

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and
Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

2016

Baseball's Power Shift

Krister Swanson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>

Swanson, Krister, "Baseball's Power Shift" (2016). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 313.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/313>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BASEBALL'S POWER SHIFT

[Buy the Book](#)

BASEBALL'S POWER SHIFT

How the Players Union,
the Fans, and the Media Changed
American Sports Culture

KRISTER SWANSON

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN & LONDON

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2016 by Krister Swanson

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Swanson, Krister, author.

Title: Baseball's power shift: how the players union, the fans,
and the media changed American sports culture / Krister Swanson.

Description: Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015034504

ISBN 9780803255234 (hardback: alk. paper)

ISBN 9780803288041 (epub)

ISBN 9780803288058 (mobi)

ISBN 9780803288065 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Baseball players—Labor unions—United States—History. | Major League Baseball
Players Association—History. | Collective bargaining—Baseball—United States. | Baseball—
Economic aspects—United States. | Baseball—United States—History. | Baseball—Social
aspects—United States. | Mass media and sports—United States. | BISAC: SPORTS & RECREATION /
Baseball / History. | SPORTS & RECREATION / Business Aspects. | BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Labor.

Classification: LCC GV880.2 .s83 2016 | DDC 796.357/640973—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015034504>

Set in Scala OT by M. Scheer.

[Buy the Book](#)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	ix
1. The Magnates, “Their Boys,” and the Birth of a Pastime	i
2. Monopoly and Trade War	39
3. 1946, a Year of Postwar Tumult	66
4. The Birth of the MLBPA	95
5. The Players Grow a Backbone	128
6. Magnates’ Worst Fears Confirmed	158
7. “Strike” Gets a Whole New Meaning	189
8. Freedom at Last?	218
Notes	257
Annotated Bibliography	279
Index	283

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is simple, a total cliché, and absolutely true: this book was only possible because of the love and support of my family. My wife, Stacy, and sons, Dane, Erik, and Nate, made it possible for a full-time teacher and parent to be a full-time grad student as well. It is impossible to overstate how much they have meant to me throughout this process.

My mother, Jan Bowman, blazed the trail up to uc Santa Barbara, and my father, Gerry Swanson, helped her do it. Nobody was more excited about the publication of this book than my dad. My grandfather, Leroy Swanson, was the ultimate traditionalist fan. He took me to my first Major League game and nurtured my love for baseball throughout my childhood. Thanks also to my grandmother, Lois Swanson, who had all the best traits of both Marvin Miller and Branch Rickey.

I have tremendous gratitude as well for the support and help from my friends, colleagues, and the staff at the University of Nebraska Press. First and foremost in this group are Nelson Lichtenstein and Laura Kalman, who provided continued support, advice, and guidance throughout the course of this project. Many good friends in the teaching profession also played significant roles. Mark Kilmer and Brian Friefeld sounded out a wide variety of ideas, good and otherwise. My team-teaching partner, Tasha Beaudoin, was always a valuable sounding board, and Ron Kragthorpe, Heather Feigenbaum and Debbie Leibold provided a great deal of help in editing

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

early versions of this project. Finally, I am deeply grateful for all of the invaluable help and support I received from the good people of the University of Nebraska Press, who embraced the spirit and purpose of this book and shepherded me through the publication process.

INTRODUCTION

While professional baseball remains very popular in the United States today, it is easy to forget that the game held an even more prominent place in our nation's everyday life from the late 1800s through the 1980s. It was truly our national pastime, and Americans from every ethnic background and walk of life shared a passion for the game. With its deep Yankee origins and traditions, the game introduced millions of new citizens to what it meant to be a true American. Baseball helped reinforce a shared sense of community in rapidly growing cities bursting at the seams with immigrants from all over Europe. It rode the wave of new media forms to even greater popularity, with radio stations like KMOX in St. Louis turning an entire region of the nation into Cardinals fans and publications like the *Sporting News* prospering almost exclusively on the public demand for the latest information about the game and the heroic men who played it.

