

The Thermidor of the Counterculture in Baseball: The Oakland A's of the 1970s as a Symbol of American Values

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The work of scholars such as Richard Crepeau, Peter Levine, Steven Riess, and Jules Tygiel suggests that a popular sport such as baseball may be used as a device to investigate the values of American society. In short, baseball may be viewed as a sort of mirror in which questions of power, politics, fashion, economics, and race may be viewed in microcosm.

Perhaps at no time period in American history was this more evident than with the rise of a counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s which challenged the views and assumptions of the post World War II liberal consensus or establishment as it was then called. If the New York Yankees with their pin stripes and platooning, which seemed to resemble interchangeable parts, were representative of the 1950s, then the bright clad, long haired, moustached Oakland A's mirrored the values and concerns of the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s.

It was not only the appearance of the A's which indicated that the times were changing in baseball. The fighting and controversy which seemed to always follow the team indicated that, just as there was no longer a consensus of values in America, baseball's alleged amity and cooperation between owners and players had broken down. But perhaps amity was a left over value from the 1950s as the quarreling A's were world champions in 1972, 1973, and 1974. With their youth, color, brash attitudes, and challenges to the baseball establishment, the A's were heroes to many young Americans who identified with the counterculture.

Chief among the many controversies surrounding the A's were their confrontations with their owner and self-made man, Charley Finley. Racial issues would be raised in salary confrontations between Finley and pitcher Vida Blue following Blue's 1971 rookie season. After these negotiations, Blue would never be the same. A's stars Sal Bando and Reggie Jackson also carried on a running war with Finley. As colleges erupted in protest, players felt free to make their discontents public. Finley's relations with his players reached a nadir when he attempted to release Mike Andrews following errors in the 1973 series and bungled Catfish Hunter's contract which led to the pitcher being declared a free agent following the 1974 season.

Finley's feuds were not limited to the players as the controversial owner assumed the role of maverick in his difficulties with baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn. Finley's antics also led to the departure of successful manager Dick Williams and his replacement in 1974 by Alvin Dark; the born again Christian manager who would try to apply discipline to his recalcitrant players. Meanwhile, the Oakland players continued to fight among themselves and win. But just as the counterculture made a tremendous but short lived impact on American life, the A's time in the sun was short as in 1975 Finley began to break up his team, and baseball, along with the rest of the nation, returned to more traditional lines. If Kent State was the thermidor of student protest, then perhaps the Oakland A's were the thermidor of baseball.

This paper will attempt to utilize the Oakland A's and Charley Finley as a means to examine in microcosm some of the issues of race, dissent, labor relations, corporate structure, fashion, violence, and affluence which dominated the seditious seventies.