

## Ball Game Itinerary

Baseball seems always to have lived more in myth than in history. Children in England and the United States had been playing variants of the game for years such as rounders, one o' cat, and base.

In 1845, some young men in Manhattan organized themselves into the Knickerbockers BaseBall Club and wrote down the rules of the game they were playing. Twenty years later dozens of baseball clubs in New York and Brooklyn, and their journalist brethren, had made what they called the "national pastime" more popular than cricket, and the metropolis had become the country's first baseball powerhouse.

As baseball clubs were transformed into entertainment businesses, so grew their need for first-rate players who could attract paying crowds. Although distinctions between players and their clubs (now really small businesses) had been hardening for years, the National League formalized the division, which has continued until today.

Baseball soon outdistanced other spectator sports in popularity and contributed to the sports boom of the 1880s and 1890s. Late nineteenth-century baseball resembled the Gilded Age business world. Owners moved the clubs frequently, while rival leagues sprung up and competed for players and spectators.

The National League either defeated its opponents outright or incorporated them into a subordinate national structure of minor leagues. Not until 1901 was the National League forced to accept the American League, the only other surviving major league. Leagues controlled access to spectators by granting franchises. Owners and leagues controlled the players through labor practices that combined elements of chattel slavery (the infamous reserve rule) and freewheeling industrial capitalism: blacklisting, fines, salary limits, and reductions, even the use of Pinkerton spies.

In 1975 an arbitrator ruled that the reserved clause applied for only one year and players, as "free agents," regained their negotiating power; salaries quickly reached unheard-of levels. Owners retaliated in 1981 but were soundly defeated by a players' strike.

Then in the late 1980s they conspired (illegally, an arbitrator held) to limit salary offers to free agents. After a twenty-year period of franchise movement, league expansions, and the creation of divisions within leagues, baseball became organizationally stable again in the late 1970s.

Attendance grew dramatically throughout the 1980s, more people attended major league baseball games (over 50 million per year at the end of the decade) than at any other time in the games history. Baseball has been America's most popular sport for so long mainly because it has successfully straddled some of the nation's most important cultural divisions. Though it was born among the respectable working class and sporting middle class, the games cultural antecedents lay in the boisterous street culture of saloon-based volunteer fire companies, militias, theater partisans, street gangs, and political factions.

Currently, baseball is integrated in that there are large numbers of African-American and Latin players; it is not unusual for a starting lineup to have a minority of whites. They are a great part in the ball game itinerary.

## About the Author

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