Baseball's prominent place in American culture has led many historians to focus their work on the ways in which societal shifts brought about significant changes in the game. Over the course of the twentieth century, baseball's history was interwoven with major developments in race relations, life on the home front during World War II, and postwar expansion into the Sunbelt. These are all worthy topics, and many exceptional books explore them to the fullest. I share these historians' intellectual interest in the relationship between baseball and society, but instead of focusing on one particular historical moment or theme, I chose to

look at a give-and-take relationship between the game and our society. I wanted to write not just about the ways in which society brought about change in the game but also the ways in which baseball, and specifically its players' union, reshaped American society and culture. The growth of the union movement provides an ideal opportunity for this type of study. The players' unionization efforts required public support in order for them to succeed. This forced the players, and their union leaders, to heed the shifting demands of public opinion in order to maintain this support. Over time the players' union members not only responded to public opinion, they actively worked to shape opinion in order to win the backing of the baseball public. As a result, the players' attempts to unionize had a major impact on the values and ideals of American sports fans, and ultimately on the entirety of American sports culture.

This story goes back nearly to the birth of the game. Baseball's beginnings date to the 1850s, and in short order it became a popular pastime among soldiers during the Civil War. Within a decade of the war's completion, there were professional baseball leagues throughout the northeastern United States. The highest level of competition, known as "Major League Baseball," was well established by the early 1880s. These early ballplayers enjoyed the same basic relationship with the capital class as workers of every stripe did during the Gilded Age. Team owners sought to exercise the same control over their players as factory owners enjoyed over their workers. The owners, often referred to as magnates, structured the standard player contract to limit the players' freedom of contract, bargaining power, and control over working conditions. Ballplayers, just like workers in other industries, sought to unionize in order to improve their conditions and found themselves dealing with the same frustrations as other nascent unions of the time.

Given the highly skilled nature of their work, it seemed the players might have better chances for success than the average coal miner or steelworker. That was not the case. For more than seventy years, player attempts at unionization failed. Several fac-

tors contributed to this ongoing failure. Until the 1930s, much of American society generally looked down upon unions, including the ownership class and many of the middle-class patrons that owners coveted. During the Great Depression, unions finally began to make headway. Through the advances of the Wagner Act and the formation of the AFL-CIO, many industries found themselves unionized by the start of World War II. Unions later helped bring many families into the middle class on the strength of the postwar industrial boom, but baseball players were unable to ride this wave of growth. The players consistently struggled to build public support for their attempts to unionize. Because baseball's customers, the fans, pay directly for the opportunity to watch the "workers" work, the game requires a much higher level of affinity between worker and customer than is usually the case. Consumers typically do not give a second thought to the auto or textile worker as long as the product he or she produces is of sufficient quality. Baseball players, on the other hand, badly need the support of their consumers—the fans and the media—in order to be successful.

There were other major obstacles beyond the need for public support. As with other industries that originated in an era friendly to pools and trusts, baseball owners used a variety of collusive tactics to keep a stranglehold on the supply of highly skilled baseball labor. As early as the 1880s, a portion of the standard player contract known as the reserve clause bound every player in the National League to his team. This clause gave the team exclusive rights to the player's services for the following season, rights that could be exercised solely at the team management's discretion. Even though player contracts were always written for one year, teams essentially owned a player for the length of his useful playing career because the reserve clause left the productive player with no other option than to re-sign with his existing team. Once a player's value diminished, his team could sell or trade him to another club, or simply release him.

In addition to the restrictions of the reserve clause, team owners had no qualms about openly blacklisting any player who

protested the terms of his contract or tried to negotiate better terms with another club. Unfortunate timing heaped further misfortune on the players, because just as the Progressives started to usher in controls over monopolies and trusts in the rest of the economy, the business of baseball actually moved in the opposite direction. In 1922 the Supreme Court's ruling in *Federal Baseball Club v. National League* gave Major League Baseball a federal antitrust exemption, leaving most players all but powerless in their attempts to deal with a labor market designed solely for the benefit of club management.

A final barrier to unionization efforts was the game's place as a revered public institution, a status baseball magnates reinforced at every opportunity. The American League founder Ban Johnson was especially adept at making professional baseball appear to be something very different from a traditional large business enterprise. Johnson built and marketed his league around practices such as banning gambling and drinking at games, policies intended to foster a wholesome image and build public trust. This approach paid off quickly, as the American League arose to national prominence in short order and joined the National League as a true Major League in 1901. If the owners were the guardians of this public trust, then, who were the players to challenge the magnates' business practices, or their judgment in general? The baseball public of this time largely viewed players as men who should feel fortunate to be such an integral part of the national pastime, and any critique offered by players was seen as ungrateful selfishness.

