

The rituals of baseball were regarded as a valuable source of social integration for adults. Fans were supposed to develop a strong sense of identification with their community (even though few, if any of the players came from their town). Participation in the rituals was said to provide a safety valve for their tensions. It was also thought to help acculturate immigrants.

The ability of baseball to serve as a means of integration and assimilation depended to a large degree on the ability of all people to attend games and participate in the rituals. However crowds at games were not representative of the social composition of cities. but were mainly comprised of leisured middle class males who could leave their offices in the afternoon. Most urbanites worked long hours each day except Sunday, and could not attend an afternoon amusement except on the Sabbath, a day when games were generally prohibited. And the cost of a fifty cent ticket was expensive for manual laborers. Only after World War I did crowds become truly heterogeneous and representative of urban populations. This was a result of increased wages, a decrease in hours of work, and the legalization of Sunday baseball.

Just as the public believed that baseball spectatorship was democratic, they thought that the recruitment patterns for ballplayers was also democratic. The ideology of baseball claimed that any hardworking young man with talent and perseverance could succeed. Baseball was viewed as an excellent source of social mobility for poor youths with limited opportunities for advancement.

In reality though, baseball was not an important source of vertical mobility. There were few positions available at the top at any given time, and most of them went to sons from either white-collar (39.6 percent) or farming families (21.8 percent). They were far better educated than most men their age since nearly one in five had attended college. Furthermore, none of them were black and just a handful came from recent immigrant stock. They were nearly all of native white, Irish or German backgrounds.

Reaction

by
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In “American Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era” (1895-1920) we have the third of Professor Riess’s papers on baseball in this era in as many meetings of NASSH. Because this one incorporates many of the points of Riess’s first paper linking major league club owners with urban politicians in much sleazy influence peddling, together with much from Riess’s second paper on the question of organized baseball functioning as a ladder of mobility opportunity for players of both “native” and immigrant backgrounds, this paper might be regarded as a summary of Riess’s recent work.

In this paper Riess rekindles these earlier points and adds new faggots to light up our knowledge of this era of American cultural and ongoing national character development. Among the newer points vouchsafed is the notion of American baseball as a *mass* entertainment institution capable of reflecting fundamental characteristics of the American

people and of reinforcing the world view of the times. Moreover American baseball by 1900 is portrayed as having successfully projected an image that is attuned to the temperament of the times, embracing values like the superiority of the American yeoman, or of individual success attending striving behavior, the status of hero going to successful strivers, the “jock myth” employed to get players to work harder to succeed, and the belief that playing baseball leads to fuller participation in the “good life.”

To particularize, Prof. Riess sees baseball’s image manipulators of this era trumpeting the game as a force for regulating the behavior of the citizenry, for Americanizing and assimilating immigrants and ethnics, for integrating communities, for democratizing institutions by allowing speedy vertical mobility, and for providing models in the form of consensus heroes.

Since the thrust of Prof. Riess’s work aims at demythologizing these and other claims as phony in greater or lesser degree, the message we get is a clear one. A conclusion is that either because of or in spite of such phony ideological baggage, baseball remained the national pastime throughout the Age of Reform.

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In playing the hazardous role of critical Walrus in the context of this seminar I trust I do not exceed poetic license in adding national character studies to Walrus ponderables!

Certainly no liberal minded sports historian who loves his subject wishes to quarrel with the thrust or conclusions of Riess’s paper. Nevertheless I feel a sense of uneasiness in reading the paper that prods me to challenge some of the assumptions. This is undertaken humbly with the full knowledge that I am guilty of similar critical lapses and in the hope that by venturing such criticisms an adequate essay might become a better one.

In targeting what I perceive to be weak spots in Prof. Riess’s arguments, I am moved by Prof. Jack P. Greene’s recent advocacy of a “new history” movement (a familiar label for what is at least the second such movement in 20th century historiography!). In identifying this new history movement which Greene says has arisen over the past decade, attention is being focused on the whole of human behavior at all levels of society. Special attention is directed to studying “collective mentalities” with attendant “belief systems and perceptual frameworks that determine the ways people interpret . . . their lives.” By this approach past historical priorities are reconsidered and traditional historical labels called into question. Areas of behavior like sports, once treated as frivolous, now are fair game for study and elucidation. But in so doing historians are cautioned to move in interdisciplinary directions and to avail themselves of insights from related disciplines such as the social sciences. To operate within this tendency demands a quality of intellectual boldness in order to answer the question “how much can plausibly be said on the basis of always imperfect sources.”

In putting Riess’s paper to this test let it be said at the outset that he does indeed manifest intellectual boldness. By tramping the thicket of national character studies, always an impressionistic venture, where the sources are most certainly imperfect and the conclusions hazardous, I credit him with a useful exploratory effort, but one that leaves several questions about alternative conclusions.

The most general of these questions has to do with employing the label of the Progressive Era as a device for interpreting this 25-year period of baseball history. In his fine book, *The Age of Reform*, the late Richard Hofstadter seemingly felt the same doubts about fixing a dynamic era of American culture with a static label. In his introduction Hofstadter wrestled with the ambiguity between the themes of reform and populism. The tension between those two ideologies had the grim effect of mixing reformist sentiments with a paranoid hatred of opponents. His study moved Hofstadter to call the era “an age of innocence and relaxation that cannot again be known.” Moreover, he found the reformist thrust that in that era aimed at reaffirming values like individual enterprise and institutional purification to be but another resurgence of similar sentiments that from time to time welled up throughout American history.

