The Evolution of 19th-Century American Baseball: How did commercialism and professionalism shape the formation of the National League?

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Introduction

Baseball, often referred to as America's pastime, began as a purely amateur endeavour based almost entirely in the New York area, rooted in social clubs and community recreation. With the rise of commercialism starting in the mid-1860s and the increasing profit accrued from games, the combination of competition, commercial interests, and professionalism created conditions for a significant cultural shift in baseball. Witness to this transformation was the National Association of Base-Ball Players (NABBP), founded in 1857 as the first organised governing body of baseball. The NABBP initially sought to standardise the rules and promote the game as a national sport, but soon found its disconnected and ineffective nature gave it little influence over its hundreds of member clubs.

This paper explores the complex factors that led to the rise of professionalism within baseball, focusing on the cultural, economic, and organisational shifts the game experienced during the 1850s and 1860s, and the resulting influence it had on the development of baseball as a commercial industry.

Chapter 1: The Early Days of Baseball

1.1 Creation of Baseball and the Founding of the Knickerbockers

Baseball, as we know it today, originated as a variant of a common style of bat-and-ball games which were popular in early 19th century America. Games involving bats, balls, fielders and bases were already widespread across the country, with local communities developing their own rules that best fit their culture and geography. Baseball would begin developing in New York and Brooklyn around the 1840s, with the most influential and well known club of this pioneer era being the Knickerbockers. *(Morris, pg 11)*

In 1842, a few bankers and other gentlemen decided to form a club to play ball games together for the purpose of exercise, recreation and socialisation. After having to relocate to New Jersey from their previous field in Brooklyn, on September 23rd, 1845, they formally organised themselves as the Knickerbocker Baseball Club. Alongside this formal founding, they declared a set of official rules by which they would play, and defined the game of baseball in writing for the first time. *(Adelman, pg 121-122)*

Little is known about the earliest era of baseball, as clubs from that time rarely documented their activities. This was likely because they did not consider their games to be particularly noteworthy. There were likely other clubs in New York playing similar ballgames before the Knickerbockers, but most of these clubs did not last long. They may have dissolved due to a lack of interest, the costs associated with running a ballclub, or the social stigma surrounding grown men playing what were considered children's games.

Compared to their contemporaries, the Knickerbockers were incredibly unique in regards to the documentation of their activities along with their perseverance as a club. This was demonstrated throughout the rest of the 1840s, as the Knickerbockers would enter a state of crisis, with many of its members seemingly losing interest in baseball, often skipping practices. This was exacerbated by the clubs difficulty in acquiring game equipment to even play, with the existence of the club often relying on a single members' ability to manufacture baseballs. As a result of these difficulties, along with little to no other clubs to play or socialise with, the Knickerbockers played and practiced within their own membership for the remainder of the decade. *(Adelman, pg 124) (Morris, pg 31)*

1.2 New York and Ballgames

New York City was a boiling pot of sports during the 19th century, with its rich sporting culture growing alongside the cities' urban development. Sports such as horse racing, yachting, and boxing would find great popularity thanks to the vast amount of wealth concentrated in the city and its cosmopolitan nature, and as such its sports were able to develop in ways that would be impossible anywhere else in the country. *(Adelman, pg 2-3)*

In the 1840s and for most of the 1850s, the most popular ballgame in New York was cricket. Despite being a British cultural touchstone, it managed to garner a decent amount of public interest by way of being a developed sport with skilled players and dedicated clubs. The existence of American cricket helps note a key cultural difference between American and British sporting culture, specifically in regards to ballgames. As opposed to the British, for whom a ballgame was their "national pastime" and had already grown and developed itself significantly by the time it arrived in America, American culture generally thought of ball games as little more than simple children's activities. This cultural disconnect, combined with the nationalistic tendency away from such a distinctly British activity, had made it difficult for cricket to appeal to Americans. *(Adelman, pg 100-101)*

Around the early 1850s however, a new attitude had developed regarding ball games and outdoor sport in general. In response to a perceived physical inferiority that resulted from the urban citylife of New York, the press and other cultural outlets began arguing that athletic and "manly" sports were necessary to counter this decline in physical health. A common comparison was made between British youth who partook in the healthy exercise provided by cricket compared to the American youth, who were typecast as being preoccupied with the indoor vices of billiards, cocktails and gambling. *(Adelman, pg 135-136) (Sullivan, pg 21)*

With newfound public interest in outdoor activity, ball games such as baseball and cricket were able to make significant strides in popularity throughout the 1850s, with the Knickerbockers being accompanied by two more dedicated baseball clubs in the Gotham Club and the Eagle Club, formed in 1850 and 1852 respectively. The main issue in promoting baseball however, was the previously mentioned cultural connotations surrounding ball games. No amount of arguments regarding health benefits or communal recreation would change the fact that ballplayers were grown men, often well-off and respected men at that, frequently meeting to participate in a children's game. And so, there would have to be an argument that legitimised ball games as a valid masculine activity. This led to baseball culture becoming entirely fixated on the concept of "manliness," with efforts to make the game appear as "manly" as possible. *(Adelman, pg 124) (Goldstein, pg 45)*

