

Riess, Steven A. *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.

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Steven Riess, an Associate Professor of History at Northeastern Illinois University, has attempted in this book to make baseball historically respectable by drawing links between the sport and its image and the main elements of American culture during the first generation of the twentieth century. *Touching Base*, an outgrowth of Riess' University of Chicago dissertation and several subsequent articles in scholarly journals, largely succeeds in telling us not only what baseball was like in the early 1900s but also what folks back then thought it was like. The major thesis of the book is the substantial disparity between actuality and mythology, or, as Riess terms it, the "ideology" of baseball.

By 1900, baseball had developed into the most popular spectator sport in the country. Rules and record-keeping were reasonably standardized; the sport was expanding into the minor league, amateur, and college levels, and new, large, permanent parks built of fireproof materials were on the horizon. Clearly, baseball was here to stay. Moreover, by this time, baseball owners and sportswriters had created the notion that baseball was Good and that association with the sport led to "individual self-improvement and national betterment." It must have been marvelously heady stuff for the owners and writers: as they convinced themselves and others that baseball was the all-American game, more people came to see it played, and as more people came, there was the obvious evidence that baseball must indeed be Good (or else why would people come?). According to the mythology, baseball had several social functions. It fostered community integration, it was a safety valve allowing people to rid themselves of aggression, it was a true expression of democracy, it built character by displaying admirable role models and it was a benefit to public health.

Riess destroys the mythology of baseball by analyzing the major elements of the game: the fans, the owners, and the players. The notion that anyone could and did go to a ball park and enjoy a game is not supported by the evidence, which suggests that most baseball fans were white middle-class people who worked at white-collar jobs that gave them both the money and leisure time to go to a ballgame. Working-class people did not have the free time to go (especially before Sunday baseball became common) nor could they afford the admission charge. And to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, trying to learn a new language and survive in a new society, baseball was irrelevant.

Although it would be nice to continue to regard the early team owner as a nice, honest, upstanding, civic-minded fellow, concerned for the welfare of his community, we learn that the reverse is true. Club owners were typical

urban businessmen of their time, interested in turning a substantial profit for themselves, and not at all reluctant to strike an advantageous, if corrupt, deal with the local political machine or traction company. Similarly, the movement to permanent, fireproof ballparks demanded assurance that the site was and would remain desirable. This led to more deals but also struck a blow for urban reform in the sense that the new ball parks were safer. Finally, the political struggle to win legislative permission to play professional baseball on Sunday was important to owners since Sunday was often the only day the working-class fans could come to the park. Although it took different lengths of time in different parts of the country, legislators were finally convinced that the allegedly beneficial effects of watching a baseball game on Sunday outweighed the godliness attributed to spending the day in prayer and contemplation.

The myth of baseball's role as a vehicle of upward social mobility occupies a long chapter in *Touching Base*. Early twentieth century Americans were led to believe that ballplayers came from rural areas, and had only scant education and financial resources. For the typical player, then, professional baseball represented his entry into wealth and status. Using computer-assisted statistical techniques based on a survey taken of former players, Riess concludes that most ballplayers came from urban middle class origins and had an above-average level of education. Those submerged groups who might have profited most from the potential social mobility in professional baseball—southern and eastern European immigrants and blacks—were almost completely excluded, either by their own choice or by society's.

Riess' research is based on an assortment of manuscript collections, baseball guides and record books, government documents, contemporary periodical literature and newspapers, and secondary sources. Throughout the book, he focuses on baseball in Chicago, New York and Atlanta as case studies, and this adds much to his analysis. His writing is unspectacular but clear, although marred by an unfortunate tendency to overuse awkward synonyms such as "pasteboard" for "ticket," and "magnate" for "owner." But these are only minor distractions from a well-researched study.

A more bothersome problem relates to the subtitle, "Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era." For the historian, the progressive era refers to those fifteen or twenty years or so before World War I when the political reform movement known as progressivism was at its zenith. Riess, of course, knows this and acknowledges his debt to various scholars of progressivism in the end notes to two different chapters. However, it is not clear throughout the book whether Riess is simply describing baseball during the progressive era or relating the game to progressivism. At times, he makes direct reference to a specific progressive goal; at other times, he misses the

opportunity to pursue that theme. For example, it would be interesting to know how club owners fared in cities such as Detroit, Toledo, or Cleveland, which were well-known for progressivist city administrations, particularly in comparison with the machine-run cities of Chicago, New York and Atlanta. Riess' discussion of the purposeful exclusion of blacks from professional baseball would have profited by reference to progressivism's blind spot toward blacks.

Nonetheless, *Touching Base* achieves its purpose of demonstrating clearly the disparity between the myth and reality of early twentieth century baseball. Steven Riess has made a fine contribution to the literature of sport history and has helped to move sport studies and American history closer together. For this, all historians interested in sport should be grateful.

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