

The Issue of Monetary Compensation in Baseball: The Sport Press and the Early Years of Organized Baseball

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Starting in the late 1850s, the issues surrounding monetary and other forms of compensation to baseball players were argued in the sport press. The arguments ranged from the appropriateness of playing “benefit matches” to the inappropriateness of paying salaries to players. In the paper I trace in the sport press the various representations of the issues connected with compensation to players. Some of these issues revolved around fixed games, covert payments to players, and the probity of professional athletics.

The movement toward the direct compensation of players sharpened the controversy between amateur baseball and professional baseball. Prior to the late 1860s the sport press did not use the terms amateur or professional to describe the playing of organized baseball. Neither did the first association of baseball clubs refer to themselves as an amateur association. They were, simply, named The National Association of Baseball Players. The press at this time referred to players as “gentlemen” and the playing of baseball was noted as a “manly pastime” or as a “noble Pastime.”

The increasing popularity of the game and the commercialization of baseball rose side-by-side. Accompanying this growth was the creation of a demand for the services of elite and talented players. At first compensation to players took the form of “benefit matches”, “exhibition matches”, and covert payments. Later on compensation was direct: salaries to players.

The sport press is used as a guide to describe the movement toward monetary compensation from the late 1850s to the early 1870s. In relation to this the following questions are raised and answered. When and under what conditions was compensation to players started? What effect did compensation to players have on the image of organized baseball? Were changes in the social and occupational backgrounds of players an impetus to payment of players? How did the press define amateur and professional baseball?

The sociohistorical process involved in the pay-for-play movement in baseball has an historical corollary in the professionalization of track and field, and road running. This should be of interest to most sport historians.