

# Was the Union Association a Major League?

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In 1884 the Union Association of Base Ball Clubs formed to take its place along side organized baseball's establishment, the National League and American Association, as a third major league. But the new League under the leadership of Henry V. Lucas, refused to sign the National Agreement and exhibited complete disregard for baseball establishment's market monopoly and player monopsony. As a result of the Union's action, the League, its franchises, and players were blacklisted by the baseball establishment of the period and looked upon as an inferior league unworthy of major league status and recognition.

While Major League Baseball currently recognizes the Union Association as a legitimate "major league," many baseball researchers continue to label the Union League as suspect based largely on League and player performance statistics. However, a closer look at these statistics, as well as historical evidence, suggest other variables significantly contributed to the perceived inferiority, and raises question as to if such inferiority did actually exist.

In order to assess major league legitimacy, the term "major league" was addressed to determine meaning and identify significant criteria for such distinction. Several "major league" definitions were reviewed ranging from "the top level, usually professional of a sports enterprise or competition," to "a league or organization of major importance to the promotion and development to any of various sports," to "salaries paid to players and what the league can do for the sport," From definitions three areas were identified and determined relevant in assessing the Union Association League's major leagueness: League performance and caliber of play; League organization and administration; and contributions to professional baseball.

Analysis of performance data, offense, defense, and pitching, suggest the Union Association was comparable to the two establishment leagues, and that other variables such as playing conditions and League equipment contributed both positively and negatively to caliber of play. Administratively,

the Union League faced numerous internal problems, as well as those imposed by National League President A. G. Mills' personal vendetta, and media accusations.

Most evident of the Union Association's baseball contributions is the 123 players who joined National League and American Association clubs following the Union's demise. As the first rival League to challenge the National Agreement and its reserve rule, the Union Association laid the groundwork for the rule's abolishment in 1975. Several Union League ball parks were later used by establishment league clubs, and the playing skills of three former Union players were worthy of Hall of Fame consideration.

No doubt the status of the Union Association's "major league" worthiness will continue to be debated. However, evidence suggests the League, its players and their overall playing ability was not as inferior as generally implied, and that other variables contributed to caliber of play, and historically, the general and unjust perception of the Union Association of Base Ball Clubs' "major league" legitimacy.