The definition of what made a sport "manly" was rarely spelled out, quickly turning into a vague yet highly valued concept in baseball culture. The main argument for baseball's "manliness" centred on the skills the game required—teamwork, reflexes, and athleticism—which were seen as reflections of a player's character. According to its supporters, excelling in baseball came from rigorous practice and dedication to one's team, requiring traits like courage, benevolence, and discipline. As a result, these skills were believed to be attainable only by someone possessing sufficient "manliness". *(Adelman, pg 106)*

Baseball was also used to demonstrate the "manliness" of the American youth as well, as the press and other critics frequently typecast the youth as physically weak, often negatively compared to their British counterparts. For instance, in response to a New York Times article that chastised the youth of New York for their lack of athletic passion, an anonymous writer proudly defended the sport of baseball and its "manly" qualities, claiming:

"The game of Base Ball is one, when well played, that requires strong bones, tough muscle and sound mind; and no athletic game is better calculated to strengthen the frame and develop a full, broad chest, testing a man's powers of endurance most severely."

"And if a representative from your office would take the trouble to visit the Ball grounds in Hoboken, Jersey City, Brooklyn, Harlem, or Morrisania, on almost any day in the week— he would there see youths, who, after working at the desk the greater part of the day in hard mental labor are here developing their physical force, and building up for themselves a constitution anything but "feeble and enervated." I will guarantee, that nowhere will you behold more manly forms, deep chests, and broad shoulders, with arms that a "short boy' might envy." (Sullivan, pg 21)

The cultural confines in which baseball was created and later popularised had a major influence on its later development. As the game found its roots in a metropolitan city like New York, ballclubs naturally found themselves reflecting elements of New York customs and practices, with its influence being seen in the joyful fellowship that defined antebellum baseball culture.

1.3 Antebellum Baseball Culture

New York in the 19th century was flush with different kinds of volunteer associations and circles which had become increasingly common around the city. These were often made to kindle and host the kind of communal relations that were lost as the city developed and became increasingly populous and urbanised. Often brought together by occupation, these types of associations and way of communal reclamation were what baseball clubs modelled themselves after. *(Adelman, pg 24-25)*

In the vein of these volunteer associations and communal organisations that were common within New York, ballclubs of this era were often multifaceted social circles whose membership and activities extended far outside the realm of sport. These clubs (sometimes referred to as fraternities) treated baseball as merely one of many activities they would participate in, often acting as a small community of like-minded gentlemen, brought together by baseball, but not defined by it. *(Morris, pg 123) (Goldstein, pg 17)*

The culture that these clubs fostered was based around a sense of joyful fellowship and community, with core values of self-control, virtue and sportsmanship, combining to form a sense of “manly” decorum which clubs would attempt to uphold at all times. Upholding a club's reputation was the most important task of a player, and so-called “boyish” acts like truancy, swearing or questioning of the umpire would usually be discouraged through fines, with repeat offences resulting in suspensions and eventual expulsion. *(Goldstein, pg 35)*

Ballclubs dedicated much of their time to social events, taking the form of balls, parties and feasts, treating them with almost as much importance as the ballgame itself. Feasts and other social customs helped demonstrate the camaraderie and community of the club in a way entirely detached from baseball, and became of special importance when interacting with other clubs. Due to the infrequency of interclub matches during this time, combined with the cultural importance placed upon these events, it became common practice for hosting clubs to accommodate their visitors as lavishly as possible after their matches. These activities continued even outside of the baseball season, often through ice skating in the winter months, with clubs often staying active yearlong. *(Morris, pg 102-103) (Goldstein, pg 19-20)*

These social customs and practices were the defining traits of antebellum baseball culture, kept in place to ensure a level of fine behaviour and “manly” decorum within the tight knit, small community of New York baseball clubs. As the game grew in popularity during the 1850s however, the game began to develop serious and passionate competition, which would slowly erode the social events and communal identity that had defined ballclubs up to this point.

1.4 The Nature of Competition

With the amount of active clubs rising throughout the decade, interclub play had become far more common, and as clubs began openly hosting matches for the public, baseball proved itself a popular attraction for spectators. The energy and excitement of a team-based competitive ballgame was a relatively new phenomenon in New York, and this energy, combined with spectator gambling, helped the game to appeal to an otherwise uninterested public, along with helping shed the games cultural connotations as a childish activity within the wider populace.

