

Adrian “Cap ” Anson: Professional Baseball Player - Manager

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Adrian “Cap” Anson profoundly influenced the formative stages of professional baseball in the late nineteenth century. He was born in April, 1852, in Marshalltown, Iowa, a community founded by his father Henry. Anson played second base for the Marshalltown Baseball Club, which in 1867 won the state championship. After attending the University of Iowa and Notre Dame University, in 1871 he entered professional baseball with the Rockford Forest City team of the National Association. During the next four seasons, Anson starred for the Philadelphia Athletics. In 1875 he became embroiled in baseball’s first contract dispute, signing a \$2,000 contract with the Chicago White Stockings of the newly formed National League. Anson played the next 22 seasons for Chicago, setting a major league record for longevity.

Anson excelled as a player-manager. Larger physically than most contemporary players, he was 6 feet tall and weighed 227 pounds. Besides compiling an impressive .333 lifetime batting average, he hit over .300 in 25 of 27 seasons. The first player to make 3,000 hits, Anson won the National League batting title twice and the runs-batted-in crown four times. A power hitter in a dead ball era, he usually hit line drives with his hefty 44 ounce bat. In addition, Anson was the first major leaguer to slug five home runs over two consecutive games and hit 96 lifetime home runs. On the other hand, he was a slow runner and a mediocre first baseman. Anson was considered the premier manager between 1879 and 1897, guiding the White Stockings to five pennants and four second place finishes. Ranked in tenth place among managers, he won nearly 1,300 games and compiled an impressive .575 lifetime percentage. A highly respected, domineering manager, Anson did not drink or smoke and was strict, serious-minded, honest, dignified, and outspoken. Besides training several future managers, he developed outstanding pitchers Larry Corcoran, John Clarkson, Jim McCormick, and Clark Griffith and premier outfielders Mike “King” Kelly, Ed Williamson, and William Lange. In 1880 Anson’s White Stockings set a yet unsurpassed record of winning neatly 80 percent of their contests.

Innovation characterized Anson’s managerial career. He was the first manager to employ spring training, implement the hit and run play, rotate pitchers, and use coaching boxes. In 1885 and 1886, Anson’s White Stockings participated in the second and third post-season championships ever held, playing St. Louis of the rival American Association. Anson joined other premier players visiting England in 1874 and touring the world in 1888-1889, serving as a good will ambassador for baseball abroad. Baseball’s first superstar, he immensely increased the popularity of the sport with his aggressive, team-oriented behavior and exemplary moral standards. In 1900 Anson became one of the first professional baseball players to write an autobiography.

On the other hand, Anson left a few unfortunate legacies and experienced several setbacks. Hostile to Negroes, he often refused to let his club take the field against teams having Black players. Anson’s policy helped establish an unwritten rule barring Blacks

from organized baseball. Besides often quarreling with umpires, he clashed in the 1890's with new Chicago President James Hart. Hart not only refused to accord Anson control over daily field operations, but repeatedly blocked player deals and did not back his manager in disciplining personnel. Consequently the once-stellar club experienced several losing seasons, causing Chicago sports writers and spectators alike to urge Anson's retirement. When Anson's ten-year contract expired following the 1897 season, Hart dismissed the veteran manager.

In his post-baseball career Anson encountered less success. He established billiard and bowling businesses in Chicago and organized a semi-professional baseball team, but these enterprises floundered financially. After serving from 1905 to 1907 as city clerk of Chicago, Anson was defeated in further attempts for elective office. He toured the vaudeville circuit to earn additional income, but eventually went bankrupt and even saw his home foreclosed. Anson died in April, 1922, in Chicago. In 1939, he was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.