

They Shaped the Game: A Team of Baseball Innovators

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For nigh unto 120 years major league baseball campaigns have delighted American baseball fans and there are few indications that the game's charm is diminishing. Indeed, the "comet season" of 1985 set new records in live attendance and television viewership.

Such sustained interest testifies to major league baseball's durability and adaptability. From a historical perspective it is remarkable that the game maintained its hold in the face of mind-boggling changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, population shifts, wars, depressions, changing leisureways, changing forms of communication and transportation, and changing values and norms.

In endeavoring to explain the game's resiliency and adaptability a "great man" theory of historical analysis is employed. The history of major league baseball is divided into three eras (the 19th century formative era; the classical era of 1903- 1952; and the expansion era of 1953 to the present) and three men from each era are identified as prime movers whose outreachings pushed the game into avenues of innovative opportunities.

In the 19th century formative era three acknowledged "fathers" emerged as able innovators. As "father of the game," Henry Chadwick became the game's pre-eminent publicist, critic, and historian. Another, Harry Wright, became the "father of the professional game" by his successful promoting of the 1869-1870 Cincinnati Red Stockings and by his innovative leadership during the years of the first professional major league. And Albert G. Spalding became the "father of the National League," as well as the entrepreneurial supplier of equipment, the great defender of National League interests, and the zealous missionary of the game.

During the classical era (1903-1952) a trio of demigods emerged to grapple with new challenges facing the game. Babe Ruth, a Hercules-like figure, personally launched the dramatic "big bang" offensive style and his charismatic personality made him the game's greatest hero. Another demigod, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, emerged in the wake of Black Sox scandal as the "Jovian" commissioner whose moral posturings won him credit for keeping the game free of scandals. And the third demigod, Wesley Branch Rickey, performed with Vulcan-like skill as an innovator in player recruiting and training, as the game's racial integrator, and as the stimulator of the emerging expansion era.

In the expansion era (1953-present day) the trio of symbolic leaders included Jackie Robinson, the equalitarian whose lonely ordeal as the black player selected by Rickey to end the long era of baseball apartheid successfully opened the doors to generations of able black players. Another, Walter O'Malley, was the kingmaker of baseball in his time and the catalyst of the game's expansion by his west coast move of his Dodgers. And a third figure, Marvin Miller, became the player's emancipator when he turned the moribund Major League Players Association into a formidable bargaining agency.

Collectively these nine worthies comprise a team of important innovators. Each in his way contributed mightily to baseball's successful adaptation. While each was a product of his times, each was a far-sighted force for change in the game. In the words of the late sociologist Robert Maciver, each acted on the assumption that "the sudden gain of an inch . . . creates a desperate longing for a yard."