I wonder then, if employing the label Age of Reform the historian of sports is hampered by having to work with a static view of American society of the time. Far better, it seems to me, were he to forget the label and focus on the dynamic processes including those that at the time just happened to coax Americans into a purifying frame of mind. By identifying and then monitoring those processes that bring about changing beliefs, norms and values, rather than employing a strait-jacketing historian-made-mold might free one from essaying the awkward task of trying to impute to baseball history of 1895-1920 those special characteristics that might apply to the national political and economic scene—institutions which long were the chief focus and concern of the old historical style that invoked the label “Age of Reform.”

In the sociological imagination there is the notion of alternation that prods the critical thinker first into recognizing the rich variety of systems of meaning that operate in the complex American culture, and then choosing the best definitions to employ. In this paper I believe that the label “Age of Reform” ill fits; that it might be better to identify and to analyze the processes without preconditioning.

Given American baseball’s conservative drift that characterized the first two decades of this century, attempting to pin on the Age of Reform label is like donning a ten dollar suit. After all, there were no changes in major league franchise allocations after 1903, and I can think of few episodes in major league history that mirror the reformist impulses historians found in the political or economic arenas. Certainly there were few attempts to bring popular democracy to players, no successful player unionization movements, no telling assaults on the power structure (indeed, the single commissioner system invoked at the end of this era was positively reactionary, like a return to monarchy!), no calls for racial justice, no successful anti-booze campaigning, no social gospelling, save the move toward Sunday ball, and no discernible anti-war crusades among baseball men. Such classic themes of the Age of Reform hardly rippled major league baseball at the time which leads me to ask if a sport like major league baseball remained the national pastime as Riess claims, and if it functions as a mirror for peering into society at large, then baseball’s indifference to supposed reformist thrusts of this age seems to be telling us that society at large was also indifferent to the reformist spirit.

If this argument holds water, it would seem that the historian who essays the task of ferreting out Age of Reform themes in this era of baseball history is chasing a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finding that the historians’ themes do not apply makes the task of shooting down nonexistent myths easy, but it looks like an exercise in toppling strawmen.

A final critical thrust leads me to focus on Prof. Riess’s attempts to use concepts like mass society, American values, American community forms, and the making of heroes in the paper. Employing Greene’s “new history” methodology would call for a better understanding of these concepts by searching the rich literature of social science to gain broader perspectives. For his part Prof. Riess consistently assumes singular meanings for each of these complex ideas, giving the reader an overall false impression. On the notion of mass society, writers like Daniel Bell reveal the traps that an uncritical acceptance of that term provides. In the area of values writers like Robin Williams Jr., Don Martindale, and David Riesman could be profitably used to show the complexity of American values. Likewise Daniel Boorstin could be employed to show the diversity of American community forms in this era. And writers like Orrin Klapp, Boorstin, and others lay bare the rich diversity of American heroes, symbolic leaders, villains and fools. To study the polytypicality of American heroes is to understand that many Americans admired the drunken antics of Rube Waddell or Bugs Raymond!

In the light of such perspectives I think Prof. Riess takes too much for granted in employing singular definitions of such highly varying ideas. As such he lends a false consensus to the national character of the age.

For the moment this walrus is done with his discourse! I sincerely hope that my criticisms be taken in the interest of better sports history. I would expect no less from my

discussant were I the giver of the paper. I believe that the theme of our seminar “Baseball and the Academic Historians” requires that we invoke prevailing standards of historical criticism. Such an effort must continually be made if we are to keep the historical study of sport from languishing in the toy department of historiography.

Reaction

by

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Sport fans tend, by and large, to be rather on the conservative side. This is at least partly because they typically glamourize and idealize the past. Has there ever been a shortstop to rival Honus Wagner, a fastball to match Walter Johnson’s, a home run hitter who could equal the Babe, an all-around athlete who could compare with Jim Thorpe? For those over forty, the answer is invariably in the negative.

This conservative bent spills over into social and political arenas as well, so that rabid fans are not often found in the forefront of those advocating the liberalization of social or political institutions. Indeed, quite the opposite. Those in charge of professional sports have typically enshrined their pursuits in the mantle of Motherhood and the Flag, and players and fans—aided and abetted by sports writers—have enthusiastically followed suit.

Against this background, it is refreshing to realize that the two historians who have presented papers here this morning—Drs. Neel and Riess—have not allowed received folklore to hamper their objectivity as historians. Both document, in some detail, the fact that the early days of baseball were characterized by more than a little chicanery and no small degree of manipulation intended to serve financial ends. From these papers, the typical baseball fan would hardly recognize the glorified early days of America’s National Pastime that he has read about since childhood.

You may be surprised to hear this praise of muckraking—an honorable term—from one who, through *The Glory of Their Times*, has contributed at least to some extent to the nourishment of that very mythology. This apparent contradiction contains within it a methodological lesson that most historians know but that they need to be reminded of continuously. That lesson can be summarized in the form of two closely related propositions—namely (1) the better one gets to know a person, as an individual human being, the less objective one becomes about that person’s life and times. And, partly for that reason but for other reasons as well, (2) the broad sweep of history, including its underlying forces, can rarely if ever be brought into focus by concentrating primarily on the lives of one or a few of those who lived through the period, regardless of who they might have been or the roles they may have played.

This is not to say that personal memoirs or reminiscences have no value to historians. They do indeed, provided they are kept in their proper perspective. The old-time players I interviewed in *The Glory of Their Times* are glamorous today because they were there when it all began. But they rarely thought—then or now—about the role they were playing in American life. Nor did they ever take time out to reflect on the interrelations between their pursuits and the changes that the country was undergoing at the time. These are for the historian to unravel, and Neel and Riess have given us a promising beginning.