

The Premier of New York's Baseball Writers

John Foster, His Unusually Interesting Career and Many
Services to the National Game

By M. V. B. LYONS

The following little sketch is the first of a series devoted to the newspaper man in baseball. The hard-working scribes toil early and late in season and out of season recording the deeds of the baseball player. But, although they write continually about others, no one writes about them. Baseball surely owes a conspicuous debt to the writers who have made it famous. Among the list of well-known scribes whose names have become as familiar as those of the baseball heroes they describe there is none more widely read or more deserving of mention than the subject of the following sketch, Mr. John Foster of the New York Telegram.

JOHN FOSTER, official scorer at the Polo Grounds, scribe for the New York Telegram, associate editor of Spalding's numerous publications, and dean of the Sport Writers' Fraternity in Greater New York, has had a longer, more varied, and useful experience than generally falls to the lot of the baseball scribe. Mr. Foster was not always involved in his present nefarious occupation. He began life with a clean slate and apparently a fair chance. True, he was in a measure handicapped from the start, for he was born at Norwalk, Ohio, and his father was a Republican. These two things conspired in his early youth to give him that morbid turn of mind so essential to success in the profession of sport writer.

Norwalk is a town of some 12,000 population, sufficient to entitle it to a post office of its own. Aspiring from the first to become affiliated with the Federal Government, by skillful wire pulling with the two senators from Ohio, the sixteen representatives and the various powerful lobbying interests which represented the state at Washington, he secured the appointment of Postmaster. This official recognition of his talents came to him at the early age of eighteen years. Mr. Foster already had his eye fixed firmly on the presidential chair as

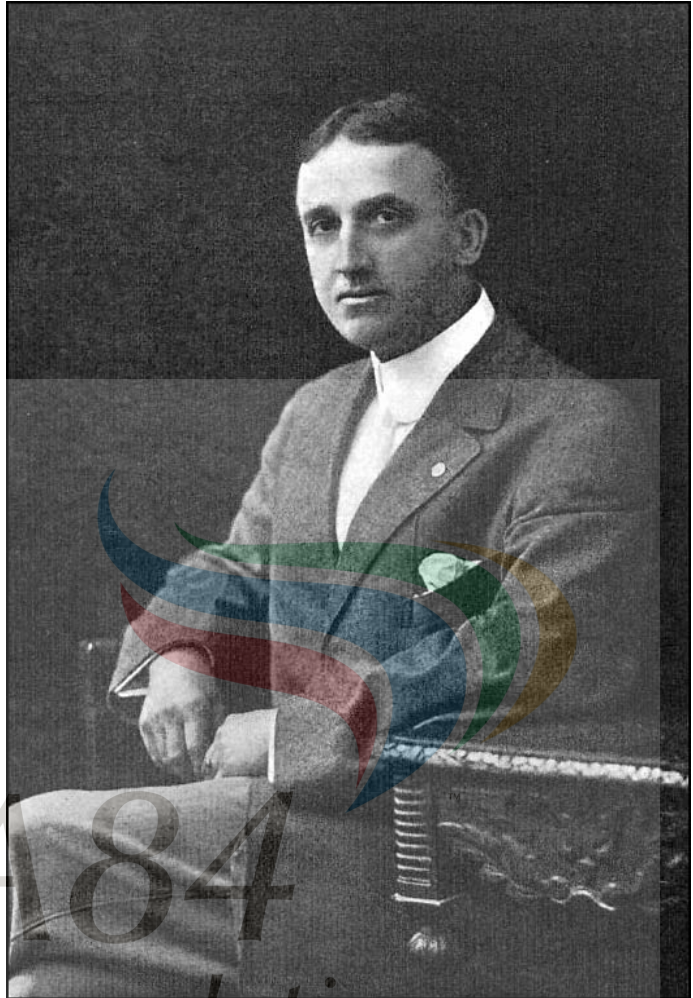
the next step in governmental preferment after his appointment as postmaster at Norwalk, but an incident occurred at this time which temporarily checked his ambitious plans and had a profound influence upon his future career. President Cleveland was elected, the Republicans were defeated and the administration became Democratic. "Were you fired?" I asked, "No," replied Mr. Foster, his head proudly erect, "I was not, I resigned before they had a chance to fire me."

Having lost his position with the government, it now became necessary for Mr. Foster to work for a living. After a thorough canvass of the reputable jobs which offered in that vicinity, and finding them filled, to their capacity, he was obliged by a process of elimination to seek such solace as could be found in the newspaper profession. Mr. Foster had had no experience in the newspaper game. True, he had dashed off in moments of intense inspiration certain immortal essays along the type of Joseph Addison and certain of these had appeared in the columns of country newspapers. But of real experience as a reporter Mr. Foster had none. With a mind singularly free from prejudice, unhandicapped by any previous experience, he applied for the position of State

Editor of the Cleveland Press and got it. Many people have found it advantageous to begin at the bottom and work up. Mr. Foster, with admirable originality, reversed this process and beginning as near the top as circumstances allowed proceeded to work down.