This competitive energy was also new to the players on the field, as clubs had to deal with the effects that competition brought to the game. It seems clubs reacted differently to this development, with clubs and players seemingly unsure how to best utilise this new form of excitement. For much of the 1850s, the heavy emphasis and insistence on a clubs decorum and social practices helped keep this energy from developing into any kind of animosity or serious rivalry between clubs. Respect and admiration for the opposing team was always supposed to be upheld, no matter how one-sided or brutal any given ballgame might have been. More than anything, a baseball player played with his club's reputation on the line, thinking it better to lose respectably and move on rather than to potentially sour the club's reputation with a “boyish” outburst. *(Goldstein, pg 32-33) (Morris, pg 123)*

The social connections and relations that ballclubs valued also helped keep true competition from developing. Any kind of animosity that may have been caused by a game was minimised by the post-game social rituals that clubs would participate in, most notably in a post-game feast, in which even a club that was blown out on the field would be able to have a joyful and exuberant celebration with their opponent. *(Goldstein, pg 19)*

The way ball clubs viewed and depicted skill also helped keep serious competition from developing. Since baseball skill was directly correlated with “manly” qualities, there wasn’t much credence given to the idea of natural ability or talent. As such, many clubs believed that as long as they dedicated themselves to practice and kept themselves and their club to a “manly” standard, they would naturally achieve success. *(Goldstein, pg 21)*

As baseball grew in popularity however, and specifically as spectators and the press started to pay attention to the game, the prospect of fame and prestige likely inspired a new level of competitiveness within many ballclubs. The values and decorum that previously mitigated any serious competition was weakened not only by the introduction of spectator interest, but also by the games overall growth, with newer clubs – who had been introduced to the game through interclub play – being more interested in the competitive aspects of the game rather than the physical or social benefits.

This resulted in an increase of competitive interest overtime, and a slow degradation of the social norms and practices that had defined early baseball culture. This was demonstrated by the growing importance and popularity regarding championship games over the 1860s, which often produced high spectator attendance and major press coverage. Despite its popularity among the public, there still existed a group of clubs who disliked the idea of a championship on principle, as they saw it as a pointless cause of friction and rivalry between clubs. These clubs still upheld respectability and fellowship as a more valuable trait than mere skill, and saw no point in a competition that would only prioritise the latter. As a reporter from *The Clipper* writes in 1863:

“It is unquestionably for the best interests of the game that matches for the championship, together with the title of champion, should be entirely done away with, and the sooner the leading men in the fraternity frown this class of matches down the better. They lead to the alienation of clubs from each other, that hitherto have been fast friends; they create a feeling of rivalry that results in endless disputes, and a great deal of ill feeling among members of the different clubs principally concerned in the contests; and above all they are the means of affording hearty encouragement to that spirit of gambling that knows neither honor, truth or justice in its efforts to obtain success.” (Goldstein, pg 60)

Overall, the development of competition within baseball had shifted cultural priorities from a focus on social relations and joyful fellowship towards simply showing prowess and skill on the field. This was likely caused by the growth in popularity the game experienced, both in the introduction of spectators and general public interest within the game, and in the increasing number of clubs who played. Spectators, who would’ve had little knowledge or care towards a club's social relations, simply preferred the most entertaining and skilled game on the field. Likewise, clubs enjoyed the spotlight and attention that skilled play brought them, and therefore were willing to sacrifice the social elements of the game in favour of competition and victory.

Chapter 2: The National Association Of Base-Ball Players

2.1 The First Convention of the NABBP

As baseball grew into a leading sport within New York throughout the 1850s, forming a proper organisation for the game was a fairly obvious step to make. The main three clubs of the early 1850's, the Gotham Club, the Eagle Club and the Knickerbockers, had already hosted frequent meetings to discuss and decide a standard ruleset among themselves, and as more clubs became involved in the game, these meetings naturally evolved into the formation of a larger, proper organisation. *(Sullivan, pg 16)*

This organisation would be founded with two key goals in mind, to define a standard ruleset for the game, and to help grow the game into a national sport. With these two goals in mind, twenty two New York clubs came together to form the National Association of Base-Ball Players (NABBP) and on the 29th of January, 1857, its first convention was held. The delegates from each participating club then elected a series of officials to govern the association, defined a standard ruleset that every member club would play by and proudly declared baseball as America's national pastime. *(Sullivan, pg 22-24) (Wright, pg 3)*

The NABBP was no different from any other regional sports association, it acted as a collective of clubs, who elected officials to make larger decisions for the game. The unusual thing about the NABBP was its claim as a "national" organisation. Despite the confident and passionate speeches proclaiming baseball as the "national pastime", the Knickerbocker rules were practically unknown outside the New York area. This commitment to baseball being the "national pastime" despite its regional status was likely fueled by the passion that the clubs involved had infused in the ballgame, and having viewed its significant growth in New York, were confident it would spread across the country if given the opportunity.

