

Nuggets From The ‘Nineties

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Born of the baseball wars of 1890 and 1891, and inspired by the business and industrial trust-building boom in contemporary America, the monopolistic Big League represented major league baseball from the 1892-1899 seasons. But when the experiment proved to be a financial and organizational failure, the owners in 1900 scuttled the four weakest teams and returned to the familiar eight team format of the 1880s. And three years later, following the successful American League incursion, the owners returned to the dual major league system that had been manifestly successful in the 1880s.

Although historians generally regard the big league experiment as a wayward course, the big league’s structural failings ought not to obscure the innovations that contributed to the game’s continuing growth and development in the 20th century.

Among the negative trends of this era that still vex major league owners of the present day was the National League’s reputation for ruthless treatment of rival major leagues, the continuing animosity between owners and players, and divisive tensions between big market and small market club-owners, and the chronic problem of competitive imbalance in the pennant races. Not surprisingly the challenge of finding solutions to such problems were beyond the ken of 19th century owners and continue to elude their present day counterparts.

But the club owners of this era grappled with these and other problems. With gate receipts as their major source of revenue, the owners expanded the playing schedule to 154 games in 1892 and again in 1898-99; it was a format that, once established in 1904, lasted through to the 1960 season. Moreover, in 1892 the owners attempted a split season format in hopes of rekindling fan interest, but this effort failed as did its resurrection by Commissioner Kuhn during the strike year of 1981.

But other innovations of this era were more positive and equally enduring. For one, the pitching distance was increased to 60'6" in 1893, a change that endures to this day. In its early years the increased distance boosted batting averages, challenged pitchers to adapt, and ultimately sent the message (still not fully grasped by promoters) that fans seemingly prefer watching hitting displays over low-score contests. For another, the better-quipped and trained players of this era unleashed unprecedented batting barrages, and set new standards in fielding and teamwork.

In promoting the game owners of this decade also sought ways of luring fans to their parks. But a rash of ballpark fires followed by local governments imposing stronger safety codes served notice in this decade that baseball's wooden park era was nearing its end. And as demonstrated by the unprofitably Temple Cup-post-season matches, and by the abortive syndicate baseball schemes at the end of this decade, the owners were persuaded that a return to the dual major league system with its post-season World Series competition, was the better format for the future course of the game.