

Baseball in Blue & Gray: The National Pastime During the Civil War

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Review

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Kirsch, George B. *Baseball in Blue & Gray: The National Pastime During the Civil War*. Princeton University Press, \$19.95 ISBN 691057338

America's game

Book explores sport as a reflection of national ideals

In the dozen years surrounding the Civil War, from 1858 to 1869, baseball emerged as the national game. It generally reflected the attitude and ideas of an America victorious in war, rapidly industrialized, steadily becoming more urban, and accepting, though not always welcoming, an increasing number of immigrants. In step with the rest of America, baseball reflected a strong nationalism, expressed, among other ways, in team names (Young America) and the addition of bands, bunting and patriotic airs to the games. As America was becoming both more commercialized and professional, baseball players who had been amateurs of indifferent ability became professionals of great skill. Both baseball clubs and grounds became businesses intent on obtaining the best players and the most profitable schedule. America made preliminary moves toward industrial standardization during the years of war and railroad building and baseball standardized the rules around the New York game of the 1850s. Baseball became the American game because it so charmingly reflected the optimistic, expansionist, capitalist Republic of the early gilded age. As Mark Twain later remarked: Baseball is the very-symbol the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century.

The speed with which baseball became the national game is one of the themes of Kirsch's book. The real founder of the New York game was Alexander Cartwright, whose handwritten rules from 1845 were the first coherent description of the game. Within less than fifteen years, the New York version had grown so popular that in 1858 thousands of spectators betook themselves to the Fashion Race Course in farthest Queens to pay a half dollar or more to see an

all-star match between New York and Brooklyn. The sporting papers treated the games as important events. By the time of the Fashion Race Course series there were dozens of teams in the New York area alone, along with others in Boston, Philadelphia and a few in smaller towns. Some still played town ball, an ancestor of baseball with different rules for each locality, and some around Boston played the Massachusetts game, a local variant, but the increasing popularity of baseball meant the general adoption of the New York rules. There were enough teams and interest for the Fashion Race Course series to be regarded as a sort of championship contest. Alexander Cartwright was only a dozen years in the past. Fort Sumter was three years in the future.

Baseball also reflected class tensions in an America that was moving from craft to industry, and Kirsch deals with these issues. Although founded as a gentleman's recreation, baseball had enough intrinsic charm and difficulty that it tempted players and fans from all walks of life. Craftsmen as well as clerks and merchants formed clubs for recreation and sport — the working men proved to be better players. The acknowledged champions of the New York area in 1861 and 1862 were the Brooklyn Eckfords, a working class team composed mostly of skilled mechanics and shipwrights. The Brooklyn Atlantics, a team also based in the crafts, defeated the powerful Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1870, ending the first professional team's winning streak that had extended for a season and a half. It was the most celebrated game that had yet been played.

The merchants, lawyers, and clerks did not relish being defeated by their social inferiors, and the Brooklyn Excelsiors, an upper class organization, retaliated by hiring the best player of the day, pitcher Jim Creighton, to even things out. The maneuver succeeded, with the Excelsiors winning, in disputed fashion, the championship series in 1860. In those days, professionalism was cheating, but professional baseball was also the wave of the future. In baseball, class would give way to skill. But not to race.

While the United States had fought both to preserve the Union and to make men free, the northern public was not prepared to embrace anything like genuine social equality. The overwhelming majority of citizens in the northern cities thought baseball was a white man's sport and recreation, and the exceptional skill of many black ball players could not overcome their race. There were segregated black teams that occasionally played white teams. But these intermittent contests were clearly outside the framework of the regular matches.

There is only a limited amount of material on early baseball — most of it in the sporting papers — and Kirsch has placed it within the general context of war, nationalism, and industrialized racism. He has presented baseball in its national setting, following the direction set in 1907 by the Spalding Commission on the origins of baseball, the theme with which Kirsch begins his book. **Baseball in Blue & Gray** deals with a northern and urban sidelight of the Civil War, illustrating that even in the midst of a great crisis, life goes on.

James D. Hardy, Jr. is associate dean of the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on both history and literature, including one on baseball.