Declaring baseball as specifically an American pastime was also viewed as a major step in developing a distinctly American sports culture. Baseball was a game that many felt represented American values, history and national character, and the pride that it created likely helped put it a step above the other sports that it competed with in terms of public interest. *(Adelman, pg 135-136)*

It also may be likely that they were using "baseball" to, somewhat disingenuously, also refer to similar bat-and-ball games, such as the Massachusetts game and town ball. As stated in a *Spirit of the Times* article regarding the first convention of the NABBP, it claims baseball's status as a "national pastime" by its old age, American

origin and widespread play among the Northern States, seemingly considering other bat-and-ball games to be “baseball”, despite them often playing by rulesets that differed from the Knickerbocker rules promoted by the NABBP. *(Sullivan, pg 22-23)*

The NABBP, by any reasonable sense, was not a national organisation, and for its first few years of existence, the Knickerbocker rules and the NABBP’s member clubs were still well isolated to New York and the surrounding areas. Since the NABBP more or less acted as a regional association for its first few years of existence, it would begin to find difficulty governing baseball as it grew to a national scale over the course of its existence.

2.2 The NABBP as an organisation

The NABBP largely functioned as a rule-making and social organisation, rarely forcing its member clubs to adhere to any specific principles aside from the rules of baseball. The way that the NABBP functioned day to day was less like an organisation or governing body as we would think of it today, and more of a messy collective of clubs, who would meet up once a year to socialize and vote in elections and rulemaking. The result of this style of organisation was an ineffective, bloated organisation that represented the national pastime only in name.

The main interaction between clubs and the NABBP was in the national convention, in which club delegates would have the opportunity to network and socialise with other clubs, participate in elections and votes regarding new legislation, and generally stay connected with the wider baseball culture. Aside from the annual convention however, baseball events and activities during this period were entirely organised and hosted by the clubs themselves, with only a nominal connection to the NABBP. “Championships” at the time were simply matches between two highly regarded teams, without the formal organisation or regulation that modern leagues provide. The primary organisers of these games were individual club secretaries, who would network with other clubs to request, arrange and schedule matches, completely independent of the NABBP. *(Wright, pg 11-12) (Morris, pg 140) (Goldstein, pg 112) (Adelman, pg 147)*

This meant that despite nominally being members of the same organisation, clubs had little actual connection or relationship to each other, aside from whatever relationship they decided to pursue on their own. This disconnect was further exacerbated by the sheer size the NABBP would grow to. Compared to the leagues and other governing bodies that would appear later, the NABBP had an incredibly low bar of entry, simply requiring a delegate of the joining club to be sent to the annual convention. This low bar of entry, combined with the fact that it was a national organisation, resulted in the late NABBP boasting hundreds of member clubs spread across the entire country. *(Wright, pg 186)*

The actual authority of the NABBP in regards to its member clubs was incredibly limited, and it was rarely ever able to enforce its guidelines outside of exceptional circumstances. It seems the only offence that was controversial and scandalous enough to spur the NABBP to serious action was regarding players being paid to intentionally lose games, typically by third-party gamblers. Excluding those heavily publicised incidents, there is little evidence of the NABBP otherwise punishing or fining clubs for violating its guidelines. *(Goldstein, pg 90-91)*

The most flagrant example of the NABBP's impotence is in its battle against professionalism throughout the 1860s. Having outlawed the practice in 1859, the ban had little to no effect in discouraging professional clubs, with the NABBP entirely unable to enforce the rule. The NABBP would later threaten professional clubs with expulsion, but these were never followed up nor, nor did they ever name any violating clubs in its legislature, only addressing the issue in vague terms. *(Burk, pg 36) (Morris, pg 170)*

One specific rule implemented in 1859 was the banning of post-game feasts between clubs after a match, supposedly because they had become mere extensions of on-field rivalry and competition. However, there exist many reports of banquets and feasts between clubs throughout the 1860s, and while certainly some of these may have not been "postgame" feasts per se, it indicates that clubs weren't afraid to flaunt NABBP guidelines for their own enjoyment, and the lack of punishment or even acknowledgement by the NABBP of these violations demonstrated the lack of power the organisation had over its member clubs. *(Burk, pg 18)*

The lethargic enforcement of the NABBP's guidelines was likely the result of the covert and unprovable nature of the violations (such as professionalism) combined with the sheer size of the organisation. The judicial council of the NABBP would've only been functional on the scale of a local organisation, around the size that the NABBP started off as. It's also likely the elected officials who ran the NABBP simply weren't interested in the administrative work of having to investigate dozens of clubs, and instead focused on activities that they actually cared about, typically in tinkering with the rules of baseball or otherwise focusing on spreading and promoting the game.

In conclusion, while the NABBP was useful in standardising the rules of baseball and helped spread the game outside of New York, it quickly found itself an increasingly bloated and weak organisation, unable to effectively manage its member clubs and enforce its guidelines. Once baseball had grown into a nationwide sport, the NABBP served only as an official mechanism to decide the rules of baseball, too distant and powerless to have any other say over the clubs who actually represented and organised the game.

