine and power hitter Tony Perez at first

and the relatively light-hitting but golden-gloved Dave Concepcion at short. Their outfield was less distinguished, but still strong, with Ken Griffey, Sr., slick-fielding Cesar Geronimo, and George Foster.

The Best of the Seventies

The other really dominant team of the decade was the Oakland A's, or Athletics, five consecutive times division winners and for three straight years, 1972 to 1974, pennant winners and world champions. On the field they looked like no championship team that had ever played. They hit, as pennant-winners go, for an astonishingly low batting average. In their three seasons as World Series winners, only one As regular hit over .300, left fielder Joe Rudi in 1972. And he hit only .305. They compensated with power—and lots of walks. It has now for twenty years and more been firmly established—in very large part by Bill James—that in and of itself, batting average is a misleading indicator of offensive accomplishment. A good deal more reliable is "on-base percentage," which takes into account, among other things, walks, and more reliable still is a combination of on-base percentage and slugging average, the latter calculated like a traditional batting average, but counting twice for a double, three times for a triple, and four times for a home run. In other words, the right combination of walks and power more than compensates for a relatively low batting average. And the Oakland As demonstrated that in practice before anyone had really demonstrated it by statistical analysis or in theory. They were, in several senses, ahead of the curve.

Their marquee player was Reggie Jackson, who found the role precisely suited him, and went on to a celebrated encore on the bigger stage of New York, but their real strong suit was pitching, led by Catfish Hunter, Vida Blue, and Ken Holtzman, with Rollie Fingers in relief. By the evaluative standards of the time, the team never really looked all that good, and their success was a bit of a mystery. The offensive players, Jackson aside—Sal Bando, Bert Campaneris, Gene Tenace, and the rest—just didn't seem to have the appropriate heft. But the problem, as things have turned out, was with the standards, not with the As.

By the end of the decade, the Yankees found their feet again, and took the world title in 1977 and '78, helped those two years more than a little by the acquisition of Reggie Jackson from the As. Say what you will about Reggie, he played for a lot of pennant winners and played very well indeed in October, most notably in the sixth and deciding game of the '77 Series against the Dodgers, when he hit three consecutive home runs to give the Yankees their first world title since 1962.

But he did not, of course, play alone. Graig Nettles at third, catcher Thurmon Munson, and Willie Randolph at second were in all, in their various ways, first-rate players, and whip-cord thin pitcher Ron Guidry, "Louisiana Lightning," was devastatingly effective, particularly in 1978, when he went 25-3, with an earned-run average of 1.74.

And the era saw some other very fine teams. The Pittsburgh Pirates six times took the division title in the decade and in 1971 and '79 proved world champions. The Pirates, more or less by themselves, had managed to hit for relatively high batting averages pretty much throughout the deadball sixties,

and in 1971 Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell and friends reaped their reward against the Orioles. Besides being a deadly, high-average line-drive hitter, Clemente was justly celebrated for his fielding skills and, in particular, for the astonishing power of his throwing arm. During the Series, to interject a personal note, I saw him make the most outstanding play that I have myself ever seen, catching a drive to right over his shoulder and spinning in the air—without touching the ground—to peg a dead-on throw to third. I simply could not believe my eyes. The '79 Series belonged to Stargell, who hit .400 with three home runs, as the Pirates once again bested Baltimore, 4 games to 3.

Baltimore too was a strong team throughout the decade, with five division titles, three pennants, and a Series victory of their own when, led by the talents of Frank and Brooks Robinson and their formidable pitching staff, they bested the first version of the "Big Red Machine" in 1970.

And the Phillies, the Royals, and Dodgers also had their innings. Each team took three division titles, and the Dodgers, in fact, twice won the pennant, only to lose the Series to Reggie Jackson and New York. The greatest players for the Phillies, as strong a team as the franchise ever boasted, were pitcher Steve Carlton and third baseman Mike Schmidt. Carlton, in 1972, before the team was even any good—indeed, while they were in last place—compiled one of the most outstanding seasons on record, winning 27 games for a team that managed only 59 wins total. Schmidt is, by general consensus, the greatest third baseman ever to play. An outstanding fielder—and as it happens, a fine basketball player as well in his days at Ohio University—Schmidt was the dominant power-hitter of his era, winning no fewer than eight home-run crowns.

Reginald Martinez (Reggie) Jackson (b. 1946)

Jackson spent his rookie year with the then-Kansas City Athletics in 1967. He went on to a stellar twenty-year career with the Athletics in Oakland, the Orioles, Yankees, and finally the Angels, winning numerous awards along the way.