In 1887 Mr. Foster went to the Cleveland Leader. It was during this period of his life that he started on his present career of sport writer. However, it was not voluntary on his part and much should be forgiven him.

He had worked on various departments of the paper and was seated in the office one morning at peace with all the world harboring no single unfriendly thought toward anyone when the sporting editor came in. After making a few remarks which were brief but emphatic, this heavily burdened executive announced that the only man he had to cover the ball game had left and that he had no possible substitute to take his place. At that identical moment his eagle eye alighted on our unhappy hero and a gleam of almost human intelligence lit up his face. Mr. Foster felt the impending danger and shuddered. But the sporting editor was a relentless man and would not be swerved from his fell purpose. "Why, John," he said, "I hadn't thought of you. Why couldn't you do the work?" Mr. Foster's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He was speechless and the cold sweat started out on his forehead, but the sporting editor continued. "Yes," he said, "I guess you will have to do," and he looked at Mr. Foster doubtfully. Mr. Foster groaned. But that afternoon he appeared at the



John Foster

ball park and wrote an account of the game. He wrote about everything except what actually occurred on the diamond, and mentioned almost everybody's name except the players who were involved in the game. In short, he showed signs of so much promise that it was a foregone conclusion that he had at last found his rightful position and he has stuck to it most of the time ever since.

This was many years ago. Mr. Foster has been a sport writer longer than anyone else with the possible exception of Tim Murnane. But his iron constitution has carried him through and his thin, firm face may still be seen occupy-

ing a central position in the press box at the Polo Grounds showing new balls through a convenient hole in the wire netting to the waiting batboy with one hand and writing down errors in place of safe hits with the other.

And yet there is a certain grim justice in the fate which has overtaken Mr. John Foster. His innate depravity showed itself at an early age and he admits though not without a sigh of remorse that he played baseball when he still wore dresses. Also as a kid he was fond of writing up little accounts of the local games and took a great interest in all things athletic. He claims and there is no evidence to the contrary that he was the first boy in northern Ohio to learn how to pitch a curve ball. But that could hardly be proved against him in a court of justice. In 1896 Mr. Foster came to New York and has made the metropolis his residence ever since. In his long years of newspaper work he has occupied every responsible position on the staff save that of managing editor. His work in the sporting department has carried him all the way from sporting editor down. He has been an editorial writer for as much as a year and half at a time and filled the city editor's shoes (number nine) with good judgment. But he is firmly attached to sports and that department finds him more at home, more in his real element than any other.

In his long years of experience, Mr. Foster has made a careful study of most athletic sports. Much of his attention has been given to football and baseball, and he is an acknowledged expert in both these games. But he has also written articles on how to play whist and various other non-athletic sports. He has not only written articles on how to play these games as an expert should do, but, unlike most experts, he has actually played them himself and knows something at least of what he is talking about. "Yes," said Mr. Foster, "in spite of what I have written on whist, I must say I enjoy the game, but I can't say as much for poker. No," he said sadly, "I have found it much too expensive."

When the late Henry Chadwick died his place as editor of Spalding's library was given to Mr. Foster. As Mr. Chadwick had been called the "father of base-

ball," Mr. Foster logically inherits that title along with the position and is now "Father of Baseball No. 2." Mr. Foster has not confined his work in the sporting department to baseball and football alone, although he prefers those games to any other. He is also much interested in golf and tennis and admits that he is fond of horse racing. He was at one time interested in boxing, but he went west to see the Jeffries-Johnson bout and lost his interest. "It took me five weeks," said he, "to go out to Reno on that trip. It takes many people longer than five weeks when they go to Reno, but they go for other purposes. I took my trip to see a boxing match, but all I saw was two old men who spent about an hour on a very hot day hugging each other. Boxing may be a great game, but I couldn't see it in that light. I have no hobby," said Mr. Foster, "except work. That is also my chief amusement and my occupation." This may well be believed in view of the multiplicity of his duties. Among other things he has devised a special new scorebook for A. G. Spalding Co., designed as an improvement over the present method of keeping baseball scores. He has also devised a similar improvement in scoring football games, but the rules have changed so radically as to make its publication at present impracticable.

When the latest edition of Webster's dictionary was on the press the publishers decided to recognize baseball as a permanent institution and its particular phrases and expressions as a real part of the English language. With this end in view they consulted Mr. Foster and on his advice various new words peculiar to the baseball world have been incorporated in the accredited language. Many newspaper men have achieved great promise in baseball in departments outside their special profession of writing. Mr. Foster has not yet held an important position in baseball politics, but it is his own fault that he has not. While he himself never mentions it it is nevertheless a well known fact that he had at one time the opportunity to become secretary of the National League while on several occasions his name has been prominently mentioned for the presidency of that league.