

ONE

Play it as a business.

A. G. SPALDING

A. G. Spalding and the Development of Baseball Professionalism



A. G. Spalding established professional baseball as a stable commercial enterprise—what he termed a “systematic business”—and earned a fortune providing sports paraphernalia to the American public. (National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, N.Y.)

Albert Goodwill Spalding's mother had misgivings when, 150 years ago, her precocious teenager left their Rockford, Illinois, home to be paid to pitch for Chicago's Excelsiors Club. Under the prevailing rules of the national amateur association, the Excelsiors, a "gentlemen's athletic club," was not allowed to pay players to perform. To circumvent this situation, the team offered Spalding a position as a grocery clerk for \$40 a week, although his primary duty in his new job was to pitch for the Excelsiors. Mrs. Spalding criticized her son for accepting anything of pecuniary value to play a game. Spalding felt differently: "I was not able to understand how it could be right to pay an actor, or a singer, or an instrumentalist for entertaining the public, and wrong to pay a ballplayer for doing exactly the same thing in his way." Although his first visit to Chicago proved short-lived—the Excelsiors folded in a month—it marked his initiation into a world where men made their living playing the game of baseball, an enterprise that would consume his attention for the next half-century.

The life of Albert Goodwill Spalding exemplifies the evolving business and financial side of the game of baseball. He recognized the need to firmly establish the amusement venture as a stable enterprise, and he fiercely promoted the sport. Spalding understood better than most that this game, this pastoral pastime, was an American gold mine, which he would develop as an entrepreneur without peer for almost a half century from the late 1860s until 1908.

Perhaps more than any other figure in the game, Spalding was responsible for establishing professional baseball as a respectable and profitable commercial undertaking, which, although not in the same financial league as coal, steel, or railroads, was of far more daily importance to the public. He fostered the myth of a Cooperstown genesis for the sport in order to construct an American origin for a game actually derived from the British game of rounders. Spalding staunchly promoted the right of club owners to direct the baseball enterprise as a "systematic business." And his Chicago-based sporting goods business, which would supply the balls and bats needed to play the game all over the country, would make him a wealthy man.

The Origins of Professional Sports

Sports have their origins in the basic human instincts for self-protection, religious observance, entertainment, and amusement. In order to survive, primeval humans practiced their fighting abilities, building endurance and skill that would provide food and self-defense. Physical play evolved into ritual hunts, stylized battles, displays of status, and religious ceremonies.

All civilizations have enjoyed organized sport competitions. Sponsors paid Greek athletes for winning athletic events, most importantly in the Olympiad. The word *athletics* itself derives from the Greek word *athon*, meaning "prize." Ancient athletes brought glory to their home cities and, as a result, received honors, triumphant recognition, and payments (including tax exemption for life). Organized sports began as a simple diversion for its participants, much as baseball did in American cities in the 1840s. Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., however, sports in Greece became an entertainment for spectators who would pay entrance fees to watch the contests. Athletes won prizes that differed according to the popularity of each event.

Professional sports became an employment opportunity for poor athletes when wealthy patrons began to support their training. Aristotle is said to have paid the training expenses of a boxer named Philammon. Roman athletes formed a *xystus*, a professional organization that ran the contests, distributed the prizes, and made certain its members were duly honored. This ancient guild attempted to protect the rights of its members, representing athletes before the emperor Trajan when he decreased their special allowance. In this representation, however, the *xystus* was not as successful as the Major League Baseball Players Association would prove to be in the 1970s.

Nineteenth-Century Sports Entertainment

Organized sports became a fixture of European and American entertainment during the nineteenth century, and participants were compensated for their performances. Professional cricket was played in England starting in mid-century and was transported to the United

States, where it remained more popular than baseball until the Civil War. However, cricket proved too slow for the strong-willed, fast-paced Americans. Matches would take days to complete. Cricket also required manicured lawns for the bowler, playing conditions that were not readily available in the United States.

Individual, as opposed to team, sports also flourished in nineteenth-century America. Although boxing matches were generally outlawed, bare-knuckled pugilists fought for prizes in matches lasting hours under the blazing sun. In 1849, Yankee Sullivan and Tom Hyer fought a well-publicized \$10,000 championship prizefight. County fairs featured foot-racing (called *pedestrianism*) and horse-racing events staged by promoters. Gamblers flocked to cockfighting, a common pastime dating back seven hundred years in England and normally staged at local pubs.