The Royals were a classic turf team, strong on defense, tenacious, and fast. Their outstanding player was George Brett, another third baseman, who at his best in 1980, when the Royals won again, and took the pennant, turned in an average of .390, the highest in almost forty years. The Dodgers were, well, the Dodgers. Their strong suit was their pitching, led by Don Sutton and Tommy John, and their astonishingly long-service infield of Steve Garvey at first, Davey Lopes at second, Bill Russell at short, and Ron Cey at third.

The most celebrated Series of the decade, often mentioned, in fact, as the best and most exciting ever played, we have not yet mentioned. It took place in 1975 between the Cincinnati Reds at the absolute height of their powers and the upstart Boston Red Sox, led by Fred Lynn in his first full season, Carl Yaztremski in his fifteenth, outfielder Jim Rice, catcher Carlton Fisk, and, on the mound, the loquacious Bill Lee and a reinvented Luis Tiant, no longer a power pitcher, but a pitcher who relied on guile. The Reds finally proved victorious, but the most vivid moment of the Series occurred the night before, when in the twelfth inning at Fenway, Fisk hit a homer off the foul pole to keep Boston's hopes alive for one more day. No baseball video clip, I suspect, has ever been shown remotely as often as that of Fisk, jumping up and down and waving with all his might to keep that ball fair.

In the seventies, of course, the long career of Henry Aaron was winding down. But that, if at any time, is when a player has a chance to surpass career records, and early in 1974, Aaron gathered the most celebrated career record of them all by passing Babe Ruth's lifetime mark of 714 home runs. Aaron went on to play for two more years—his twenty-second and twenty-third—before finally hanging up his spikes with a total of 755.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did the reserve clause affect the business of baseball?
2. Why is batting average not the most reliable measure of offensive output?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

Lowry, Philip J. *Green Cathedrals*: *The Ultimate Celebration of All 271 Major League and Negro League Ballparks Past and Present*. Rev. ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992.

Wolff, Rick, ed. dir. *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Lecture 12:
The 1980s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

The 1980s were a baseball decade more or less without dynasties. Until the very end of the period no one dominated like the Yankees of yore, or even like the Reds or the As of the seventies. The competition was more balanced than it ever had been, or, indeed, than it ever has been since. No fewer than twenty-one teams won at least a single division title. Only the Cardinals (and in a sense the Dodgers) won as many as four, and even they took but one world title, with the Dodgers gathering two. Something close to parity.

Attendance, meanwhile, continued to rise—by nearly 40 percent over the decade—and player salaries rose even faster. The average, by 1984, was in contemporary terms well over $500,000 per player per season. By 1989, again in contemporary terms, it was closer to $800,000. Ballplayers were doing well. So well, in fact, that the owners very much wanted to impose a salary cap—and also to impose some sort of compensation for players lost to free agency. The result was conflict, and in mid-June of 1981 the players went on strike—and stayed on strike until late July.

The result was a truncated season of only about 108 games—some teams played more, some teams played fewer. Baseball adapted by adopting a split-season format, first-half and second-half winners in each division playing each other before playing for the divisional championships and then the pennant. This led, in both leagues, to rather bizarre results. On a full-season basis, the division leaders were, in the American League, Milwaukee and Oakland, and, in the National League, St. Louis and Cincinnati. Not one of the four played in the World Series, which was instead contested between the Yankees and the Dodgers, who had survived the playoff marathon, with the Dodgers finally coming out on top. By a wide margin the outstanding player of the truncated season was Mike Schmidt of the Phillies, who was on the way to what might well have been the best season of his career. He hit .316, with 31 homers and 91 RBI in the 107 games that the Phillies managed to play.

Michael Jack Schmidt
(b. 1949)

Mike Schmidt played his entire Major League career with the Philadelphia Phillies from 1972 to 1989. He was chosen fourteen times for the National League All-Star team, was the League's Most Valuable Player three times, a ten-time Gold Glove winner, and led the league in on-base percentage (three times), slugging percentage (five times), home runs (eight times), runs batted in (four times), and in 1981 the most runs scored. Schmidt was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1995 with a 96.5 percent vote on the first ballot.

Baseball's Changing Complexion

Several other factors, beside labor unrest, contributed to the complexion of the game. There had always been plenty of ballplayers who had their problems with the bottle, but it was during this decade that drug use began visibly to shorten and to diminish players' careers. The primary culprit, by all reports, was cocaine, and more than one player, flush with money, more or less snorted himself out of baseball.

Again, since the sixties at least, baseball had confronted the growing popularity of football, particularly NFL football, as a real threat to baseball's putative title as the "national game." Sometime in the seventies, in fact, the title was lost, and football took over the number-one spot. During the eighties, if not before, basketball too became a serious rival, particularly for the affections and efforts of African-American athletes. Since Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey had broken baseball's color line, black athletes had, of course, done superlatively well in the major leagues. But at no point did they dominate as in the NBA. And professional basketball had a different, more urban, and more "hip-hop" ethos. The percentage of African-American major-leaguers, for that, and, no doubt, for other reasons, began accordingly to decline.

