

Baseball “Ideology” Among Players in the Pre-1970s Era of Management Hegemony

Gerard A. Brandmeyer

University of South Florida, Tampa

During the 1970s, two events radically altered power relations between players and management in major league professional baseball. First, in settling the 1972 players strike, management agreed to limited contract arbitration. Then, in 1975, arbitrator Peter Seitz cast the deciding vote which granted the possibility of free agency to some categories of veteran players. These developments sharply changed the course of player-management relations.

Dating from 1879, when a Federal court upheld the reserve clause in the basic contract, generations of ballplayers have suffered management domination by virtue of the power inherent in monopoly and monopsony. The owners claim that “for the good of the game” they require a protective exemption from laws that would permit players to sell their services annually on the open market.

This paper assesses the factors in the pre-modern era (1876-1975) which combined to lock players in as chattels for a century. The paper considers the contributions of: a) a civic culture of press and public, b) management, c) the legal system and d) the players themselves to explain

why no effective challenge was mounted until the 1970s to management's hegemonic control over the game.

The civic culture is portrayed as a superstructure of press and public interested through fan loyalties in the fortunes of particular teams. Were players free to move from club to club, orderly competition would seem threatened. So this civic culture provided important legitimation for the status quo, namely, the reserve scheme that bound players to one club.

Management sought the reserve clause as an invaluable tactic for controlling labor costs, no small matter when exhibiting talented athletes with marketable skills.

Consistently the courts provided baseball management with legal cover by upholding the reserve clause. No other sport enjoyed this special protection, suggesting the impact of the civic culture as an agent of legitimation.

Faced with a united front in support of the reserve system, ballplayers lacked the commonality of interest necessary to muster unified resistance. In the face of powerlessness, this athletic elite remained highly individualistic, though alienated from management in terms of its hegemonic control.