Chapter 3: Commercialism and Professionalism

3.1 Revolvers and the early professionals

The NABBP officially forbade professional players from participating in its member clubs in 1859. Despite this clear-cut rule against the practice, clubs would covertly compensate their players in various ways throughout the entire history of the association, with little action from the NABBP.

Professional players during this era were typically referred to as “revolvers”, as they would leave and join clubs for no clear reason (“revolve”), leading to assumptions of taking under the table payment. Star pitcher Jim Creighton is generally considered the first revolver, as he was likely compensated to play for the Excelsiors in 1860. As revolvers had appeared before the widespread commercialism of baseball, they tended to be paid off by individual wealthy club members, purely to uphold or otherwise improve the reputation and ability of their club. *(Morris, pg 168-169)*

The initial reaction to these early professionals was fairly limited and restrained, with little complaint or objection from the majority of clubs. Considering the ban on professionalism took place in 1859, there were likely more paid players before Creighton, although the lack of any documentation indicates that it was a rare occurrence that wasn’t given much attention. To many clubs, a couple players being paid here and there wasn’t that big a deal, especially as the possibility of a club raising the wealth necessary to hire a significant number of players would’ve been near impossible. *(Morris, pg 168-169)*

The main force pushing to prohibit professionalism in 1859 was a group of dedicated amateurists headed by Frank Pidgeon of the Eckford Club, who believed that the introduction of player compensation would result in the destruction of the social and communal aspects of the game.

“How would you like to see those you depended upon to uphold the name and fame of the club bought up like cattle, or, if not bought, would you like to see the bribe repeatedly offered to them, to desert their colors. These things have occurred, and it was thought best to nip them in the bud… This rule was used to protect ourselves against the influence of money, and give ‘honest poverty’ a fair chance, and in a struggle for supremacy between clubs to let skill, courage, and endurance decide who shall be the victors.” – Frank Pidgeon, in response to Porter’s Spirit, (Thorn, pg 120-121)

The outcome of this ruling didn’t especially matter beyond a symbolic victory for amateurism. Neither individual clubs nor the NABBP had much power to address the situation effectively, and although several players were suspected of being

"revolvers" and of receiving under-the-table payments, proving these claims was challenging. Clubs often concealed their professional players by assigning them to fake jobs or other disguises, making it difficult to uncover their true status. *(Thorn, pg 81)*

3.2 Club Expenses and the Advent of Commercialism

Money and baseball have always been interconnected. Clubs constantly had to manage expenses, including costs for equipment, renting fields, travel expenses, and hosting events. To sustain themselves financially, clubs relied on several methods, the most common being member contributions, typically collected as monthly dues and fines. In some cases, clubs also had non-playing members—dedicated and passionate spectators who took part in club activities beyond the games themselves—contribute to the club's financial upkeep. *(Morris, pg 162-164) (Goldstein, pg 71)*

This method, while able to hold together the early clubs, grew inconsistent and often unreliable as baseball grew in popularity. Many clubs weren't able to rely on non-playing members, not being fortunate enough to have such a dedicated base of support. Likely as a result of increased competitiveness in the game, the amount of active players within a club had decreased over time, as in the search for victory, clubs would frequently neglect their less skilled players in favour of their best nine. This resulted in many players getting frustrated at having to collectively bear the brunt of expenses that were only being used to serve a small portion of the club, marking a divide between playing members and non-playing members that strained club relations. *(Morris, pg 164)*

Club expenses were not a trivial amount of money, as demonstrated by the games early demographic being made up almost exclusively of middle to high class gentlemen. The cost of equipment, grounds and uniforms alone would've already been a significant drain on clubs, but there was also the travel expenses often necessary to play other clubs, in addition to the banquets and parties that clubs often hosted.

This meant the future for most ballclubs moving into the 1860s was uncertain, and while most were able to keep themselves afloat for the time being, there would need to be a new, permanent solution to the issue of funding. This would be found in an obvious, but yet untapped and risky method in the form of admission fees for spectators.

Admission fees were not entirely unheard of in early baseball. They were somewhat common for large events, such as the earliest known instance — an all-star series between New York and Brooklyn in 1858 — and for charity or prize matches. Despite

this precedent, most ball clubs were reluctant to introduce entry fees for regular games due to two main reasons. *(Goldstein, pg 70)*

First, the majority of games were played on open fields, making it nearly impossible to enforce an entry fee. For fees to become a regular practice, clubs would need enclosed venues, ideally dedicated to baseball. However, the cost of building such fields was prohibitive for most clubs, requiring either outside investment or a wealthy club owner to fund the venture. *(Morris, pg 165)*

Second, there was significant controversy around the idea of ball clubs directly profiting from the game. The concept of a "professional baseball player" was viewed with suspicion, and commercialising the sport in such a direct way was seen as a radical step, only considered under the financial pressures that clubs faced. *(Morris, pg 165) (Morris, pg 169)*

