

Frommer, Harvey. *Primitive Baseball: The First Quarter-Century of the National Pastime*. New York: Atheneum, 1988. Pp. 135. No footnotes, no index. \$17.95.

Harvey Frommer, professor of speech at the City University of New York, has a Ph.D. in communications from New York University and has authored more than 20 books, most of which deal with baseball. *Primitive Baseball: The First Quarter-Century of the National Pastime*, is a short account of the game prior to the beginning of the modern era in 1900. It is divided into three sections: history [60 pages], sketches of leading players and teams [44 pages], and rules, equipment, and other accoutrements of the game [31 pages]. The last two parts, though brief, are entertaining and informative.

The historical section, however, is too short to provide the reader with a very good account of the game's early years and is marred by several factual errors. Frommer gets mixed up when discussing the 1869 Cincinnati club, the first all-professional team. He has Asa Brainard, the pitcher, playing outfield and Cal McVey, the outfielder, pitching. Someone named Dave Birdsall, who was not even on the team, is listed as an outfielder. Charles Sweasy, the second baseman, is called Cal. Harry Wright, organizer-manager of the team, is mentioned as a sometime pitcher, which he was, but he was also the regular center fielder, which is not mentioned.

The 1884 Union Association causes some difficulty. On page 41 Frommer notes that there were 34 teams in the Union Association, that eight cities had two Union Association teams, and Philadelphia even had three teams in the league. Of course, the Union Association had only 13 clubs (eight original franchises, five of which were transferred to other cities) and there was no more than one to a city. What the author meant was that there were 34 teams in the three major leagues in 1884, 13 in the Union Association, 13 in the American Association, and eight in the National League. Viewed this way, eight cities had teams in two of the leagues and Philadelphia had a team in each of the three leagues.

In discussing the formation of the National League in 1876 the author explains very ably the provisions of the constitution. But he says on page 21 that "the players would now be tightly bound to their clubs." This, certainly, was a distinct improvement over the chaotic practice of "revolving," which characterized the old National Association. However, "reservation," or the "reserve clause," was not included in the original National League constitution, hence players could still revolve, although not during the course of a season. Later, on page 43, Frommer describes the origin and the operation of the reserve clause, which was first instituted on a limited basis in 1879. However, it is a little misleading to suggest the players were bound to their clubs in 1876.

Frommer devotes seven pages of the history to the inter-league post-season series between the champions of the National League and American Association, 1882, 1884-1890. Yet he fails to mention the more celebrated "Temple Cup" series, 1894-1897. This omission might be justifiable on the grounds that

the early series was between the two league leaders, while the Temple Cup was only between the top two teams of one league. Still the Temple Cup was of some importance and should have been mentioned.

The Cleveland Spiders do not fare well under Frommer's pen. No one can deny that the 1899 Spiders were the worst team in the history of the game. But do not judge the Spiders of the 1890s by the collection of misfits which were fielded in 1899. Over the decade they were a very solid team. In 1892 they finished second, in 1893 they were third, in 1894 they were sixth, in 1895 and 1896 they were second, and in 1897 and 1898 they were fifth. Actually, in 1892, the National League had a split season and the Spiders won the first half, although they lost to Boston in the playoffs. During the four years of Temple Cup competition, the Spiders were involved twice, defeating Baltimore in 1895, but losing to the Orioles the following year.

Who played on these Cleveland teams of the 1890s? Cy Young, the winningest pitcher of all time, Jess Burkett, who hit over .400 three times, second baseman "Cupid" Childs, who hit .313 over 12 years, Shortstop Ed McKean, who hit .311 in 13 years, "Chief" Zimmer, one of the great catchers of all time, "Nig" Cuppy, who won over 20 games three times, and pugnacious "Patsy" Tebeau, the manager. There were other stars of the day, such as Jimmy McAleer, Jack O'Connor, and Bobby Wallace. The Indian Lou Sockalexis, after whom the later club was named, had a great year in 1897 before drink took him down.

One noticeable error is the statement on page 71 that Burkett and Rogers Hornsby were the only players in the history of the game to have three .400 years. Ty Cobb hit .420 in 1911, .410 in 1912, and .401 in 1922. Admittedly, the 1922 figure was in some dispute. One scorer gave Cobb .399, while the other gave him .401. League president Ban Johnson made the final decision: .401. And the first National Agreement in modern times was signed in 1903 rather than in 1902.

This reviewer dislikes "nit-picking" and tries to avoid it whenever he can. Some of the foregoing observations may be so classified. But it is his view that anyone who undertakes the writing of serious history should research his subject in painstaking fashion. It is not easy to believe that this was done in the present case.

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