

Zingg, Paul J., and Mark D. Medeiros. *Runs, Hits, and an Era: The Pacific Coast League, 1903-58*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994. Pp. 179. Notes, photographs, appendices, index. \$19.95 pb.

When major league baseball moved its operations westward for the 1958 season, it entered a domain where, for more than a half century, the national pastime was firmly rooted. From Seattle to San Diego, professional baseball on the West Coast built a tradition and competitive spirit that rivaled its counterparts to the east. Indeed, some argued that a “big league” already existed on the west coast. In many respects it did. Paul J. Zingg and Mark D. Medeiros’ *Runs, Hits, and an Era: The Pacific Coast League: 1903-58* chronicles the life of this memorable institution and how it personified urbanized western culture. During these years, Zingg and Medeiros argue, PCL baseball “transcended the ball games, providing a context for forging civic pride and bolstering competitive self-images” (p. 147). Zingg’s colorful text, along with several photographs and insets of selected episodes and information, paints a vivid picture of the charm, character, and often comical scenerios that contributed to the intimate relationships that grew between teams and the various communities that they represented. Moreover, the degree to which the league routinely argued its status as an institution on par with the majors in many ways reflected the traditional frontier attitude towards its arrogant counterparts to the east. On this count, PCL leadership was clearly a bond. Competitive amongst themselves, they acted in bipartisan fashion when dealing with forces beyond their realm. During the mid-1940s, for instance, league owners who sought major league recognition “insisted that all eight teams achieve big league status at the same time, thus creating an entirely new third major league, not just elevated status for a few of its clubs” (p. 110). These episodes, and so many others offered in this delightful story, serve as ingredients for twentieth-century western folklore.

Free of historiographical analysis and argumentative schools of thought (which at times undermine the human element in many narratives), readers are introduced to baseball as it stemmed from the region of the San Francisco bay during the immediate post-bellum period. From its genesis, however, baseball on the West Coast distinguished itself. Unlike its eastern competitors, baseball was not primarily urban-based in these early years. “Fierce competition between the Siskiyou Mountaineers of Ft. Jones and the Eureka Actives in California’s northern counties, . . . underscored the dramatic expansion and appeal of the game,” write the authors (pp. 3, 5). By 1878, however, baseball aficionados in San Francisco pioneered the first league on the coast—the Pacific Base Ball League (PBBL)—and lay the cast for furthering the professional game in years ahead. After years of organizational struggle, in 1903 the Pacific Coast League opened for business with geographical boundaries that stemmed from Los Angeles to Seattle. Throughout the years the league varied in its membership. However, the main core of its

traditional franchises characterized “the league’s remarkable stability and the intense loyalties and rivalries that stemmed from it” (p. 147). And during its heyday, the cast of characters who emerged, calamities that unfolded, and the bond between teams and the communities that emerged, reflected a warm and endearing Americana.

The PCL was baseball at its charismatic best. Players dubbed “Two Gun,” “Spider,” “Highpockets,” and “Ping,” to name a few, performed in neighborhood parks that “instilled images of community and democracy that were central tents of the game’s mystique” (p. 23). But the league was much more than simply comic relief. Many of its tightest pennant races were second-to-none in all of baseball history. And a number of the legendary players who later impacted the major leagues had some of their finest years in the PCL. Joe Dimaggio of the San Francisco Seals hit in 61 straight games, Ernie Lombardi of the Oakland Oaks batted better than .360 for three straight years, and Ted Williams of the San Diego Padres contributed 98 runs-batted-in to help his club win the 1937 championship. That they were local products of the communities for which they performed added to their legacy. In 1919, the league also created a precedent in stemming corruption. One year prior to the revelation of the celebrated “Black Sox” scandal, PCL president William H. McCarthy banned several players for gambling on games. Indeed, as Zingg and Medeiros claim, “Not only had the league already had its share of crooked behavior, but it had addressed it in a manner that provided an example for [Kenesaw Mountain] Landis” (p. 45). The league also propelled itself into a unique designation. In 1948, the PCL won a Four A status which, under professional baseball agreements, allowed a greater degree of maneuverability for the protection of its players. This designation remained intact until 1958 when the big leagues advanced to the Pacific Coast and, in effect, brought an end to an era.

*Runs, Hits, and an Era*, to be sure, does lend itself to some critical questions. The question of community comes to mind. For that matter, how was patronage defined? Indeed, each city within the PCL family had its own ethnic characteristics. Did these neighborhoods single out individual heroes based on their heritage and/or color? For instance, while the authors do cover the integration period more than adequately, they stop short of addressing its impact on the black community. How vast was the increase in attendance for most teams as a result of integration? If Jim Crow facilities existed outside of the ballpark, did PCL facilities also segregate inside its fences? How long did it take for the PCL to fully integrate?

California’s Latin community was another area that could have been explored in Zingg and Medeiros’ work. The PCL had franchises in regions where some of America’s largest Mexican American enclaves were implanted. These Latinos followed baseball, too. In fact, Spanish-speaking fans during the 1950s were avid supporters of Mexican pitcher Memo Luna of the San Diego Padres. To be sure, this experience provided a slight glimpse into

the future when, three decades later, a euphoria surrounding another young Mexican pitcher named Fernando Valenzuela would take hold. Also, how did the major leagues' move to the west impact PCL communities? It might have been interesting to incorporate various "letters to the editor," for example, from fans whose entire baseball upbringing was rooted in the PCL. Finally, how did the PCL fit into the Turnerian interpretation of the West? Did it characterize democratic values and independence, or was it simply a reflection of baseball's eastern aristocracy with a western flavor?

*Runs, Hits and an Era*, though, is a fine piece of work and for the right reasons. It is pleasurable reading and expands our knowledge not only in terms of sport history, but also provides deeper insight into the western experience. It is both informative and charming. With these elements in mind, Zingg and Medeiros's efforts clearly prove as successful as the league they described. The readers, however, will be the biggest winners who—as a result of this text—can learn of the PCL's important contribution to baseball and, on a larger scale, to American culture.

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