Baseball and the Civil War
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While the Civil War undoubtedly marked a turning point in U.S. history, the conflict also proved a pivotal time in the growth of baseball. Both before and after the war, baseball enjoyed a great surge in popularity, spreading throughout regions that knew little of the game in the years prior to the conflict. To explain the United States’ attraction to baseball during this era, historians examine the national sentiment, culture, and the Civil War’s impact on the country. This essay presents a composite view of the various factors that led to baseball’s growth in popularity and the game’s role during the Civil War period in U.S. history.

Although Americans enjoyed numerous sport and leisure activities prior to the war, baseball was gaining interest and generating an increasing number of both players and fans. According to baseball historian Jules Tygiel, author of Past Time, “the key to understanding baseball's appeal...rests not in the false nostalgia of the twentieth century, but in the culture of the United States in the years immediately preceding the Civil War” (2000). Considering the growing sentiment of nationalism in the U.S. during this era, some historians attribute baseball’s expansion to the period belief that the game served as a uniquely American symbol, signifying a concept conceived and perfected in the U.S. Historian Melvin Adelman, as quoted in Past Time, explains the rise in baseball’s popularity as the result of “a desire upon the part of Americans to emancipate their game from foreign patterns.” Adelman’s assertion depicts baseball as a national symbol that appealed to the era’s increasing sense of patriotism, citing aspirations of cultural independence as one explanation for the greater interest in the game.

While the air of nationalism contributed to baseball’s appeal, only sections of the country viewed the game as the “national pastime.” The term “national pastime,” coined prematurely in 1857, suggests that baseball had spread extensively throughout the U.S. According to Tygiel, “the version of baseball being celebrated in 1857 was not a national, but a New York pastime.” Kenneth S. Greenberg, author of Honor & Slavery, describes early nationalist writers as “eager to discover a single sport loved by all Americans, ignor[ing] the Northern regional roots of baseball” (1996). To further confirm baseball’s regional popularity, George B. Kirsch’s essay “Baseball Spectators, 1855-1870” from Major Problems in American Sport History states: “the baseball matches that generated the most excitement and attracted the largest crowds before the Civil War were the 1858 New York City versus Brooklyn all-star series...and the 1860 Atlantic versus Excelsior matches in Brooklyn” (1997). Despite the increased fascination with baseball, prior to the Civil War, the majority of baseball clubs and fans remained in New York and New England.

Although appreciation of the game lingered predominately in segments of the North, according to Greenberg, “it would be incorrect to suggest that no Southerners played baseball or ball games before the Civil War.” In concurrence with Greenberg, Tygiel writes that by 1860, “baseball, particularly the New York version, had indeed become a more national pastime,” listing regions such as Washington D.C., Lexington, New Orleans, and St. Louis among the many new homes for baseball. But the sparse acceptance of the game in the South directly counters the game’s overwhelming success in the North, preventing an accurate declaration of
baseball as the "national pastime" of this era. Considering the disproportion of baseball's acceptance in the U.S., the question arises as to why the game failed to generate a similar magnitude of support in the South. In Baseball in the Blue and Gray, author George B. Kirsch suggests that while plantation owners showed little interest in the game, evidence exists that slaves occasionally enjoyed the sport (2003). Greenberg deems the plantation owners' lack of interest in baseball a result of their pride. He writes: "Baseball did not grow rapidly among men of honor because it seemed to embody a set of values at odds with their culture." Greenberg presents the idea that while Southerners may have had the ability to hit the ball, "the act of running in baseball implied a change of position that that seemed inappropriate for a man of honor." Greenberg further explains that Northern cities, rather than Southern plantations, presented a more favorable context in which to generate both teams and fans. But the open acceptance of the game in the North may also indicate dissimilarity in the social values of the two regions. In New England, social reform was gaining momentum during this period. According to Linda J. Borish's essay "Catherine Beecher and Thomas W. Higginson on the Need for Physical Fitness" from Major Problems in American Sport History, reformers began a health crusade to "promote physical exercise and sports" (1997). New England reformers endorsed outdoor activities and competitive team sports for their ability to improve the quality of life and end "the deterioration of American Health." The movement to promote health and physical fitness in the North created an ideal environment for the acceptance of a sport such as baseball.

Although prior to the Civil War, acceptance of baseball varied greatly, the Civil War years marked an important era in baseball history. According to George B. Kirsch's article "Baseball and the Civil War," baseball "persisted and progressed" despite the war (1998). Teams such as Philadelphia and the leading New York teams flourished regardless of the war. According to Kirsch's Baseball in the Blue and Gray, touring teams served as a distraction from the conflict and attracted thousands of spectators. In evidence of baseball's importance during the war years, the Continental Baseball Club of Brooklyn organized games to raise money for the Sanitary Commission of Brooklyn to help sick and wounded soldiers. But as the war intensified, spectator attendance dropped, and many teams disbanded.

