

## *The Black Sox Scandal*

Halfway through the 1921 season, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the newly appointed High Commissioner of Baseball, banished eight players from the game. The players, all of whom were members of the Chicago White Sox, had just been acquitted in a Chicago court for fraud, having been accused of throwing the 1919 World Series. Organized baseball was not pleased with the court's decision. Thanks to Landis's forceful action, baseball had with one bold stroke separated itself from the less savory aspects of professional sports, at least in the public eye. Baseball—or more accurately put—baseball's owners had, however, accomplished far more than simply insuring baseball's future as the national pastime.

The Black Sox Scandal, as it quickly became known, served as a catalyst for a running debate on the guilt or innocence of the eight banned players, as well as a source of stubborn pride for White Sox fans who to this day are prone to blame the team's long history of misfortune upon the scandal's legacy. The hold that the scandal has had upon the public has also, sad to say, tended to undercut the scandal's historic significance. Once one gets beyond the guilt or innocence of Shoeless Joe Jackson or Buck Weaver, the scandal can tell us much about the role of baseball and sports generally in American society as the nation entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The scandal's story can be summed up easily enough. Rumors that the World Series of 1919 had been fixed circulated even as the series was being played. A year after the Sox lost the nine game series to Cincinnati five games to three, a grand jury was convened in Cook County, Illinois, to investigate rumors that White Sox players—working hand-in-glove-with gamblers—had thrown games earlier that season. The grand jury's attention soon shifted to the 1919 Series. Following several weeks of testimony, the grand jury indicted the eight Sox players. The ensuing trial approached the farcical. Though clearly a fix had been made, with perhaps six players actively participating and two other players—Shoeless Joe Jackson and Buck Weaver having had knowledge that the fix was on—the trial resulted in an acquittal for all defendants, due largely to the curious disappearance of the confessions that had been secured during the investigation. The player's celebration was cut short, however, as Landis announced the next day that he was banning the players.

Landis had hit the players hard but he had also conveniently ignored the role of the Sox's owner, Charles Cominsky, in the scandal. Cominsky had done much to set the stage for the scandal. A former ball player himself, Cominsky nevertheless had little sympathy for his players. Taking full advantage of baseball's "reserve clause" that contractually bound players to their teams, Cominsky paid his players dimly low salaries, though his club was one of the best in the game. Being so poorly paid, his players became a likely target of gamblers. Once more, Cominsky had been warned by Jackson that attempts were being made to fix the Series but he chose to ignore the warning. Once the scandal broke, Cominsky did what he could to cover his own tracks, which might explain why his lawyer eventually declared that those missing confessions had been misplaced in his office.

Whatever Cominsky's exact role in the scandal, Landis, who of course had been hired by baseball's owners, studiously avoided any reference to Cominsky's complicity when famously declared that "no player who throws a ball game, no player who undertakes or promises to throw a ball game, no player who sits in confidence with a bunch of crooked players and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball again." While the club owners apparently stood immune from those same standards Landis had succeeded in insuring the integrity of the game by banning those eight players. Whether inadvertently or intentionally, he had shifted public attention from professional baseball's involvement in gambling to the actions of the banned players. That was a critical shift for the future of baseball as a business.

In 1920, baseball was not yet the national pastime it was to become. The game was tainted. Gambling had, of course, been in and around the game since it had first been played. It was an accepted part of the game that players would throw an occasional game. Fans themselves gambled openly. Ball parks were not yet the family playgrounds that they were to become. The American League in particular sought working-class fans by playing on Sunday and hawking beer, not that National League fans necessarily avoided drinking while in the parks. But by America's entry into World War I times were rapidly changing. Temperance, which had begun decades earlier as a social movement to curb consumption of alcohol, had grown into a more general social and then political movement that gradually focused upon closing the saloons and the *Bier Gartens* of Irish, German and other immigrants in American cities. The implicit hope was that the threat to the American republic that these foreign elements represented would be contained if not eliminated. World War I offered the opportunity to move beyond the mere curbing of drinking to its absolute elimination.

With Prohibition, Temperance, and the largely middle-class movement that it represented, had succeeded in imposing its will upon the nation's cities and the immigrants and other workers who had come to characterize them. Baseball had no choice but to eliminate the sale of beer at its parks and accept the consequent loss of revenue, but its owners may have also realized that Prohibition also signaled the emergence of a new, potentially profitable market. When the game could no longer attract fans with beer the owners may also have come to realize that they could no longer afford to allow gambling to threaten its ability to attract the growing middle class and also their families to their parks. Arguably, Landis's banning of the players may have had less to do with protecting the integrity of the game, which had never been that great to begin with, than with tapping new market.

Of course, it may be a stretch to suggest that Landis and the owners had a new market in mind when Landis banned the players, however hard Prohibition may have hit their gate receipts and concession sales at the parks. It would, however, hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that the owners undoubtedly approved his decision as it clearly represented a strong blow against labor. As a federal judge, Landis had secured for himself a reputation as being anything but a friend to labor or radicalism. He had issued a harsh ruling against the IWW and Big Bill Haywood in one trial and in another imprisoned Congressman

Victor Berger and other leaders of the Socialist Party for their opposition to America's participation into World War I. Once more, he had sided with the National and American leagues in their battle against the upstart Federal League, which had been signing their players in a bid to become a major league, effectively protecting the monopoly status of the two major leagues and the reserve clause.

With Landis's decision to ban the eight Sox players, professional baseball may have insured the integrity of the game, at least publicly, but it had also positioned itself to attract the middle class to the ballpark, while also eliminating the possibility that players might challenge their status as employees. If players could be summarily banned for even knowing that a game was fixed, they could be banned for union activity as well. Landis had spoken loudly and effectively for the owners.

*Chjones: Revised May 30, 2007*