On the other hand, though, the percentage of Latino and, ultimately, of Asian players began to increase. If there was anyplace on earth where baseball was unambiguously the "national game," it was not the United States, but the Dominican Republic, and the percentage of Dominican, Venezuelan, Cuban, and Mexican players, among others, has increased steadily to this day.

One final change, the full effect of which is difficult to assess, though it certainly enhanced fan interest, was the rise of "fantasy" or "rotisserie" leagues. Baseball is admirably—indeed, so far as I know, uniquely—susceptible to translation into table-top dice or computer games. My personal favorite is "Stat-O-Matic" baseball, though there are others that their partisans swear are just as good, and I played in a league for many years (and solitaire for years after that). Such games, though, depend on the past performance of the players included. If you are playing with a Walter Johnson 1913 card, he plays, in a statistical sense, like Walter Johnson in 1913. Fantasy or rotisserie leagues, by contrast, are based on performance *right now*. You pick your players in advance, and then, day to day, you see how they do, competing all the while with others in the league who have picked their own teams. Activities like this are not for everybody, but those who love them can become obsessed, and such leagues have become something not far removed from being a contemporary equivalent of the baseball "pools" so popular in the teens.

Baseball in the Eighties

But back to eighties baseball on the field. There were so many winning teams during the decade that here, perhaps, it makes sense to focus not so much upon teams as on players. Most impressive, perhaps, in retrospect—though he pitched and pitched beautifully long after the eighties had passed, was Roger Clemens—who some would argue is the greatest pitcher who ever lived. I don't myself quite buy it—great as he was and astonishingly durable as he has proved to be, others have been a bit more dominant at their peak, though, admittedly, not by much. But he is by any standard one of

the great pitchers of all time, and during the eighties he helped to lead the Red Sox to two division titles and a pennant, singles-hitting batting champion Wade Boggs leading the offense in both campaigns.

William Roger "The Rocket" Clemens (b. 1962)

Clemens has won seven Cy Young Awards, two more than any other pitcher in baseball history. In 2003, Clemens earned his three hundredth win in the same game that he also recorded his four thousandth strikeout. Clemens is one of only four pitchers to have more than four thousand strikeouts in their career—Nolan Ryan, Randy Johnson, and Steve Carlton are the others.

It was during the eighties that Mike Schmidt reached his peak and rounded out his superlative career, leading the Phillies to a world title in 1980 with 48 home runs, and to a divisional championship in 1983 with 40. The Tigers won two division titles during the eighties, and in 1984 went all the way, swamping the San Diego Padres in the Series by a margin of 4–1. In Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammel they boasted the most durable keystone combination of all time and one of the very best. They played together as regulars in Detroit for fourteen years, from 1978 to 1991. Power-hitting outfielder Kirk Gibson was a player who was greater than the sum of his parts. A former wide receiver for Michigan State, he brought his own brand of intensity to the game, and the video clip of his energetic arm-pumping response to a post-season home run, garnered later in his career for the Dodgers, rivals Fisk guiding his homer into fair territory as the most often replayed ever.

To the extent that any teams dominated, it was the Cardinals and the Dodgers who were most consistently successful over the course of the decade. The Cardinals were three-time pennant winners, featuring early in the decade Keith Hernandez at first, later and most capably replaced by Jack Clark, Tommie Herr and the incomparable shortstop Ozzie Smith in the infield, ace reliever Bruce Sutter, and, later on, speedsters Vince Coleman and Willie McGee. Leading the pitching corps for the Dodgers were Fernando Valenzuela early on and the self-controlled, precise Orel Hershiser later in the decade. Pedro Guerrero and, later, Kirk Gibson provided punch at the plate, along with Dusty Baker and Steve Sax, and Mike Scioscia proved a very competent catcher.

Most consistent in the American League, meanwhile, were the Kansas City Royals and the Oakland Athletics. Anchored by George Brett at third, the Royals remained a pitching-based turf team, benefiting from the services of, among others, reliever Dan Quisenberry, and starters Larry Gura and Bret Saberhagen. During the last few years of the eighties and on into the nineties the A's, meanwhile, proved a portent of things to come, with the so-called "Bash Brothers," José Canseco and Mark McGwire in control, and on the first and last of the Oakland A's three title teams during the decade (after an intervening stint in New York), all-time base-stealing champion and record-holder Rickey Henderson, often named, among other achievements, as the greatest lead-off hitter of all time. Dennis Eckersley, meanwhile, was consistently dazzling in relief, all but unhittable at his best.

