

The Formation of The Baseball Public in 19th Century America: An Analysis of a Special Public

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From the standpoint of collective behavior, the baseball public was formed through the dissemination and by the consumption of information about baseball. The principle source of information about the game was the sport press, baseball guides and sport periodicals. But knowledge about baseball was also generated and transmitted by playing baseball and attending games. Essential to the rise of the baseball public was an extended chain of social and occupational networks. People who played or watched baseball or who merely read about baseball belonged to groups, such as political and social clubs, volunteer fire companies and recreational clubs. It was in this context that much of the circulation of attitudes, rumors, speculation and baseball news was nurtured and ideas about the game were shaped.

Baseball perceived as a spectacle helps explain the popularity of the game and the rapid expansion of interest in all aspects of baseball. Baseball as a spectacle grew out of the following factors: rule changes, the implementation of innovative playing strategies, rowdy behavior of spectators, club rivalries and partisan rooting of members of the baseball audience. Being part of a lively and spontaneous assemblage, where individual pride and community allegiance were vested in the outcome of the contest, proved to be an irresistible attraction to many.

The sports press was crucial in shaping ideas about baseball in the baseball public's mind. This assumes that in the formative years of the baseball public, little information was available on the semi-structured nature of the game. Changes occurring within baseball made it imperative for those interested in baseball to follow the game in the sport press. The press helped establish and influence rule changes by editorial suggestions and consistent advocacy for reforms. It is also likely that they helped codify the rules by serving as an informal arbiter of disputes among people who would defer to the written word. From this perspective the press reinforced both direct experience of the game and indirectly guided discussion which was freely exchanged in the saloon, workplace and sporting club.