Amateur teams disappeared as players were called to war, and, according to Jonathan Fraser Light's The Cultural Encyclopedia of Baseball, New York alone "went from ninety-two to twenty-eight teams in the first two years of the war" (1997)." With the lack of players, and "with civilian anxieties focused on battlefield news, interest in playful contests waned." While the loss of players destroyed numerous teams, "the Civil War was important to the popularity of baseball because it helped spread the game to new enthusiasts." According to Kirsch, "the game became a feature of military life, and it took on new meanings in the context of war." Kirsch states: "In the course of time a few Confederate and Union prisoners of war were even allowed to indulge in ball games to keep them active and to help them pass the long hours of incarceration as they awaited repatriation." As a testament to baseball's importance during the war, Humanities published "The Game Endures: A Civil War Diary," containing excerpts from the diary of William H. Peel, a Confederate Lieutenant from Mississippi who was held prisoner in Sandusky, Ohio (1994). The diary offers several accounts of baseball in the prison yard. Peel writes: "The Confederate Club challenged the Southern Club. The game came off today and created more excitement than anything has done in the yard for a long time. There were several hundred dollars bet on the game by the club and outsiders." Peel's account of baseball during his detainment represents the game's value during the war, as well as the spread of baseball to Southerners, such as Lt. Peel.

Aside from being played in the prison yard, "during the war, truces were arranged at the front lines to play baseball games, though not between Northern and Southern teams." According to Kirsch, "soldier-athletes also believed that baseball was useful in preparing them for the more deadly contests of the battlefield. The Rochester Express noted that with 'the serious matter of war...upon our hands...physical education and the development of muscle should be engendered by the indulgence of baseball.'" Kirsch also quotes an article from the Clipper which praised the practice of athletic games in camp, noting "the beneficial effect they have on the spirits and health, and how they tend to alleviate the monotony of camp life." Aside from recreation alone, baseball clearly retained value as a diversion from the war and a means of physical fitness.
After the Civil War, according to Warren Goldstein, author of Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball, "baseball activity increased enormously" (1989). In accordance, Kirsch writes: "In April of 1865 Northern baseball players looked forward to both the imminent collapse of the Confederacy and also a brilliant new season of action. As they rejoiced that the four years of terrible carnage were coming to an end, they greeted the return of spring by flocking to ball fields instead of battlefields." The advent of unofficial championships and open professionalism after the Civil War "drew thousands to the ballparks, as the powerful [teams] fought for supremacy." Tygiel writes: "The years immediately following the Civil War would witness, in the words of the Chicago Tribune in 1866, 'the arrival of the Age of Baseball.' The Patterson New Jersey Press described a baseball 'frenzy' in the city, and the nearby Newark Advisor added in 1868, 'people have baseball on the brain to an extent hitherto unequalled.' The outbreak of baseball after the war undeniably signified a new era in the history of the game.

Historians have offered many reasons for the phenomenal growth of baseball. Krisch writes: "Regional rivalries, tours by prominent clubs, and intersectional matches helped smooth relations between North and South immediately after the Civil War," and "Northern and Southern journalists believed the tours of the great Eastern ball clubs would help heal the bitter wounds of the war." Tygiel describes baseball as "a symbol of reunification," citing the New York Clipper in 1886, which asserted that "the [baseball] fraternity should prove to the world that sectionalism is unknown in our national game." Tygiel further states: "The Civil War defined the United States as a nation," and in its aftermath, "baseball truly reigned, as...prematurely crowned..., the 'national game.'

The years surrounding the conflict of the Civil War significantly shaped baseball, triggering the game's rapid spread throughout the nation. Through the investigation of the culture and national sentiment of this period, historians have pinpointed the various circumstances that led to baseball's acceptance by the nation, and by analyzing the Civil War's impact on the country, they can further explain the extraordinary increase in the game's support after the war. The Civil War period remains a truly monumental era in both American history and the history of baseball, beginning a new age for the reunified nation and
generating an explosion of baseball fever.

Notes

2 Tygiel, 6.
3 Tygiel, 6.
6 Greenberg, 120.
7 Tygiel, 7.
9 Greenberg, 121.
10 Greenberg, 122.
11 Linda J. Borish, "Catherine Beecher and Thomas W. Higginson on the Need for Physical Fitness," pp. 94-103 in Major Problems in American Sport History, 100.
12 Borish, 96.
14 Kirsch (2003), 58.
17 Light, 162.
21 "The Game Endures...," 2.
22 Light, 162.
27 Goldstein, 113.
29 Tygiel, 13.
30 Kirsch (1998), 4
31 Tygiel, 14.
32 Tygiel, 14.

Bibliography


