

The Tragedy of Ban Johnson

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The career of Ban Johnson, founder and first president of the American League, was a mix of triumphant power and glory on the one hand, and tragic decline and defeat on the other. Rising from a Cincinnati sports desk in the early 1890's to the presidency of the Western League in 1894, Johnson polished that dull circuit into one of the shiniest objects in minor league baseball. Cracking down on rowdyism and umpire-

baiting, he made the Western a reputable and successful organization; he turned baseball into wholesome family entertainment.

But not content with being head of a mere minor league, Johnson planned to convert his Western League into a second major league. Conditions were ripe for the move in 1899-1900 when the National League dropped its four weakest teams, leaving valuable territory without baseball. At the time, moreover, a number of disgruntled players formed a union and expressed willingness to jump to a new league. The Western League became the American League in 1900 and moved to major status in 1901. Johnson hoped the National would peacefully accept the American as co-partner, but it did not. A bitter fight ensued in 1901-1902, ending in the 1903 peace agreement, wherein the American League dictated surrender terms to the National.

As the major force in the new National Commission, set up by the peace agreement to administer baseball, Johnson became the czar of the game for nearly two decades. In those "imperial years," he arranged for the sale of clubs, hired and fired managers, negotiated trades between clubs, and blacklisted players, managers, and umpires. An example of this power occurred when Johnson successfully blocked the election of John Montgomery Ward as president of the National League in 1909.

It is not argued that baseball would have collapsed without Ban Johnson, but it should be noted the the game grew and prospered greatly in the first two decades of the century when Johnson was at the peak of his power. And while he developed a horde of supporters who recognized the value of his contributions, he also built up an army of enemies, people jealous of his power and offended by his rulings.

Between 1915 and 1919 Johnson was involved in four controversial decisions which antagonized certain influential owners in both leagues, and led directly to his downfall. In the first case young George Sisler was awarded to St. Louis rather than Pittsburgh, which infuriated Pirate owner Barney Dreyfuss. In 1918 Johnson irked the entire National League by awarding pitcher Scott Perry to the Philadelphia Athletics. The following year, the American League president awarded Jack Quinn to the Yankees which angered the White Sox, and tried to block the transfer of Carl Mays from Boston to New York, which angered the Yankees.

Johnson's "imperial years" were over. The three "insurrectos" in the American League stood ready to jump their teams to the National and break up the American if Ban's power was not curbed. The upshot was the creation of the office of Commissioner of Baseball, and the appointment of the celebrated federal judge, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, to the post. Landis was a tough, blunt autocrat, who demanded and got absolute authority. Clashes with the failing but stubborn Ban Johnson appeared inevitable.

The two cases which brought the Landis-Johnson rivalry to a head occurred in the fall of 1924 and in the fall of 1926. In the first of these, the Cozy Dolan-Jimmy O'Connell bribe incident, Johnson publicly berated Landis for his handling of the matter. Landis ordered that the American League owners either muzzle Ban or find a new commissioner. In a formal statement of December 17, 1924, the owners promised that Johnson's first act of misconduct would lead to his "immediate removal from office."

Ban behaved pretty well for two years, but in the fall of 1926 the final falling out came over the commissioner's handling of the Cobb-Speaker game-fixing scandal. Landis ordered a showdown meeting in January, 1927, but on the eve of the meeting, the American League owners gave Ban what was thought to be a permanent "vacation." But Ban returned to his post in the spring of 1927 and tried to exercise his former power. It was then that he was forced to formally resign in the most humiliating moment of his life. It was a sad and tragic end for a man who had contributed probably more than any other to the establishment of baseball as our national game.

Yet by the 1920's times had changed, while Johnson had not. He had antagonized too many people who were now eager to topple him to the ground. Failing health and frustration over his lost influence led him into errors and tactless confrontations with Landis, and he was doomed. Johnson should have either adjusted to the new

dispensation or gracefully retired. The tragedy was that he did neither, and sought desperately to hang on.

But he was not forgotten. When the baseball Hall of Fame was established at Cooperstown, New York in 1936, one of the first men elected for enshrinement, and properly so, was Byron Bancroft Johnson.