Baseball began as an outdoor diversion in America's growing East Coast cities in the 1840s. On late weekday afternoons and weekends, young men from the newly urbanized, white-collar workforce began to play a variation of the bat-and-ball games that had been common in America for centuries. The game of baseball first took root in Manhattan, where participants formed social and athletic clubs, with the first, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, founded on September 23, 1845. A club maintained strict internal rules to insure appropriate behavior. Rather than being paid for their athletic exhibitions, members paid an initiation fee of \$2 and annual dues of \$5 to participate in the contests, which were always followed by a sumptuous dinner.

The Knickerbockers was an exclusive gentlemen's social organization limited to forty members. It leased a room in New York's Fijux's Hotel to conduct regular business meetings. If members breached the rule against swearing or similar verbal impropriety, the club assessed a fine. Arguing with the decision of the umpire during a match, for example, would cost a player twenty-five cents.

These inaugural participants in what was to become the national pastime were amateurs in name and in fact. They enjoyed playing the game because outdoor recreation promoted good health and because participation in the club contributed to good fellowship. Sportsmanship and fair play stood at the core of the upper-middle-class values of these early baseball competitors.

When the Knickerbockers had difficulty finding a field to play their games at Madison Square in the crowded southern end of Manhattan, they crossed the Hudson River by ferry to Hoboken, New Jersey, where they leased the cricket pitch at the Elysian Fields picnic grove for weekend play. After many intracub contests, on June 19, 1846, they played the rival New York Base Ball Club in what may have been the first real baseball game. The Knickerbockers lost by a score of 23–1, but they did not use their “first nine,” and even supplied some players to the opposition.

By the 1850s, young men on the East Coast had created a sport we would recognize as baseball, played on a diamond-shaped field by two teams of nine players each. Bases were set ninety feet apart. Sixty amateur clubs formed the National Association of Base Ball Players in 1858, and changed an important scoring rule. Previously, under the Knickerbockers’ rules, a team needed twenty-one aces (later renamed *runs*) to prevail. Now, the team with the most runs after seven or nine innings was declared the winner. This speeded up the game, which, like cricket, sometimes had required more than one day to complete. The new shorter game made baseball commercially viable as a spectator sport. The initial rules of the National Association, however, flatly prohibited all player compensation.

From a Game to a Business

As the United States emerged from the Civil War with a new entrepreneurial spirit, it was foreseeable that some enterprising ballplayers would recognize the game’s potential for profit as entertainment for spectators. Americans were drawn to the game not only to play but to watch it played as well. As Mark Twain said, baseball suited America with perfection: It was “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century.” While young men would continue to play baseball on the amateur level, as they do today, the best players of the game soon would soon be compensated for their athletic performance as professionals. Profit, not principles, drove the nation’s economic machine, and baseball became a business.

There was a direct relationship between the development of baseball as a profit-making enterprise and the advent of salaries for ballplayers. When entrepreneurs discovered that spectators would pay to watch the games, ballplayers demanded part of the gate receipts. When an all-star team of Manhattan players scheduled a series of challenge matches against a similar assemblage of Brooklyn players in contests held on the Fashion Race Course on Long Island in 1858, the owner of the enclosed playing field charged the four thousand spectators fifty cents each to watch the proceedings. Soon after that, clubs would pay players for the entertainment they provided to paying spectators.

It is likely the first paid baseball player was the "speed-balling" pitcher James Creighton, a "ringer" who first played for various Brooklyn clubs in 1859. He spun the ball toward the plate, leaving batters helpless against his offerings. Creighton's professional career was short-lived, however. On October 14, 1862, he ruptured his bladder while striking a home run and died four days later at the age twenty-one of internal bleeding, a tragic end to the first professional's playing career.

Taking the next step, as clubs moved from having only a few paid players to employing an entirely professional roster, required enormous entrepreneurial skill. In 1869, Harry Wright, the son of an English professional cricket player and a fine cricket player and baseball outfielder in his own right, assembled the best American ballplayers for a club to represent the city of Cincinnati. Aaron Chapman, a young Cincinnati lawyer, had first organized the local amateur Red Stockings club in 1867, and he now raised the capital needed to transform the organization into a professional nine that would boost the identity of the Queen City. But it was Wright who would make it a successful enterprise. As the playing manager, he earned \$1,200 for the season, and he paid his younger brother George, the star shortstop, \$1,400. Other than the pitcher, Asa Brainard, who earned \$1,100, and the third baseman, Fred Waterman, who earned \$1,000, the remaining members of the squad were paid \$800 each.

In the Red Stockings' maiden season, the club completed a nationwide barnstorming tour with fifty-six wins, one tie, and no defeats. It outscored opponents 2,395 to 574. George Wright batted .519, thus earning his generous salary. Spectators from Massachusetts to Califor-