

# The “Hitless Wonders” and the Scandal of 1906

Anthony Papalas

East Carolina University

The Chicago White Sox, “the Hitless Wonders,” won the 1906 American League pennant beating the New York Highlanders in a tight race. The Highlanders, managed by Clark Griffith, had the strongest team in the league and going into September had a two game lead over the Sox. In the first week of September (5-8) the Sox cut the lead by taking three out of four games from the Detroit Tigers. It seemed to some observers that the Detroit players laid down during the series. None of the veteran pitchers were available for the first two games. William Armour, the Detroit manager, started E. Willets, a rookie, who pitched well but lost. Eddie Sievers, scheduled to start the second game, did not report nor did the other veteran hurlers, G. Mullin, B. Donovan and R. Donahue. G. Schaefer, the second baseman, claimed he was too sick to play and M. Mc’Intyre, the leftfielder, fainted in the clubhouse. The Tigers started another rookie, C. Rowan, who lost, yielding 8 runs in the first inning. During the game the Sox and Tigers fraternized and joked with one another. The Chicago pitcher, F. Smith, enjoying an insurmountable lead, allowed several of his Detroit friends to get hits and fatten their average. After the game M. Bingay, the baseball correspondent for the Detroit News, appealed to B. Johnson, the president of the American league, to grab a train from Chicago to investigate the situation. The Tigers made a better effort in the third game, but lost. Sam Thompson, a 46 year old former major league star who had been out of the big leagues 10 years, played in the outfield. Thompson, a popular figure in Detroit, helped the gate but had problems fielding his position. Johnson publicly blasted the Detroit players, particularly Donovan and Donahue for not being available to pitch, and wrote a letter to F. Navin, the Tiger general manager, demanding an explanation. New York and Cleveland were angry at the Tigers for their indifferent performance. Griffith was upset at the presence of Thompson in the outfield. The Tigers took the final game. Donahue, apparently, stung by Johnsons’ criticism, shoutout the Sox. Oddly, Bingaly, who thought the Tiger situation needed an investigation came to the defense of the organization arguing that injuries were keeping the Tigers from doing their best.

The Cleveland Naps had an outside chance to get back in the pennant race. They arrived in Detroit on September 9th. for a four game series. Detroit took three out of four surprising Bingay who thought Detroit too riddled with injuries to play competitive baseball. On September 24th. the Highlanders arrived in Detroit, one game in first place, for a three game series. Detroit swept the series. Donovan, unavailable for the Chicago series, won one game, and many of the allegedly injured players were in the line-up. The amazed Bingay wrote that the Tigers played with “a nerve and daring noticeably lacking against Chicago. Let us be charitable, Maybe it was injuries.” The Sox, with a team batting average of 230, won the pennant. The Sporting News reported that the Sox players owed special thanks to the Tigers for their success.

There is no evidence that the Detroit players received money to throw the Chicago games, and play hard against New York, though they may have received gifts from the Sox players, after the season, and may have placed bets on the second game of the Sox series. There are several reasons why Detroit let down against Chicago and played hard against Cleveland and New York. The Detroit players did not like management. The owner, William Yawkey, a lumber millionaire, tended to underpay his players because he thought they were trying to take advantage of his great wealth. Frank Navin, a former bookie drawn to baseball by his interest in gambling, became accountant and then general manager of the Tigers. To please Yawkey he pinched pennies and won the gratitude of

his boss but the dislike of the players whose resentments against management seemed to peak early in September. The baseball correspondent of the *Cleveland News* felt the Detroit players were so concerned with their problems with Yawkey, the tightwad, that they did not play effective baseball against Chicago.

Navin fired Armour on the first of September, but kept him at the helm for the remainder of the season. As a lame duck manager he lost control of his players. Navin eventually had to put drinking clauses in some of the players' contracts. The Tigers tended to be frivolous during important games. This was the year for most of Germany Schaefer's memorable pranks. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* baseball writer thought the Tigers were more interested in jesting than playing serious baseball. Furthermore, the club was riddled with dissension. Most of the veterans disliked Ty Cobb, a rookie, who was emerging into a star, and management had complaints about his wild off the field behavior.

Several of the Detroit Tigers were friendly with Chicago players. Schaefer and O'Leary grew up in Chicago and lived there during the offseason. Most of the Tiger players disliked Griffith. During the 1905 season the Tigers felt that Griffith had the Highlanders lay down against Cleveland. Detroit and Cleveland had made a team bet on which club would finish higher in the standing. Detroit finished third a few games ahead of the Naps.

Detroit shaped the outcome of the 1906 pennant race helping the Hitless Wonders get into the World Series. Their motives were not primarily mercenary. They probably did not receive any money. Some were disgruntled with management, others disliked the Highlanders and some simply wanted the Sox to win.

This essay is based on the *Sporting News*, *Detroit News*, *Cleveland News*, Records of the Detroit Baseball Company in the Detroit Public Library.