

# The United States Baseball League of 1912: A Case Study of Organizational Failure

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Within the contemporary context of player strikes, shifting franchises, and the rise and fall of professional sports leagues, our purpose in this paper is to explore and piece together the origin, development and fall of the United States Baseball League of 1912. Proposed as a third major league at that time and considered by many a major precursor to the Federal League of 1914-15, the U.S. League provides an excellent opportunity to study organizational failure.

Since the origin of established league play in 1876, professional baseball has been beset periodically by labor strife and attempts at league expansion. The classic examples of the Union Association (1884) and the Players League (1890) illustrate clearly that the major issues in player-initiated league expansion centered around the controversial “reserve clause” and its direct/indirect effects on salary levels. These undertakings were not successful and generally resulted in the established leagues “buying out” and co-opting the 2 or 3 strongest clubs in the defeated “outlaw” league.

By contrast, the United States League of 1912 was started by a group of men (“capitalists”) interested in cashing in on what they thought was a lucrative opportunity. After a series of false starts and several uncertainties, the league opened its 126-game schedule on May 1 with 6 of its 8 clubs located in major league cities. Hindered by lack of capital, rainouts, poor attendance and a limited number of highly-skilled, “name” players, the League folded after about one month of action. The standings on June 5, 1912 read as follows:

<i>Club</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>LPct.</i>	<i>Club</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>LPct.</i>
Pittsburgh . . . . .	19	7 .731	Washington . . . . .	6	7 .462
Richmond . . . . .	15	11 .577	Chicago . . . . .	10	12 .455
Reading . . . . .	12	9 .571	Cleveland . . . . .	8	13 .400
Cincinnati . . . . .	12	10 .545	New York . . . . .	2	15 .118

In analyzing the failure of this league organization, we have looked in some detail at the competing ideologies and comparative tactics of the two opposition groups - the United States League versus the Baseball Establishment (read the National and American Leagues). The United States League stressed the inherent “good” of baseball for all individuals and communities, and indicated that it wished to conduct its business in the accepted capitalist style - free competition in the marketplace. It emphasized the importance of fair play and gentlemanly conduct as the marks of its aspirations in setting up a new league. A key element of the position of the U.S. League was its intention to eliminate the “reserve clause” from its contract as a lure to players who would sign with the new league. It was stated frequently that the U.S. League intended to bring an end to “slavery in baseball.”

The Baseball Establishment returned the fire, with especially strong support for the necessity of the reserve clause as the basic underpinning of the national game. There was concern expressed for the evils of “cut-throat competition” which results when too many “sellers” enter the marketplace. It asked that the new league face the hard realities of supply and demand, predicting a quick end to their venture.

In terms of strategy and tactics, the owners of the United States League at first sought to obtain legitimate recognition from the Baseball Establishment. Instead they were met with scorn, ridicule and sarcasm. The officials of the established league attempted to “label” the newcomers as “outlaws,” while the new ball clubs did their best to reject such a label by constantly stressing the magnitude of their financial backing and the legitimacy of their plans. The U.S. League constantly leaked rumors about major events (e.g., the New York ball club would have its field on the roof of Grand Central Station) or rumors about big-name stars joining the league (e.g., Tommy Leach or Lave Cross as managers, Adrian “Cap” Anson as a player). The Baseball Establishment danced between ignoring the new league completely or announcing that “war” was imminent. Due to a combination of factors (e.g., lack of money, strong leadership and skillful players; bad weather; poor attendance; and inopportune timing, among others), failure appeared inevitable.

This case study has implications for management-labor relations and league structure in professional sports, fan reaction, and the general sociological importance of conflict as a social and integrative process.