

Sunday Sport Comes to Pennsylvania: Professional Baseball and Football Triumph Over the State's Archaic Blue Laws, 1919-1939

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Following World War I, Pennsylvanians in large numbers plunged into sport, joining the rest of America in an unprecedented sports boom. Many Americans found the Sabbath a convenient and popular day for engaging in sporting activities, especially since Sunday activities—sporting or otherwise—had become commonplace during the war and acceptable in many areas due to the social changes of the 1920s. When Pennsylvanians turned to sport on the Lord's Day, they were confronted by the state's archaic blue law of 1794 which prohibited all sports and diversions on Sundays.

In the years following the Great War, several incidents indicated that the 1794 blue law and the public demand for Sunday sport were irreconcilable. Philadelphia participated in sporting pleasures in the city's parks on the Sabbath, while across the state in Pittsburgh, residents there enjoyed Sunday football. Sabbatarians in both cities reacted vehemently and initiated action to suppress these activities on the Sabbath. They were successful in temporarily keeping Sunday football out of Pittsburgh, but their effort fell short in Philadelphia as the courts ruled in favor of Sunday recreational activities in the city's parks.

These incidents popularized the Sunday sports issue and paved the way for professional baseball to challenge the blue law. In 1926 the Philadelphia Athletics tested the 1794 statute by scheduling a Sunday contest with the Chicago White Sox. The game was played without incident, but Sabbatarians protested and brought this issue before the courts. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1927, concurring with Sabbatarian charges, ordered the Athletics not to schedule any more Sunday games under penalty of forfeiting its charter of incorporation.

The Philadelphia Athletics scheduled no more Sunday contests, but the open Sunday advocates and the baseball lobby renewed their efforts in the Pennsylvania legislature. The Sunday sports issue came to a head during the 1931 and 1933 legislative sessions. In 1931 Representative Louis Schwartz of Philadelphia introduced a bill to move hours for delivery of milk on Sundays from 9:00 to 10:00 A.M. during the months of day light savings time. As the milk bill gathered support, Clinton A. Sowers also of Philadelphia attached a rider permitting baseball on Sunday afternoons. The baseball rider caused a tumultuous Sabbatarian response. Debate on the issue was fierce as Sabbatarians aroused just enough opposition to defeat the Schwartz bill.

Two years later the open Sunday lobby, returning in full force, generated the necessary votes to modify the 1794 statute, permitting baseball and football on Sunday afternoons between 2:00 and 5:30 P.M., if the voters of any locality approved. The electorate in Pennsylvania's metropolitan areas voted heavily in favor of Sunday sports at the November, 1933 elections. Professional baseball had to wait until the 1934 season for Sunday games, but professional football began playing immediately on Sundays in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, inaugurating the first legal Sunday sports in Pennsylvania's history.