

American Baseball: the Plastic Age, 1950-1976

by
David Q. Voigt
Albright College

Presented in outline fashion before the session "Baseball Research in Progress" were the highlights of a projected history of major league baseball's last 25 years.

The "leitmotif" of the era is the majors' attempted adjustments to sweeping changes in recent American history. Among the catalysts forcing change in the sport was America's changing internationalist posture which cast the nation as a buttress against aggression and which plunged America into wars in Korea and Vietnam. The indecisive outcome of both wars, and critical reaction to them, tore at America's international image as well as her nationalist fiber. Meanwhile advancing industrialism, producing changes in transportation, communication and consumerism democratized affluence. The new affluence wrought a harvest of change in social life, raising issues centering about militarism, consumerism, statism, racism, urbanism and the new plutocracy. No less significant were other issues such as the growing significance of formal education and the rise of the leisure ethic in American life.

Such whirlwinds of change buffeted all institutions including baseball. In the period 1950- 1976 three powerful external challenges forced baseball men to reshape their commercial enterprise. These included the civil rights movement which soon involved ethnics and women as well as blacks; the TV revolution in communication; and the democratization of fun-seeking which was part of a groundswell of increasing democratic participation.

In the 'fifties, baseball leaders faced the backlash of these challenges. Blacks joined team rosters in ever greater number, quickly excelling in performance. By the 'sixties baseball was caught up in movements for fuller equality for blacks and ethnics along with concomitant demands for higher pay for all players. At the same time the owners faced the challenge of the television revolution; a change which offered lucrative subsidies and enticing opportunities for new teams locating in urban centers with TV markets which heretofore had never hosted big league teams. But TV also provided opportunities for other spectacle sports whose expansions vied with baseball for consumer dollars and for national popularity.

In coping with such challenges baseball men, despite accommodating blacks and Latin-American players, faced a growing talent scarcity. Crippled by television and by the rise of rival sports, the minor leagues became a wasteland. Moreover the same forces wrought changes in the traditional structure of the major leagues. Early in the 'fifties the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee, the Athletics to Kansas City, the Browns to Baltimore, and before the decade ended the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles and the New York Giants to San Francisco.

But these were mere tremors rocking the foundation. In 1961, spurred by TV opportunities, baseball underwent a first round of expansion, swelling to two-ten club leagues and a 162 game schedule. In 1969 a second round saw the leagues creating four divisions of six teams each bringing with it divisional playoffs for determining World Series participation. And 1976 saw a third round in which the American league grew to 11 teams with the addition of Seattle and Toronto.

Equally bewildering were the internal changes. Responding to the union ethic, players

banded together under the Major League Players Association which successfully bargained for pensions, salaries and an end to the time-worn reserve system. Owners now face the prospect of negotiating short and long term contracts for inflated salaries that by 1977 found the average salary for starting players at an estimated \$90,000 per man!

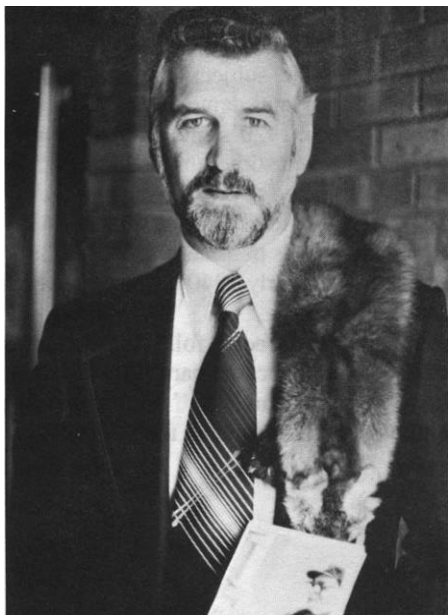
To get good players owners no longer could depend on free enterprise scouting systems. By 1965 young players were picked by annual amateur free agent drafts. And the several expansion moves introduced expansion drafts while the near death of the reserve clause in 1976 added an annual "re-entry free agent draft" for veterans of six years of service.

Throughout the era championships and dynasties were affected by such forces. While the Yankees and Dodgers dominated championship play under the old system of the 'fifties, the new system of drafts reduced the farm systems so that by 1976 no club had more than six farm clubs; clubs largely stocked by scholastic and collegiate players chosen in annual draft meetings.

Further challenges to baseball's structure came from a new breed of fans whose tastes for comforts led to a new wave of stadium building, publicly financed with concomitant political pressures added to owner worries. Equipment changed drastically as new materials were introduced bringing plastic grass, double-knit uniforms, plastic helmets, cowhide baseballs, among many other innovations. Likewise transportation switched from rail to air thus facilitating a trend which saw most games played at night.

A most perplexing problem was that of dealing with players whose tastes and demands contrasted starkly with older more regimented ways. Moreover, writers and media men presented a new breed, ever demanding more intimate access to players, owners and actions. Joining this new breed were politicians at all levels, ever seeking information for policy making that would regulate the spectacles.

In 1976, Major League baseball hosted its billionth fan since 1901, a testimony to the scale of the big league enterprise. A bewildering era this past quarter century, it leaves the historian, as it does players and promoters, with no sense of a new equilibrium replacing the old. It is as if baseball in the Plastic Age is best approached by plastic men who quickly adapt to change without traditionalist sentimentality.



Jerry Glassford presented an anthropological view of Northern Canadian people



Ella Shannon spoke on the Life of Elmer D. Mitchell