The Mets took two division titles, and in 1986, on the way to a world championship over the Red Sox—a painful memory for the Red Sox faithful—they compiled the best won-lost record of the decade with a mark of 108-54. The Mets have historically been a pitching team, and in 1985, as the Mets were working toward their title, the young Dwight Gooden, in his second year,

burnished that tradition with one of the best seasons on record—24-4, with an earned-run average of 1.53. For that one year, at least, he looked like the second coming of Walter Johnson. The 1986 Mets, though, led the league in *both* pitching and hitting. Howard Johnson was not yet the power-infielder he would later become, but catcher Gary Carter and outfielder Darryl Strawberry provided the Mets with plenty of offensive juice, to say nothing of the contributions of Lennie Dykstra and Keith Hernandez, and later in the decade, when the Mets won again, of Kevin McReynolds.

But in this decade, more than in any other, a whole array of teams had not only their stars, but their moment in the sun. The Milwaukee Brewers boasted a pair of long-service Hall-of-Famers in Paul Molitor and Robin Yount, both of whom ended their careers with well more than 3,000 hits. So too did the good-natured and steady Tony Gwynn, long-time mainstay of the San Diego Padres and winner of eight batting titles, peaking out in 1994 with an average of .394, the highest recorded in more than half a century.

The Minnesota Twins, upset world titlists in 1987, overcoming first Jack Morris and the Tigers, and then the Cardinals, boasted in outfielder Kirby Puckett a one-of-a kind exuberant sparkplug, always smiling, always energetic, always eager to give his all. The Twin Cities loved him. And Toronto twice took the division title. Understated, efficient pitcher Dave Stieb was one of the best of the decade, and a whole series of strong Toronto outfielders took care of the offense, among them Dominican George Bell, Lloyd Mosby, and Jesse Barfield, and, later in the decade, as designated hitter and first-baseman, the "Crime Dog," Fred McGriff.

The Orioles took the division title only once, but they took pennant and the Series with it behind the efforts, above all, of ironman Cal Ripken and Eddie Murray. The Angels won, with the help of the peripatetic Reggie Jackson—and Carney Lansford, Doug DeCinces, and Bobby Grich. And Houston twice took a division title, thanks in large part, the first time around, to Cesar Cedeno and Jose Cruz, and next time out, to Kevin Bass and pitcher Mike Scott. Spending almost the whole decade in Houston, and himself a native Texan, was all-time strikeout leader Nolan Ryan, who spent longer, in fact, in Houston than anywhere else in his uniquely long career on the mound.

Finally, the Chicago Cubs, after decades of frustration, finished twice in the money at least to the extent of taking the division title. Both times second baseman Ryne Sandberg served as team leader, in 1989 ably assisted by Mark Grace, and on the mound, just beginning what would prove a 300-victory career, the superb control pitcher Greg Maddux. And on that note—with an inside strike, nipping the corner, we'll take our leave of the eighties.

Lynn Nolan Ryan, Jr.
(b. 1947)

Nolan Ryan had a record-tying twenty-seven-year career as a Major League pitcher. Many of the pitching records he set will likely remain on the books for some time. Ryan is ranked first in baseball history with 5,714 strikeouts. Ryan leads the Major Leagues with seven no-hitters, and is tied with Bob Feller for twelve one-hitters. He also pitched eighteen games in which the opposing teams managed only two hits.

Ryan's fastball was recorded at over 100 miles per hour even late in his career, when he was well into his forties. Dubbed "The Ryan Express" by the press, Ryan had a career win-loss record of 324-292. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1999 with 98.2 percent of the votes on the first ballot.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did baseball adjust its playoff format to account for the 1981 players' strike?
2. How did the rise of professional basketball affect the demographics of professional baseball?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

Lowry, Philip J. *Green Cathedrals*: *The Ultimate Celebration of All 271 Major League and Negro League Ballparks Past and Present*. Rev. ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992.

Wolff, Rick, ed. dir. *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Lecture 13:
The 1990s

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

For my money, despite the most severe and damaging labor problems ever to plague baseball, including the strike that wiped out the 1994 World Series and which to some degree truncated the 1995 season as well, the baseball of the nineties was exciting as any ever played. I like the power game, and most fans like the power game—attendance flourished in the nineties despite all. And the power game has never been stronger than in the nineties. Never even all that close.

