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Reaction Paper 2: “Invisible Umpires”

Throughout American history, there have been many occurrences when baseball has been a representation of society at a particular moment in time. Examples of this can be seen with Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in 1947 at the dawn of the Civil Rights movement, as well the sport becoming increasingly popular in times of economic prosperity such as during the 1920’s. The 1920’s also brought another representation of society into the game of baseball, teams that were made up of members of the Ku Klux Klan. In his article, “Invisible Umpires: The Ku Klux Klan and Baseball in the 1920’s,” writer Felix Harcourt discusses the manner in which the Klan members played in games and the affect it had on society and baseball. Overall, Harcourt does an excellent job of portraying how the Klan’s participation in baseball was not received with a lot of attention, which in many ways made it as though they were accepted as part of American society, but at the same time defeated their possible goal of playing games in the first place which could have been to recruit members to their hateful organization. Harcourt acknowledges the problems and supporting factors to this theory of motivation, but points to the lack of acknowledgement of Klan baseball teams as a sign to how accepted they were in American culture in the 1920’s.

Harcourt searches throughout his article for the Klan’s main motivation to participate in these games. While he mentions that some historians believe it may have been to prevent their membership numbers from dwindling, he believes that the main reason was to assimilate themselves more with American society. He writes: “Other groups seemingly at the fringe of mainstream American society had adopted a similar approach to great success. The *American Hebrew* urged Jewish youths to seek success in sports to prove that they could ‘play on an equal footing’ and earn ‘added respect.’ A Utah team, the Salt Lake City Mormons, Elders of Bishops, which played at the turn of the century, had helped the church of ladder day saints prove its American character to nearby states, who recognized in the Mormons appreciation of baseball their common character with American ideals” (Harcourt 2). Other groups having done a similar thing throughout history, the Klan sought to become more popular in American society. Even in the 1920’s much of the American public was aware of the Klan’s violence and bigotry, and playing baseball was a way that the group could sway public image away from these things. “Steven Riess has argued that ‘baseball in the 1920’s was probably more successful in helping socialize and integrate Americans than ever before.’ This was true not only for Jews and Catholics, African Americans, and outlier sects like the house of David but also for the Klan” (Harcourt 3). While other groups had some success in assimilating into American culture through baseball, and the Klan did a similar thing, it did not necessarily help their cause. Their membership numbers continued to fall, as they had for years up until the 1920’s, and they did not become exactly more popular with Americans because of their games. Regardless, their participation in the sport is worth analyzing, nonetheless.

The main reason Harcourt analyzes the Klan’s baseball teams in his article is because he looks at it as a representation of American society and how the little attention Klan teams received shows how integrated their racism and bigotry was into America. “Klan teams were able to integrate themselves into the sporting life of cities and towns across the United States with barely any comment, let alone outrage. The Klan was apparently so much a part of this everyday milieu that even games against Jewish and Catholic teams did not often seem to provoke any particular interest in the newspapers or spark any violent protest” (Harcourt 13). There was little extra media attention on Klan games compared to other baseball games played at the time. This was true even when they played teams made up of groups they openly hated. In hindsight, hearing about the Klan playing baseball would expect to be met with outrage. However, participants and media barely batted an eye. “But when it came to day-to-day interactions, the Klan was so deeply woven into the fabric of American Society in the 1920’s that a Klan baseball team could almost win the championship in the nation’s capital and barely anyone would notice” (Harcourt 13). Harcourt supports his ideas with detail and reason, consistently mentioning newspaper sports sections and quoting their reaction to the Klan games. They read like how a sports section would talk about a Red Sox game today, mentioning few things other than details about the sport. Harcourt does an excellent job throughout his article showing how baseball truly displays just how normal the Klan was looked at in American life in the 1920’s.