

**Robert F Burk, *Never Just A Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1994. Appendix, bibliog. essay, illus. pp. xv + 284. \$US34.95.**

Baseball until recently was the United States of America's most popular spectator sport - a position it commanded for over a century. Its hold on the American imagination is such that it is regarded as the 'national pastime'. Baseball embodies everything that is 'good' about the American way of life. It develops notions of fair play, is character building and provides the ideal mix between individualism and the collective needs of the group. In the popular imagination baseball is viewed as a 'game', where players receive high incomes for doing something which is essentially fun.

Robert Burk in *Never Just A Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920* explodes the myth that baseball is a 'game'. Above all baseball is an activity which generates enormous amounts of income, and from which a few individuals, only some of whom have been players, have amassed small fortunes. The owners, or those who control baseball, have sought to perpetuate the myth that baseball is only a game, and an embodiment of all that is good about the American way of life, so as to maintain and/or extend their power over those whose deeds of skill and daring with bat, ball and glove produce the product called baseball. As Burk says in his preface:

As one of the most visible of entertainment industries, baseball claims a past marked from the beginning not merely by on-field heroics and blunders but also by bitter off-field struggles between players and management over prestige, power and profits. Central to its labor history have been repeated battles over who would have access to opportunities, how its profits would be divided, and, encompassing these concerns, who would control its operations (p. xi).

Burk traces the dynamics of the relationship between players and owners - of what might be called the game within the game - from baseball's New England puritan origins to the appointment of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis in 1920 as baseball's first commissioner

following revelations associated with the 1919 'Black Sox' fixed world series. Burk relentlessly focuses on issue of control within the labour market, and how the balance of power was influenced by product market developments mainly in the form of trade wars between established and rival leagues. *Never Just A Game* demonstrates that the owners of baseball (like those in other professional team sports) developed the most comprehensive set of labour market controls outside slavery to restrict the economic freedom and earning potential of their workforce.

The early history of baseball bears a strong resemblance to that of cricket and various football codes. The game was developed by a social elite to enhance communal values and was mainly governed by players themselves. With the passage of time the game became more popular and 'democratic' and a group emerged to codify rules and competition. This was associated with a separation, in both terms of class and age, of those who governed and played the sport. As teams and clubs strove for success they searched for talented players and thereby created professional players. A number of individuals perceived the revenue generating potential of baseball and brought about the formation of more or less structured leagues. As baseball became more popular clubs vied with each other for markets and players. In an effort to control and restrict the incomes of players, owners/leagues developed a number of labour market restrictions - the most famous example being the reserve rule in 1879 which restricted clubs from competing with each other for the players of another club.

The only respite that players had from domination by their owners was during periods in which rival leagues held out the prospect of alternative employment and higher incomes. Burk clearly demonstrates that the economic well-being of players was dependent on the existence of rival leagues. Once a trade war had been quashed or resolved owners would employ a variety of methods to force down the earnings of players (besides the offer of lower wages). Such devices included requiring players to pay for uniforms and their upkeep, equipment, travel (even when relocated to a minor league club) and medical expenses. The major

way in which clubs clawed back promised/contracted income was through the use of fines. Players could be fined for swearing, insubordination, drunkenness or for imagined or real 'not trying'. One of the more pernicious devices used by clubs was to threaten players with fines, demotion (to the minors) or the blacklist if their performance did not improve, and when it did to fine them for having malingered in the past. Clubs employed Pinkerton spies to keep an eye on the private lives of players. In addition players were traded between clubs like cattle at a fair.

On three occasions players sought to make use of collective action or trade unions to improve their lot. The National Brotherhood of Professional Baseball Players was formed in 1885. It disintegrated in 1890 after it was deserted by financial backers in seeking to establish a rival players' league. The Protective Associations of Professional Baseball Players (1900- 1902) and the Fraternity of Professional Baseball Players of America (1912-1918) also failed in attempts to establish themselves as collective organisations representing the needs of players.

Two other themes developed by Burk should be noted. First, he demonstrates that various rule changes were developed so as to alter 'production' statistics of players in an effort to blunt their ability at the 'negotiating' table. Second, Burk suggests that the fixing of games, which seems to have been fairly widespread if somewhat intermittent, was a response or a natural part of an industry characterised by sharp practice and chicanery. Owners, umpires and players were not immune from such practices. For players the attraction of fixing was not so much the extra income but the chance it provided to aid players in other teams and as a 'pay back' to their owners for indiscretions of the past.

*Never Just A Game* provides a very readable and interesting account of the various dimensions of player-owner relationships in American baseball to 1920. In so doing it provides a compelling critique of an activity which is regarded as America's 'national pastime'.

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