

Voigt, David O., *America Through Baseball* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 216 pages.

Professor David Voigt has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the history of American professional baseball, and in this essay, seeks to demonstrate the various ways that professional baseball has reflected and does reflect the values and beliefs of the broader American society. In the first of his four sections, Voigt briefly shows how the history of the national pastime mirrors certain key themes in American social history. He points out that baseball's stability presents an image of changelessness which is reassuring to Americans living in an age of great flux. Changes in playing styles have been necessary to keep the sport popular, and Voigt ties these to changes in American social developments. He finds that such themes as the melting pot and the self-made man myth can be clarified by a study of baseball. A number of tenuous connections are made, particularly his tying baseball to the rise of feminism. While the assertions in this section are quite bold and certainly provocative, more evidence is necessary before the arguments can be fully accepted.

The second section is supposed to demonstrate how baseball mirrors some of the most sacred myths of American society, but it is really a study of certain of the principal myths in the history of professional baseball. Voigt argues that professional baseball did not begin with the "immaculate conception" of the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869, but that it had already evolved in the 1860's due to the demands of gentlemen club members for winning teams. Yet the substance of the chapter deals mainly with the story of the Red Stockings. The second myth Voigt explores is that major league baseball began in 1876 with the National League. The first major league was the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (1871) which Voigt says was operated on an artist-patron basis. Voigt presents an excellent analysis of the Boston Red Stockings, the first great major league team in which he explains the various methods utilized by Harry Wright to build

up his club. The third myth discussed is that of baseball's single sin, the Black Sox scandal. Voigt briefly indicates that the majors have been beset by scandal in a few earlier instances, most notably 1877 when four Louisville men threw several late season games. In the early 1900's, rumors of fixes occurred every now and then, and a number of cases of fixed games certainly did take place in the late 1910's.

The third section indicates how baseball's history reflects such basic American issues as nationalism, racism, and the union ethic. Baseball's leaders sought to secure recognition of their sport as the national pastime for presidents and other public officials, and they exploited this status, for their own interests. In return, politicians have sought to use baseball for their own interests. Urban politicians used ball clubs to make money for themselves and their allies. National politicians have used baseball to secure popular support of foreign policies and to promote our country abroad. In regards to American racism, Voigt argues that it is reflected by the racism in professional baseball. The pioneer black professionals of the nineteenth century were vigorously opposed by their white colleagues, who got the club owners to remove the blacks by 1898. An interesting, although undocumented assertion is that two major leaguers in the 1890's, Vincent Nava (Irwin Sandy) and George Treadway, passed the color line as respectively a Cuban and an Indian (I assume the source was Lee Allen, *The National League Story*). Voigt attributes the end of segregation in the 1940's to the growing political clout of black Americans and the need of ball clubs for black patronage. Voigt also asserts, but unconvincingly, that the boom in higher education produced a more enlightened public which opened the way for integration.

The fourth, and most imaginative section, deals with the changes that have occurred in American baseball and how these developments reflect the changing patterns of American culture, particularly the changing nature of hero worship. Voigt claims that popular heroes reflect changes in society's values and norms. The argument is made that common folk can identify vicariously with heroes like King Kelly or Babe Ruth, men who led uninhibited lifestyles that they themselves would never dream of living. Voigt also indicates that Americans have always wanted to believe that opportunity exists for all in our society, and that the presence of ethnic Americans of humble origins in professional baseball is evidence which apparently proves that notion.

In addition, Voigt argues that the changing mass media have a very strong influence on the way fans experience baseball. At the turn of the century a fan could either attend the game or read about it in the newspaper. But the development of radio and television have greatly expanded the ways a person can get his sport. Each media presents a different version of the game and creates a different meaning for the

fan. Participating in the rituals of crowd created one kind of special experience. Reading the game in the press created another. Radio provided a totally different psychological effect. It was an intense emotional experience in which the drama was manipulated by the broadcaster. Yet it was also a highly imaginative experience for the fan had to create in his own mind a visual image of what was actually going on. Could the reality of a ball game match the fantasy world of radio?

The impact of T.V. has been particularly extraordinary. "Television is a cool medium which makes the viewer use all of his senses while actually becoming a participant in the event being viewed." It destroys the linear sense of history for fans. Contemporary heroes are exalted and the past stars are forgotten. Television has a major impact on the character of the sport, influencing not merely the starting time of the games, but even the location of franchises. It has provided an economic windfall for the majors, but at the cost of nearly destroying the minors.

A great deal of what Voigt says in this book is familiar to sport historians since several of the chapters have been published previously in learned journals. Consequently there is some overlapping of material. Voigt's prose is written in the sprightly style we have become accustomed to, but I think he goes overboard in repeatedly reminding his readers that the study of sport is a novel, yet legitimate field of social inquiry. There are a number of factual errors that mar the text. The Walker brothers were not barred from the major leagues in 1882 (p. 88), and the Federal League collapsed after 1915, not 1914 (p. 134). However the main problem is that in several instances Voigt does not fully establish his arguments or explain his ideas. Nevertheless, the book does succeed in demonstrating for the intelligent reading public the ways that baseball reflects many basic themes in American social life.

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