

Levine, Peter. A. G. *Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. xv, 184. Notes, bibliographical note, index. \$16.95 (cloth)

This book is accurately titled. What Peter Levine has produced is less a biography than a history of one man's involvement in the rise of baseball as a business and as an activity acceptable to the urban middle classes of late 19th Century America. His choice of Albert Goodwill Spalding is apt. More so than any other single figure, Spalding participated significantly in almost every facet of baseball's transition from genteel amateurism to "National Pastime." He began as a hometown pitching hero and later became one of the earliest stars of professional baseball. Then, as manager and eventual owner of the Chicago White Stockings, Spalding helped the fledgling National League become established. By the early 1880s, he was perhaps the most influential figure in the League and subsequently served as its president. In 1876, he and his brother founded the sporting goods firm which was to make them rich and preserve the family name to this day. Spalding's life was a Horatio Alger tale come true; he attained both success and respectability. But Levine is primarily interested in what Spalding's career reveals about American society and culture as the Victorian Age was giving way to the Progressive Era. The author uses Spalding to write about baseball in light of the larger trends at work in society. To capture all this in so short a text is a forbidding task. Yet to a substantial degree Levine has succeeded in doing so.

The book's dominant theme is its emphasis that baseball reflects larger cultural trends and concerns. Levine writes from the perspective of a social historian rather than a baseball chronicler. He benefits from the work of Wiebe, Boyer, Clark, Bledstein, Rodgers, Lears and others who have analyzed American society and culture in the late 19th Century. Thus he links the organization of the National League in 1875-76 to the rising emphasis on professionalism in America and explores cogently the ways in which baseball met the needs of the urban middle class. Its members came to see baseball as good preparation for life, since they believed it taught the value of organization, efficiency, expertise and teamwork. The game was also deemed valuable for providing the sort of

healthy relaxation that increasing numbers of Americans were coming to view as beneficial. As the product of a thoroughly middle class Midwestern background, Spalding well understood the anxieties and expectations of his peers and worked shrewdly to shape and portray baseball in a manner they would find appealing. In this regard, Levine tries to make more of the world tour Spalding organized than the evidence will bear, but he offers abundant proof of his point in Spalding's rhetoric and actions. Spalding's obsessive effort to prove that baseball was uniquely American in origin, which resulted in the Doubleday legend, is but one example.

The book is also valuable for its depiction of Spalding the businessman, the very model of an American entrepreneur in the age of enterprise. He was alive to opportunities and shamelessly exploited his influence within professional baseball for the benefit of his sporting goods firm. Spalding was the first sports retailer to integrate vertically, backward, when he bought into a manufacturing firm. He also moved aggressively to gobble up vulnerable competitors and diversify his product line. The "Spalding Plan," introduced in 1908, aimed to rationalize the market by mandating uniform prices for retailers and customers. What effect this had on price levels is unclear, but Spalding's insistence on maintaining quality is beyond question. All this effort brought him ample reward. A company begun with an \$800 loan from his mother was incorporated at \$4 million sixteen years later. As always, Levine is astute at linking Spalding's activities to overall trends, and here he is if anything too modest about his subject's achievements.

Levine's emphasis on cultural context creates an imbalance within the book. It would benefit from somewhat greater attention to Spalding's personal life and to the way baseball was played. Part of the problem is organizational. Levine has a habit of introducing important information at inappropriate points. Only after his account of Spalding's pitching career does Levine mention that the National League required everyone to pitch underhanded. Toward the end of a good account of the Brotherhood War, which occurred when dissident players attempted to break the reserve clause by forming a rival league of their own, Levine divulges that A. G. Spalding and Brothers had become the largest sporting goods firm in the world. Presented as they are, such items distract the reader more than they inform him. More seriously, some aspects simply are not covered. Upon the death of Spalding's first wife, who is invisible in this book, we learn that he had a lengthy affair which produced a son. Earlier Levine has discussed the value Spalding put on baseball as a developer of good moral character and a release for a boy's "natural vitality." Levine realizes that Spalding was probably projecting the benefits baseball had had on his own life to the society as a whole, and yet the affair and the child are never discussed in this regard. Indeed, only after Spalding has retired do we get much of an account of his life away from professional sport and business.

These are not trivial shortcomings, but they are offset by the book's strengths. Similar in emphasis to Steven Riess's *Touching Base, A. G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball* is more succinct. Combining social and business

history in a readable fashion, it is a serious candidate for course adoption should a paperback edition appear.

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