

AMATEURISM AND PROFESSIONALISM

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The Model for Ownership of Chicago Sports Franchises: Charles A. Comiskey— Sportsman or Robber Baron?

The New York Yankees have won twenty-five World Series championships in the twentieth century. The White Sox have won two, the most recent dating back to 1917. Chicago teams have neither the crutch of nor the excuse of the Curse of the Bambino as Boston fans can resort to when frustration overwhelms them. Rather Chicagoans have to look at a long string of owners whose commitment to self-profit and mediocre products have made the city one of the least celebrated in terms of successful franchises. With the exception of the Bulls of the 1990s Chicago teams have suffered from ownership malaise that is almost unabated.

Charles A. Comiskey — player, manager, and owner — set the model for this ownership style in Chicago. Based on primary materials from the clippings files of the *Sporting News* as well as from sources in the Baseball Hall of Fame, and from research in the popular press, this paper is a preliminary biography of Charles Comiskey and his impact on baseball in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The last biography of this Hall of Fame member (class of 1939), “Commy,” was written in 1919 by Gustav Axelsson, prior to the events uncovered in 1920 during the Black Sox scandal.

This paper explores the pertinent questions about Comiskey’s role in the modernization of the professional sport of baseball including his role in bringing the American League into existence. It looks at his time as player and manager in St. Louis and at his willingness to bounce to competing leagues before retiring in 1894 to purchase a franchise in the Western League. Together with Ban Johnson, Comiskey moved the “smaller city” Western League franchises (Sioux City) into more substantial cities (St. Paul) and then into the large cities, Chicago, competing against the National league for the fans’ support.

Comiskey’s greatest controversy came in 1919 when eight players from his team conspired with organized gamblers to lose a World Series. Comiskey’s lack of generosity in salaries as well as a split in the factions on that team made the possibility of scandal quite real. Comiskey was less than forthcoming about either his knowledge of those events

or in what he did to assist baseball and the legal system to get to the bottom of the situation. In that sense his role further sullied the degradation of baseball's reputation.

The White Sox since 1919 have floated in mediocrity. Comiskey's team under his ownership until 1939 and under the direction of his son and grandson through the 1950's neither excelled nor competed at the highest level until 1959. Perhaps the curse of Comiskey was as real in Chicago as the Curse of the Bambino in Boston. Or perhaps Comiskey simply set the tone for future ownership in Chicago. Neither the Cubs, White Sox, Blackhawks, nor the Bulls (except those of the 1990s) were models of consistent success on the playing field and all but the Cubs have struggled for an avid following in the Windy City.

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