Despite these worries and the general hesitancy around the idea, the first enclosed baseball stadium was built in 1862 as a reconfiguration of the Union Skating Grounds in Brooklyn, with the owner William Cammeyer charging 10 cents admission for spectators and inviting high-profile clubs to play on his grounds for a portion of the gate money. *(Thorn, pg 134)*

The result was financially successful, as while spectators were initially averse to begin paying for baseball, their hesitancy quickly subsided. The Union Grounds eventually proved financially successful enough to inspire other business owners and venture capitalists to begin investing in their own ballparks elsewhere in the country, eventually becoming commonplace after the Civil War. The gate money given to participating clubs would prove a controversial development, as while it had been argued that clubs taking a portion of the gate money was not necessarily a sign of professional play, as much of the funds would presumably be put towards club expenses, it still represented an explicitly commercial approach towards the ballgame. *(Morris, pg 166-168)*

Clubs who began to play on these enclosed grounds would quickly find themselves making a comfortable profit off of their play, able to make more than enough money to keep themselves afloat. Players quickly noticed the surplus money that their club was pulling in, which within some clubs resulted in threats of strikes and desertion if they weren’t also given a cut of the money. Soon enough, player compensation had become commonplace within many clubs, and as baseball’s popularity slowly grew to encompass the entire country, the increasing number of enclosed ballparks and new commercial motivation given to skilled clubs had come together to form a brand new industry rooted in the game of baseball. *(Morris, pg 169)*

The reaction within the wider baseball culture was mixed, as there existed a large portion of clubs who were against this development, and remained steadfast in their

support of purely amateur play. Many of these acknowledged the necessity of entrance fees for the sake of clubs financial difficulties, with some clubs considering themselves amateur despite taking in gate money. However, there did remain a small minority of clubs – such as the Knickerbockers – who were firm enough in their beliefs to outright refuse to play with any club who took in gate money. *(Burk, pg 27) (Goldstein, pg 126)*

The introduction of entrance fees to baseball did more than just keep baseball clubs financially afloat — it revealed the substantial profits that could be made from the game. As clubs began to generate revenue from ticket sales, they realised that baseball had the potential to be a profitable venture, transforming the sport from a recreational pastime into a commercial enterprise.

3.3 The Post-War Boom and the end of covert professionalism

As opposed to the professionals of the early 1860s, who were acquired out of pocket by club members, and compensated purely to uphold and improve a clubs reputation on the field, a new kind of professionalism was developing as clubs slowly became profitable businesses. Clubs now had a financial motivation to play the best nine they could find, as to draw as many spectators as possible to their games. This resulted in a boom in professionalism and revolving over the mid-late 1860s, as the wealth necessary to hire players had now become accessible to any popular club. *(Morris, pg 8)*

With the introduction of commercialism and enclosed stadiums, alongside baseball's rising popularity across the country post-Civil War, a new era of the game had begun. As high profile clubs had begun raking in thousands of dollars off of their games, revolvers would become an increasingly common phenomenon across the NABBP. By the end of the 1860s, nearly all of the highly regarded clubs within the NABBP had professional players in their ranks. *(Goldstein, pg 84)*

As previously noted, the NABBP’s attempts to curb professionalism within its member clubs were entirely ineffective, and in 1868, they officially allowed professionalism, categorising its member clubs as either amateur or professional. While the distinction between amateur and professional clubs was purely descriptive, as no restrictions or benefits were given to either type of club, it allowed professional clubs to be less secretive about the status of their players which helped form the first fully-professional baseball club in the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings. *(Adelman, pg 166-167)*

The first all-professional club was the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings, who went on a famously undefeated cross-country tour under the leadership of club captain/secretary Harry Wright. With eleven players (including Wright and a backup player) on the payroll, alongside the expensive nature of touring, even this

picture-esque idea of a touring professional squad ended the season barely breaking even. Despite the on-field success and major popularity of the tour, the sheer expenses of a professional nine were staggering. Player salaries totaled around eight to nine thousand, with the average player salary being $870, significantly more than a highly paid manual worker of the time. *(Burk, pg 36-39)*

The next season for the Red Stockings was a similar on-field success, albeit with a single loss compared to their previous undefeated record, but once again proved costly and after expenses resulted in little profit for the club. After two seasons that both barely broke even, the Red Stockings reverted to an amateur club, despite their incredible performance on the field. Being the first popular example of a fully-professional club, the Red Stockings had a major influence on the development of amateurism, which would experience a major boost in interest after the financial failure of the Red Stockings. *(Goldstein, pg 117-120)*