There were several reasons for the home-run explosion of the later nineties. One, which no one ever mentions, on the theory that the talent level at any given time is more or less equivalent to the talent level at any other given time, is the players involved. And this caveat, one must concede, has a good deal of merit. Up to a point. There is little doubt, in my mind at least, that the very best athletes of any era would flourish even now, born into current conditions. But that being said, there is also no doubt that across the board, athletic performances now far surpass what they were 100 years ago or even a generation ago. This is absolutely unmistakable in time-based sports like track and swimming. But it is pretty obvious elsewhere too. I don't know for sure how the Bob Cousey-era Boston Celtics would fare against one of today's top NBA teams, but it isn't difficult to imagine. Things have changed. And not least, I suspect, in baseball, where in the 1890s the average player stood about 5′8″ or 5′9″ and weighed about 160. Now the figures are more like 6′2″ or 6′3″ and 220. But even so, the very best players of an era, the Honus Wagners, the Babe Ruths, the Oscar Charlestons—well, they would surely thrive. But Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Ken Griffey, Alex Rodriguez, and, above all, Barry Bonds? I cannot believe that they were and are not something special. Steroids or no steroids, that is quite an assemblage—and it is, I think, worth remarking, that the use of steroids, however pervasive it was or was not, was by no means confined to the very best players. Other people used them too—lots of other people—and they didn't hit 60 home runs. No, whatever else may have been going on, these players were—and are—just good.

But there were, assuredly, other factors at work—and not just steroids and not just talent. For one thing, up until the nineties, weight-training was not even close to all-pervasive. The idea was that it would make you "muscle-bound" and destroy your finesse. And a look at the physique of even the sluggers of by-gone eras—even, say, a powerhouse like Mickey Mantle—reveals the difference. They don't look "cut." Today's best players are simply stronger, and not by any small margin.

Also very influential was the demise of the "cookie-cutter" stadium, made, for the sake of efficiency, to accommodate football as well as baseball, often with turf, and, with—football in view—a great deal of space in foul territory, the better to convert foul balls into outs—and regular, 330′, 400′, and 330′ outfield fences. As such fields were gradually replaced with self-consciously "retro" parks, made only for baseball—the prototype, of course, was Camden Yards in Baltimore, but the nineties saw the construction of no fewer than ten all told—a whole lot of hits and whole lot of homers came back into baseball.

More Changes in the Game

Yet another factor was an adjustment, if not in the rules, then in their enforcement. During the nineties umpires cracked down on "brushback" pitches. For generations pitchers had been accustomed to "protect" the inside of the plate by throwing at batters who dug in too close to the plate. During the nineties that was no longer tolerated, and as a result, hitters were able to cover the outside corner of the plate better than ever before—which led to more opposite-field hits. And the prevalence of more or less unbreakable aluminum bats at the sub-professional level meant that hitters had learned to jump on inside pitches that might before have shattered the bat. Sometimes they still did—but sometimes the batter got a hit even so.

The game changed in other ways as well. In 1993, the National League expanded, adding the Colorado Rockies and the Florida Marlins to the League. And in 1998 baseball expanded again, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays going to the American League, and the Arizona Diamondbacks to the National. For scheduling reasons—it is difficult to work out schedules for an odd-numbered league in which all teams cannot play each other at once—the Milwaukee Brewers in 1998 became the first team in more than a century to switch leagues, moving from the American to the National. In 1994, baseball also expanded the playoff structure, dividing both leagues into East, Central, and West divisions, with, as a wild-card team, the club that compiled the best non-division-winning record entering what was now a two-tier playoff system. In addition, in 1997, baseball introduced regular-season interleague play, which proved successful from the very outset, both financially and otherwise.

The Big Strike and the Great Change

The 1994 player strike with the loss of the 1994 World Series was the most damaging series of events confronted by baseball since the 1919 Black Sox scandal. The strike, as usual, represented a confrontation between players and management with the added complication that over the past decades television revenues had become both immense and very unevenly distributed, so far, in particular, as local cable contracts went. The New York metropolitan area has twenty million people, give or take. Los Angeles and environs has well more than three quarters of that. Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, and Cleveland are closer to a tenth—a really substantial disproportion. The ensuing problems, and there are an array of them, have not really been resolved to this day. One is balancing franchise revenues and salary costs. Major-league players today are very well compensated, far better compensated, even taking inflation into account, than ever before. But then again, franchises, especially big-city franchises, take in a lot of money. Some teams,

though, much more than others, and more even than disproportions in paid attendance might suggest. Which becomes a threat when it begins to endanger at least rough parity. Because, contrary to what you might expect, people begin to lose interest even in a winning team if it wins all the time by ridiculous margins. In baseball, at least, a team with an .800 winning percentage is *too* good.

