
ALEXANDER, CHARLES C. *Breaking the Slump: Baseball in the Depression Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Pp. 337. 34 Photographs. \$29.95 cb.

The Great Depression of the 1930s impacted the American game, causing it to modernize and recognize the creative forces of communications, technology, and organizational schema made possible by business forces in the twentieth century. Baseball began its slow changes from its family owned, mom and pop style of management, moving cautiously toward the corporate structure which came to dominate mid twentieth-century America.

Out of the crisis of the Depression and the economic exigencies that it heaped on the game, night baseball emerged as a regular answer to attracting larger and more diverse audiences to the major league game. Minor leagues and semi-professional baseball had played night games for many years, but owners of the major league franchises had feared for the purity of the game. The need for enhanced audiences overrode the purity issue and major league baseball began to be played occasionally at night.

In an attempt to stabilize player procurement issues baseball turned, under the leadership of Branch Rickey of St. Louis, to the creation of the farm system, a regular corporate model for product procurement. Though not universally accepted, the minor league systems adopted by the most successful franchises of the decade, the Cardinals and the Yankees, forced other teams to go that route as well.

The innovation that broadened the realm of the game more than any other, however, was radio, which was accepted, though not without controversy throughout the leagues in the 1930s. While night baseball and radio attempted to add revenue streams to the game, the farm system tried to add further corporate style efficiencies that would eventually cut costs.

The crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression had hit baseball hard. Attendance, which had been solid in the 1920s tilted downward sharply, as unemployed and underemployed persons were unable and unwilling to pay even the moderate costs of tickets. As a result, salaries for players were cut, sometimes sharply. Even stars saw their salaries spiral downward despite banner years of production. Coaching staffs were reduced. The White Sox and Reds had no coaches only the manager. Rosters were limited to twenty-three effective in May instead of June to save the cost of one player salary for one month. Minor league rosters were reduced by two, and limits were set on salaries in nearly every league. The only respite from such economic misery was the restoration of income, in 1933, from the sale of beer that was legal again.

Breaking the Slump tells the story of baseball in the 1930s with style, grace, and humor. Given what appeared to be a relatively dry topic, Alexander, a skilled writer, produces a charming and well-told tale of a game that saw the organization of Branch Rickey, the marketing of Dizzy Dean, the exploits of "Joltin Joe" DiMaggio, the brashness of Larry McPhail, the creativeness of Arch Ward, and the persistence of Satchell Paige not only preserve but also improve a game that could have been deeply harmed by the economic crisis of the 1930s.

By 1941 and the attack on Pearl Harbor, most major league operations had modernized. The Cubs still had no farm system and no lights for night baseball, and they suffered through the 1940s, and the 1950s, and the 1960s as a result of their recalcitrance. Some owners were still not convinced that radio would increase their audience, and they were sure that the new medium of television would not be a friend to the game.

Left alone by the baseball leadership were issues that focused on franchises that languished and were near moribund, most notably the Boston Braves and St. Louis Browns. Left alone were the African-American players who excelled in their segregated game, a topic not to be seriously tackled until the death of Kennesaw Mountain Landis. Some had contemplated the value of the "left coast" but that would have to wait until jet technology allowed quicker travel to Los Angeles and San Francisco. The game would be challenged by the war in the 1940s but had survived the economic wars of the 1930s in good stead.

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