

The History of Baseball As a Means of Teaching U.S. Social and Cultural History

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The historian Jacques Barzun has suggested that “he who would understand America” should first study baseball. In a new course at Texas Tech we are seeking to show how baseball has reflected changes in American life from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. My paper will attempt to suggest that the history of baseball can instructively illustrate changes in race relations, literature, and in perceptions of the hero.

A study of how organized baseball attempted to deal with the American racial dilemma provides a striking preview of how all American society faced the race question. In the late nineteenth century baseball was ambivalent on the question of inter-racial play. Black players such as Moses Fleetwood Walker illustrate what C. Van Woodward labels the “forgotten alternatives” to segregation. However, like society at large, organized baseball gradually excluded Blacks, and the professional leagues embodied the nation’s embrace of segregation during the early twentieth century. Perhaps most interesting, baseball’s efforts to integrate anticipated the national experience in the 1950s and 1960s. Even today the continuing racial unease in baseball on such questions as Black managers and coaches and the recent controversy over the lack of press attention to the accomplishments of Lou Brock mirror the persistence of the race question in American society.

Fiction involving baseball has dramatically reflected changing currents in American literature and in turn illustrated the maturation of American culture. An examination of the transformation in writing about baseball from the Horatio Alger romanticism of the Frank Merriwell takes through the realism of Ring Lardner to the complex symbolism of Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* embodies the theme of the loss of American innocence in the twentieth century. Baseball literature like other fiction can be effectively used to reveal the times that produced it.

Similar reflections of American society can be taught through an examination of baseball heroes of different eras. Babe Ruth, the greater than life hero of the 1920s, and Reggie Jackson, the super ego of the 1970s, represent different personalities; but they also reflect the culture that adulated them. For example Ruth’s personal peccadillos were largely ignored by the media while the latter day Jackson’s most intimate activities are widely discussed. Other comparisons can be illustrated with the consideration of more orthodox hero figures such as Stan Musial and Joe DiMaggio.

In sum an examination of baseball’s race relations, fiction about baseball, and baseball’s heroes can tell us much about the country that labeled the sport its national pastime. In this sense a study of baseball may be a key to understanding America.