In any case, the fallout from the big strike, if nothing else, has thus far prevented a recurrence, but nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath a good many fans were disaffected. What drew them back, in large part, was the astonishing offensive barrage, which peaked in 1998 with the epic home-run duel between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. McGwire in particular, never a small man, by the mid-90s, looked really huge, and he hit really huge home runs—staggering, towering, Ruthian drives to the deepest reaches of the ballpark. In 1996, he took the American League homer title with a lifetime best of 52. The following year, in 1997, dividing his time between Oakland and St. Louis, he hit 58, 34 with the Athletics and then another 24 with the Cards. So the table was set and expectations were high even before the 1998 season began. And McGwire didn't disappoint. Neither did Sammy Sosa, for that matter, which, it must be confessed, was a bit of a surprise. Sosa, a Dominican and a much smaller man, had taken longer to reach his potential. A free-swinger, he had always shown at least the promise of power, but in his first few years in the majors revealed more potential than achievement. Nonetheless, he stayed within striking distance of McGwire, winning lots of friends with his cheerful, up-beat demeanor. And on the last weekend of the season, he tied McGwire, at 66 homers each—both players having already put to rest the contested record of Roger Maris (Maris's family members were in fact on hand to congratulate McGwire when he finally passed Maris's mark). McGwire then hit four more homers, to take the record to an even 70, all the while maintaining a respectful, balanced frame of mind, at least when dealing with the media, which won him many admirers. It is only in retrospect questions of steroid use have to some degree at least tarnished the magic of that summer. At the time it was great and just the tonic baseball needed.

McGwire, indeed, went on to hit another 65 the following year, while Sosa followed with 63, and then with 64 in 2001. The nineties, in fact, saw, by a wide margin, more 50-homer seasons than any previous decade. From 1965, when Willie Mays hit 52, until 1990, when Cecil Fielder of Detroit hit 51, the only player to pass 50 was George Foster of Cincinnati with 52 in 1977. In the nineties, though, the floodgates opened. It wasn't just Sosa and McGwire. Ken Griffey, Jr., twice hit 56 for Seattle. And Albert Belle of Cleveland, Brady Anderson of Baltimore, and Greg Vaughn of San Diego all reached the 50 mark.

Dynasties and Outstanding Players

It wasn't only home runs, however, or only offense. The nineties boasted some really outstanding pitching as well. Both Roger Clemens, for Boston, Toronto, and New York, and Greg Maddux, for the Chicago Cubs and Atlanta, continued at the top of their game. Maddux, in fact, once arrived in Atlanta, anchored what was probably the greatest long-term staff ever fielded. Teaming up in 1993 with Tom Glavine, John Smoltz, and a variety of others,

Maddux helped to establish what proved to be, at the divisional level at least, the most durable baseball dynasty ever. The Braves won seven division titles during the nineties, and beginning in 1996, went on to garner eleven straight. That's pitching. Emerging over the course of the decade in Los Angeles and Montreal, and reaching his peak in Boston in the very late nineties and beyond was Pedro Martinez, a pitcher in the Mike Cuellar, Juan Marichal mold, though at his best, arguably, better than either, whose bewildering pitch assortment, timing, and control left hitters baffled. And rounding into top form in Seattle and, at the end of the decade, in Arizona, was the tall, gangly Randy Johnson, at his best the most intimidating and overpowering pitcher I have ever seen—including Nolan Ryan, including Bob Gibson, including even Sandy Koufax. All of these folks were first-magnitude stars.

And it wasn't only Atlanta that founded a dynasty. The Cleveland Indians had been wandering the wilderness for the requisite forty years when they built Jacobs Field and started to win, taking five straight divisional titles at the end of the decade and selling out virtually every game. The outstanding players on the best Cleveland teams were the young Manny Ramirez, an all-around hitter of blinding talent, power-hitting Jim Thome, the moody Albert Belle, Kenny Lofton in center, and Omar Vizquel playing a very fine shortstop. The Indians twice made it to the Series, only to fall victim to Atlanta and then, in 1997, to surprising Florida.

Early in the decade, the tiny-market Pirates were strong, featuring Jay Bell, Bobby Bonilla, Andy Van Slyke, and the man who would go on to become, on a statistical basis, the most imposing offensive player since Babe Ruth, the young Barry Bonds.

And other teams fielded some outstanding players. Most impressive, as a hitter at least, for most of the decade, was big Frank Thomas of the White Sox, 6′5″, somewhere just under 300, and, all things considered, a player whose record recalled the careers of Lou Gehrig and Jimmy Foxx. In Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell, the Astros had two players who would go on to Hall-of-Fame careers—a prediction at this point, but I do not expect to be proved wrong. The Dodgers had hard-hitting catcher Mike Piazza. The Braves, infielder Chipper Jones. Toronto and the Indians, Roberto Alomar. The Yankees had Derek Jeter. And the Seattle Mariners, in addition to Ken Griffey and Randy Johnson, the young "A-Rod," Alex Rodriguez, the best hitting shortstop since Arky Vaughn, if not, indeed, since Honus Wagner. It was a great decade for stars, all positions, all flavors.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What reasons lay behind the late 1990s home-run explosion?
2. To what extent did the Mark McGwire-Sammy Sosa home-run chase "save" baseball?