Amateurism as a general idea had existed for many years, representing an ideal that baseball should exist as a purely amateur game, later developing into the idea that the highest level of play would naturally be represented by amateur clubs. Older forms of amateurism criticised the development of commercialism and professionalism on the grounds that it would destroy the social and communal relations that were prioritised in the antebellum era of baseball. The new form of amateurism, reacting to the outcome of clubs like the Red Stockings, believed that professional clubs were unsustainable by their very nature, and that the virtues and tradition involved in amateur play would eventually prove the ideal form of baseball. *(Goldstein, pg 120)*

The angle towards idealising amateur play was a result of the clubs who were involved in the movement, typically older clubs who used to preside within the upper echelon of baseball, and were seeking a way back to the popularity and respect that they had lost over the decade. This motive explains the later creation of the national amateur association as well as their indifference towards the immense popularity of localised amateur baseball. Amateurists weren't interested in the overall prevalence of amateur play, it was solely the prominence of it that mattered to them. Therefore, despite amateur baseball booming in popularity after the Civil War, with amateur clubs and associations appearing across the country in great numbers, all amateurists seemed to care about was the fact that the general public and press were focused on the activities of professional clubs and not themselves. *(Goldstein, pg 125-126)*

To promote their ideology, amateurists often described the antebellum era of baseball as a sort of "golden age", typically accompanying fantastical and blatantly ahistorical descriptions of the older ballgame. Amateurists would frequently describe a return to amateur play as some kind of panacea to perceived ills of the game. *(Goldstein, pg 123-124)*

What amateurists didn’t realise, or at least refused to acknowledge, was the overall shift in baseball culture that had occurred over the 1860s. The cultural dynamics of antebellum baseball – namely a key focus on recreation and community – had been almost entirely lost after the Civil War, with the key elements of baseball now taking the form of competition and skill. Amateurists acted as if simply taking money out of the game would somehow bring back the social and recreational aspects of the game, rather than just replicate the current professional culture with an amateur coat of paint.

Chapter 4: The NAPBBP and the National League

4.1 The Schism of the National Association

Due to the rising conflict between the two groups, the NABBP reverted its legislation that had categorised clubs as professional or amateur, removing the nominal distinction that they had added a couple years prior. This ended up being the last straw for both amateurists and professionals, who, both equally unhappy with the NABBP, went to form their own independent associations. Both of these new organisations would function nearly identically to the NABBP, with little difference in constitution aside from their rulings on professionalism, failing to innovate or meaningfully develop on the structural shortcomings faced by the NABBP.

The National Association of Amateur Base-Ball Players (NAABBP), founded in 1870, would find itself an inefficient organisation that failed to adequately meet the needs of amateur ballplayers, and proved itself unable to grab public interest compared to the professional association. After an initial boom of interest, it quickly fizzled out of public perception, and a lack of interest caused it to eventually fold only four years after its founding. *(Burk, pg 40-41)*

The NAABBP's failure can be attributed to the regional and state baseball organisations that had developed throughout the 1860s. These local organisations filled the role and served the functions that a national one was supposed to, except with more efficiency and flexibility, offering more control to its participating clubs. With these local associations having essentially taken over amateur baseball, there was little reason for most amateur clubs or players to even think about joining a national one. *(Morris, pg 222) (Goldstein, pg 129)*

Another issue with the NAABBP came in the definition of "amateur". As a part of its constitution, the NAABBP would forbid its member clubs from hosting games with admission fees. This was controversial among its member clubs, as many of them had been taking in money from gate receipts for years, and still regarded themselves as amateurs. After some deliberation within the association, they eventually decided to allow its clubs to take in gate receipts, which called into question the "amateur" ethos that the NAABBP was supposed to represent. *(Goldstein, pg 126)*

In conclusion, the NAABBP was a last ditch effort to bring amateur play back to the forefront of baseball, and a last hurrah for the ideology of amateurism. It managed to survive for a few years, mostly due to the integration of college baseball, but as previously described was unable to gain interest with other forms of amateur baseball, eventually dissolving in 1874. *(Burk, pg 41)*

4.2 The National Association of Professional Base-Ball Players

The National Association of Professional Base-Ball Players (NAPBBP), founded in 1871 as the first exclusively professional baseball organisation would have to face new challenges and roadblocks, yet undiscovered by its predecessors. For a professional league like the NAPBBP to function properly, its member clubs had to be able to pull in reliable profits, ideally with its clubs focused in popular baseball markets playing on scheduled tours to ensure consistent spectators to view competitive, quality games. *(Goldstein, pg 134)*

In order to do this, the NAPBBP would have to be far more efficient and organised than its predecessor. It would require an organised game schedule and association planned tours, it would require market research and team screening in order to figure out the largest and most reliable baseball markets. In all, it would require a great structural departure from the hands-off nature of its predecessor.

