

The Pitching-Batting Imbalance in Major League Baseball History

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Prevailing myths prating of major league baseball's unchanging style of play collapse under the a fortiori assault of writers John Thorn and John Holway in their brilliant new book, *The Pitcher* (1987), which, among other insights, documents the persisting problem of a pitching and batting imbalance throughout the game's century long history.

At the dawn of major league history pitchers were already rejecting their role as passive servers who were expected to be flogged unmercifully by free-swinging batters. By the 1860s innovators like Jim Creighton and Candy Cummings were transforming pitchers into active deceivers of batters, who were obliged to abide averages of .300 as a standard of hitting excellence. From 1876 to this day rules makers have had to contend with cycles of pitching and hitting domination which demanded remedial action toward the goal of sustaining public interest in the games.

Although changes in rules effected the pitching-batting imbalance, so did other factors. Among the latter, changes in equipment, in ballparks, in playing schedules, in the recruitment and training of players, in strategy and tactics, in pitching and batting techniques (including a Nixonian dirty tricks factor), and others loom large. But this presentation focuses mainly on rule changes whereby deliberate attempts to alter the game in favor of hitting or pitching were essayed.

Rule changes affecting cycles of imbalance throughout baseball history are covered, with particular emphasis placed upon the dynamic decade of the 1880s. As a centerpiece, the memorable 1887 season is reviewed. In that campaign rule changes favoring batters produced the highest batting averages in major league history, with some 20 batters topping the .400 mark. Although the exaggerated rule changes of 1887 were official at the time and stood for more than four score years, statisticians in 1969 committed the egregious crime against historical principles of tampering with the

1887 records to fit their misguided and temporocentric standards of propriety. Such errant bowdlerizing of historical records demands vigorous counteraction by baseball historians.