Suggested Reading

James, Bill. *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Charles C. *Our Game: An American Baseball History*. New York: Holt, 1991.

James, Bill, and Jim Henzler. *Winshares*. Morton Grove, IL: Stats, 2002.

Lowry, Philip J. *Green Cathedrals*: *The Ultimate Celebration of All 271 Major League and Negro League Ballparks Past and Present*. Rev. ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992.

Wolff, Rick, ed. dir. *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Lecture 14:
To the Present

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bill James's *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract.*

ay what you will about Barry Bonds—and plenty of people have plenty to say—on a statistical basis at any rate, his first seasons during the 2000s are offensively the match or the superior of any ever recorded. Period. They are simply mind-numbingly good. Barry Bonds, to put the matter gently, does not have a media-friendly personality, and all sorts of questions swirl around him. But the numbers are the numbers. Whatever he did, others did it too, and they didn't accomplish what Barry Bonds accomplished. That doesn't make him a role model. But it does make him a terrific player. Steroids make you strong, but in and of themselves, they don't make you hit. And Barry Bonds has always hit. He was a great player early and he was a great player late. Among the very greatest.

For the first decade and more of his career, people often forget, Bonds was a superlative base-stealer. And from very early he has had an outstanding batting eye. He just didn't swing at bad pitches, not that in his later career he very often saw anything but. He has, as a result, eight times led the league in on-base-percentage and ten times led the league in walks. Many of these last are admittedly intentional. But by no means all. And in any case, people are intentionally walked for a reason. That too is an offensive contribution.

Bonds's 73 home runs in the 2001 season are his most obvious headline achievement, and that same year he recorded an .863 slugging average, a figure exceeded only by Babe Ruth in 1920 and 1921. Just as impressive, in their way, are two figures from the 2004 season. Before Barry Bonds, Babe Ruth held the single-season record for walks with 170 in 1923. Bonds has exceeded that mark three times, with 177, 198, and, in 2004, a staggering 232. As a result, he recorded by far the highest single-season on-base percentage ever with a figure of .609. And it was not like Bonds was only getting walks—like he wasn't getting any hits. On the contrary, during the two years in which he garnered the *most* walks and recorded his highest on-base percentages, he also led the league in batting, hitting .370 in 2002 and .362 in 2004. True, with Bonds in-house, though the Giants have three times won the division title, they have never won the pennant or the Series. And true, there are a lot of questions. And true again, Bonds has most emphatically not been able, and indeed, has not seemingly tried, to turn these most impressive marks into the sort of adulation enjoyed by players like Babe Ruth or Willie Mays. Or for that matter Cal Ripken and Ken Griffey—or even Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. But by the numbers—and all of the numbers, not simply home runs—he stands, as an offensive player, high above any of his contemporaries—and by that standard, at least, high above pretty much everybody else, except for Ruth, Wagner, and maybe Ted Williams as his early best.

Beyond Bonds

Throughout most of the decade, Barry Bonds and his doings were a leading story, but outstanding—and controversial—as he has been, he was by no means the only story. From 2000 to 2005—and indeed, from 1995 to 2005—Atlanta won the division title in the National League East. Throughout the period the Braves fielded their traditional fine pitching, but boasted some outstanding offensive players as well, most notably third baseman Chipper Jones and, from the Netherlands Antilles, Andruw Jones in center, who in 2005 contributed 51 home runs to the Atlanta cause. On a divisional level, at least, no team has ever won so consistently or so long.

The revivified Yankees proved almost as dominant in the American League East, taking the division title, 1998 to 2006, and taking three straight world titles from 1998 through 2000. The 1998 team, indeed, was one of the strongest on record, winning 114 games during the regular season and going on to down the San Diego Padres for the title. Throughout the period, shortstop Derek Jeter was a Yankee mainstay, with a varied cast in support, among them catcher Jorge Posada, outfielder Bernie Williams, reliever Mariano Rivera, and, at one point or another, two of the greatest pitchers ever to play, Roger Clemens and, later, Randy Johnson, and with them, Andy Pettitte. From 2004 Alex Rodriguez joined the team, after three years playing for the Texas Rangers during which he recorded 156 total home runs, peaking with 57 in 2002, making the left side of the Yankees infield about as accomplished as shortstop-thirdbase tandem can be.

The Boston Red Sox, meanwhile, three times won a playoff slot as a wild-card team, and in 2004 won both the pennant and the World Series over the St. Louis Cardinals, finally exorcising the “curse of the Bambino” and ending a lifetime—more than eighty years—of post-season frustration. The Boston press-corps was nothing if not appreciative, and it is not inconceivable that at least some of the Red Sox regulars may have been a little overpraised, in gratitude, no doubt, for the team’s long, long yearned-for success. Be that as it may, no one was overpraising Manny Ramirez and David Ortiz, the offensive powerhouses of Boston’s blue chip teams, and in 2004 in particular, Boston benefited from the rare conjunction of two first-magnitude pitching stars, Pedro Martinez and Curt Schilling, to join long-term Boston pitching stalwart, knuckleballer Tim Wakefield. But, sad to say for the Boston faithful, by the 2004 Series, longtime favorite of Red Sox fans, shortstop Nomar Garciaparra had departed, after a distinguished career in Boston that included two batting titles.

