

Righteous Club Owners and Dissolute Player: Temperance in the Gilded Age

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This paper examines the imposition of temperance on professional baseball players by club owners in the late nineteenth century. It asks, Why did owners mount a campaign so zealous that Chicago White Stockings' owner A.G. Spalding hired Pinkerton detectives to follow players at night after games to report any drinking? In seeking the answer to this question, it also asks, Why were players so recalcitrant in their response to the owners' temperance rules? (The episode with the Pinkerton detectives came after ten years of players defying increasingly harsh anti-drinking rules, and ended with the players beating up a Pinkerton spy.)

Drawing wherever possible in the words of the owners and players themselves, found in the nineteenth century sporting press and publications such as Spalding's Guide, it argues that players' drinking was an issue upon which the owners based the legitimacy of their control over baseball, a game which had originally been run by the players themselves. Thus the paper is set against the background of the fraternal nature of early baseball clubs, whose members, according to their contemporaries, "paid less attention to the game of ball than to wining and dining." This is followed by a brief account of the commercialisation of the game, ending with an account of clubs owned by men who sought to run them not to promote fraternity, but for profit. This was the essential nature of the clash over drinking: It was an attempt by club owners to impose their authority over the players in whom the traditional knowledge of the game resided.

The subject of temperance in baseball is significant because it mirrors what was happening in the wider society, and thus it contributes to a better understanding of temperance in the Gilded Age. In particular, it addresses the debate over whether temperance was motivated by moral concerns, or whether it was a device used by employers to impose their will on workers. Initially, the evidence from baseball is clear: Owners used temperance to impose discipline on players and to take control of clubs. However, the developing concern of owners to prohibit players drinking in taverns on their own time suggests that temperance also had a moral component. This

morality, which said that drinking was evil, in fact grew out of the original economic concerns.

The baseball experience shows that any moral-economic dichotomy is false, and temperance was not an expression of a single capitalist mind set. Players and other workers who drank were not, on their own terms, "immoral," any more than pre-industrial work practices were less desirable than work as it was defined by the factory owner. Drinking players simply had a different set of morals, one consistent with the pre-industrial society out of which baseball emerged.