The NAPBBP failed to meaningfully develop in this way, and as a result, suffered massively. The NAPBBP had no organised schedule, with clubs being given the ultimate responsibility to arrange their own games, with no limits or expectations enforced by the association. Clubs were also allowed to play against any team they pleased, even outside of the association, which allowed teams to balloon their win total against weak opponents. *(Burk, pg 41)*

This made club profits incredibly inconsistent, as clubs could do as little or as much touring as they pleased, which made overall league profits incredibly unpredictable and unstable. This was compounded by the ever-increasing expenses that clubs would have to pay to even have the opportunity to play a proper season, with the high costs involved in touring alongside rampant revolving causing a constant inflation in club expenses.

Players in the NAPBBP were granted complete freedom of movement and due to the intense competition and lack of coordination between owners, were able to gain immense bargaining power over their clubs. The average club would be paying over ten thousand dollars in overall players salaries, a figure which would often inflate each season as players revolved from club to club. Due to the massive expenses involved in running a professional ballclub, the number of clubs within the association would fluctuate around a dozen per season, with an average season resulting in a couple of those folding due to bankruptcy. The major cause of this was a lack of screening within the NAPBBP's member clubs, as the induction process consisted of a relatively small $10 induction fee, with no other checks or screening process involved. This resulted in several clubs who, despite lacking the funds, talent or local market necessary to function as a professional team, still found their way into the NAPBBP. *(Burk, pg 46)*

The NAPBBP had mirrored the haphazard and hands-off nature of the NABBP, except now in a professional capacity where the lack of league-wide administration resulted in a convoluted, unstable mess of an organisation, only able to keep itself alive due to the lack of competition in a burgeoning and yet undeveloped industry. The key issue the NAPBBP faced was the lack of connection and communication between club owners, as throughout the existence of the NAPBBP, they constantly sparred with each other over players and markets, desperately trying to get a leg up over their competition in an attempt to not to go bankrupt.

From the players perspective, while the NAPBBP was incredibly lucrative, with players having the ability to effectively bargain with clubs over their working conditions and salaries, their agency was purely on an individual scale and solely relied on the mismanagement of the NAPBBP's club owners. The lack of collective organisation between players meant that they would not have lasting power over their employers, and the reckless abandon that many players revolved with had resulted in significant job insecurity, as their employers would go out of business at an alarming rate.

4.3 The Formation of the National League

The National League (NL) was the brainchild of William Hulbert, the owner of the Chicago White Stockings. He had been a stockholder in the White Stockings since 1870, and had kept an eye on baseball and its financial potential for years. After working his way into an executive position within the White Stockings and bearing witness to the many flaws within the NAPBBP, he began enacting plans to create a more efficient and powerful baseball organisation. *(Burk, pg 51-53)*

The National League would make significant changes to guarantee consistent profit among its clubs, introducing a league organised game schedule which ensured consistent play between all of its clubs along with enforcing strict territorial control among its clubs by refusing to admit multiple clubs to a single cities' market. This gave the league a territorial monopoly over the most profitable baseball markets across the country, and ensured that its clubs wouldn't needlessly compete with each other in smaller markets. *(Burk, pg 54)*

With these changes – alongside the introduction of a vigorous screening process and heavy restrictions on player agency – Hulbert began conspiring and organising with other clubs, and in 1876, completely supplanted the NAPBBP with the brand new National League. *(Goldstein, pg 147)*

Conclusion

The shift in baseball culture that occurred during the 1860s, from a communal recreational game into a commercialised competitive game, was a development that the NABBP was entirely unprepared for. The competitive elements of the game had become the main focus of the game, and as highly skilled clubs became the most popular and renowned clubs within baseball, the seeds were laid for professionalism to develop once commercial opportunities developed.

The NABBP itself was seemingly only kept alive due to historical importance and its convenience as a rulemaking body. The amount of clubs it fostered became pointless, as nothing truly connected or organised them together as members of the NABBP. The resulting disconnect and lack of organisation within baseball wasn't a serious issue during the amateur era, but once baseball had proven itself as a profitable business, the NABBP had no control over the resulting effects of commercialism, both unable to effectively limit the practice, and unwilling to potentially legitimise and take control of it. This made professional baseball incredibly haphazard and disconnected, with clubs unable to establish any larger form of organisation to stabilise or effectively capitalise on the newly developed industry.

The creation of the NAPBBP didn't fix this issue, as it made no effort to better professional club organisation, and for the most part replicated the functions and constitution of the NABBP. The resulting organisation simply took the messy, expensive and unpredictable nature of 1860s professionalism and continued it in a larger capacity. With this in mind, it was inevitable that another competitor, such as the National League, would appear and crush the NAPBBP.

The legacy of the NABBP and the rest of the early pioneers of baseball is immense, and despite their many failures and shortcomings, none of them could have expected their little New York game would grow to such a monumental scale, both geographically and culturally. Although modern American baseball would find itself defined by the National League, the NABBP were the ones who pioneered and allowed the game to reach such heights in the first place, out of little more than passion and dedication to spread a game that had brought them nothing but joy.

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