The St. Louis Cardinals teams were consistently good, as has been their custom since the late twenties and the days of Branch Rickey, making the playoffs six times in seven years, and winning the Series over Detroit in 2006. And from 2001, the Cardinals boasted in first baseman Albert Pujols probably the best hitter of his generation thus far.

The Arizona teams of 2001 and ’02 in particular featured Randy Johnson at his devastating peak as a power pitcher—two earned-run-average titles and more than 700 strikeouts over those two years, as the Diamondbacks struck hard in the desert, winning divisional titles both years and taking the World Series over the Yankees in 2001. Curt Schilling joined Johnson as a pitching

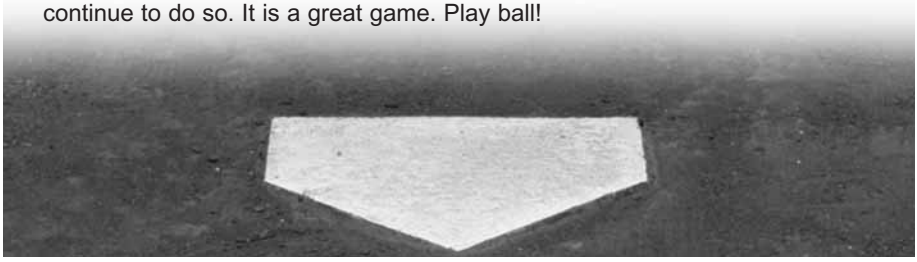
mainstay, and in fact matched Johnson's 45 wins in Arizona's title-winning years. And in 2001 outfielder Luis Gonzalez had a sudden access of power, hitting 57 home runs, a mark vastly exceeding his previous peak year of 31—and his subsequent best of 28.

Working quietly, with a low a payroll and a low profile, the Minnesota Twins also managed four divisional titles. It wasn't just smoke and mirrors. Pitcher Johan Santana got better and better, outfielder Torii Hunter covered a lot of ground in center, and as the decade progressed, catcher Joe Mauer and first baseman Justin Morneau began to emerge as stars.

The Seattle teams of the late nineties were among the most exciting ever to play. In Ken Griffey, Alex Rodriguez, and Randy Johnson, they fielded three first-tier, round-one Hall of Famers, and Edgar Martinez provided one of the most consistent and effective designated hitters of all time. Outfielder Jay Buhner and the steady, long-serving Jamie Moyer on the mound provided strong support. Then in 2001, with Griffey, Rodriguez, and Johnson departed, the Mariners did even better, compiling a record of 116-46, with Martinez and Moyer still very much in play, sparked by the acquisition of Ichiro Suzuki, who that year took both the batting and stolen base titles and likewise recorded a league-leading 242 hits. Three years later, in 2004, he did even better, winning another batting title with a .372 mark and setting an all-time single-season record for hits with 262, breaking the mark of 257 set all the way back in 1920 by St. Louis Browns first baseman George Sisler.

The Astros three times made their way to the playoffs, following up on their three straight Central Division crowns in the late nineties. In Jeff Bagwell and Craig Biggio, they too boasted a pair of Hall of Famers, with, after 1999, outfielder and first baseman Lance Berkman joining the party.

The mid-2000s, though, saw outstanding players all over baseball, for the Phillies, young power-hitter, Ryan Howard and second baseman Chase Utley, for the Colorado Rockies, splendid all-round hitter Todd Helton and young outfielder Matt Holliday. For the Angels, former long-time Expo, Vladimir Guerrero, for Florida, third baseman Miguel Cabrera, for the Mets, his counterpart, David Wright. The Tigers had outstanding young pitcher Justin Verlander. There were, in fact, as always, talented young players vying for position on almost every team. So as professional baseball works its way into the twenty-first century, there are plenty of grounds for optimism. The game is as exciting on the field as ever. Competitive balance, all-told, is strong. Baseball no longer reigns as undisputed queen of professional sports, but the last decades had proved that there is plenty of interest and attention to be shared. Football, basketball, and baseball, and even hockey, can prosper alike. The summer game still rules the summer. And, so I hope, will long continue to do so. It is a great game. Play ball!



FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. All other issues aside, can a player such as Barry Bonds be considered truly great without winning a title?
2. What does the future hold for baseball and how might the game change in the next century?

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