

Baseball As Economic and Business History: A Teaching Perspective

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Our distinguished colleague and fellow NASSH member David Voigt refers to baseball as a “mirror of American life.” Taking a cue from that idea, my paper will suggest that the history of baseball can provide valuable insights and useful teaching perspectives on American economic and business history. Specifically, the rise of professional baseball illustrates an important “organizational theme” in American history, the early business of baseball reveals an urge to limit competition and to discipline players, and the game’s historic exemption from the antitrust laws reflects the special treatment accorded the national pastime. The history of baseball thus becomes an effective medium for examining larger themes in American life.

Recent efforts to develop a better conceptual framework for understanding modern America have focused on the idea of organization. In 1967 Professor Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* skillfully surveyed U.S. history along organizational lines. The late nineteenth century witnessed many attempts to reorder American society, including the successful efforts of baseball promoters William Hulbert and Albert Spalding to “reform” the game through a new structure. Player raids, scheduling problems, and fly-by-night operators were leading reasons for organizing the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs to “enact and enforce proper rules for the exhibition and conduct of the games.”

Subsequently club owners were able to adopt big business techniques for restraining competition from new clubs and leagues as well as enforcing greater discipline on the players. During the turbulent 1890s when players rebelled against their employers, the club owners responded with tactics similar to those used by the railroad General Managers’ Association in the great Pullman Strike of 1894. Little wonder that John Montgomery Ward, player, lawyer, and leader of the dissidents, asserted that baseball was a “business, not simply a sport.”

The antitrust exemption granted baseball in 1922 appears to perpetuate the myth of the game as merely a sporting exhibition. This legal exclusivity, however, may soon be in jeopardy if the owners demonstrate more than the usual collusion in presenting a new Basic Agreement to the players. It is worth noting that management now seems determined to discipline maverick owners who may undercut a united front against the players. The organizational revolution, begun in the late 1800s, would then have degenerated into a conspiracy with significant legal and economic ramifications for baseball.