Owner paternalism helped make this public view an even greater obstacle for the players. The magnates openly referred to the players as "their boys" and expertly cultivated player dependency. Owners catered to the more popular "superstar" players, such as Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth, who would bring fans to the park, and then used these star players as examples of the wonderful treatment afforded to all players. In exchange, the star players responded by criticizing their peers for any interest in collective action. In order to have any chance for success in form-

ing a union, the players needed to help fans understand some of the fundamental flaws in the structure of their sacred institution; they also had to develop the solidarity necessary to overcome the divisiveness created by owner paternalism.

Developing player solidarity was no small feat. Fans and the media usually bought the notion that the owners were the noble guardians of this revered institution lock, stock, and barrel. Even as early as the 1920s, baseball fans were very traditional in their view of the game. These “traditionalists” subscribed enthusiastically to the widely held public view that the game remained pure and unchanged, even though owners constantly tinkered with the rules of the game in order to attract more fans and reduce escalating labor costs. The public ignored these changes, as it wanted to see the game as a timeless treasure. Different generations of fans used a variety of statistical measures to debate the merits of star players from various eras, even though rule changes made these numbers much less relevant and valuable than they first seemed. Fathers passed their love for the game down to their sons, and families developed deep affinities for their local teams and the ball-playing heroes who took the field on their behalf. Fans truly loved their star players and expected them to demonstrate appropriate gratitude and humility in exchange for the opportunity to make a living by playing a “boys’ game,” as well as the honor of representing the great tradition of the Cincinnati Reds, or New York Giants, or Chicago Cubs who preceded them. Fans counted on players, and especially their beloved stars, to relish the opportunity of having a long and prolific career in one city, which would, in turn, allow the fans an even greater chance to get to know and love their heroes. Given this view of the game, most fans had a difficult time recognizing that, ultimately, the average ballplayer was a workingman, just like them. In the public mind, a professional ballplayer could not possibly have legitimate grievances about his working conditions or the terms of his contract. This perspective became a significant obstacle to public support for unionization, especially when the drive for unionization chal-

lenged the practices, such as the reserve clause, that kept the players with one team and allowed fans to develop cherished, long-term relationships with “their boys.”

I was born in the 1960s and learned the game from my grandfather, father, uncles, and older cousins, all dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists. My relatives held fairly progressive views on the social questions of their day, especially those tied to the civil rights movement, but to them baseball was a separate issue entirely and certainly not in need of any significant changes beyond the elimination of the color barrier. I came of age during the tumult created by the ongoing struggle between the players’ first successful union, the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA), and baseball’s magnates. I loved the game and hated the strikes and lockouts that were a regular part of these protracted disputes. In the view of traditionalists like my relatives, there was no question which side was at fault. In their minds, ballplayers needed to embrace their good fortune and avoid the collective radicalism that tore at the fabric of so many of our social institutions in the 1960s and early 1970s. My mentors were especially fearful of free agency because it would surely disrupt the sacred continuity of team rosters and set a horrible example in terms of player greed.

In an effort to navigate its way around the traditionalist point of view, the MLBPA’s early demands focused on the kind of “bread-and-butter” demands that resonated with fans of all types. It was a relatively easy first step for the players to convince traditionalist fans and sportswriters that ballplayers needed to secure a modest pension, similar to those of industrial workers across the nation in the postwar era. In a way, the pension became a bridge issue, as it garnered public support for the union without asking traditionalists to accept major changes in the structure of the game, like the elimination of the reserve clause. Once the pension was in place, players could move on to convince the baseball public to embrace complex freedom-of-contract issues whose resolution would reshape the entire game. This new stage presented an entirely different set of challenges. In order to win the public

support they so badly required, the players and their union had to convince the game's tradition-bound public to rethink many of their core beliefs regarding the nature of the game. Players needed fans to see them as highly skilled workers who deserved both freedom of contract and a larger share of the ever-increasing revenue streams generated by their on-field work.

These became the critical questions the players faced as their union pushed beyond the pension and on to addressing the freedom-of-contract issues that had plagued baseball players since the 1880s: How could players help fans realize the need for and benefits of free agency, a practice that would allow players to sign multiyear contracts with the team willing to pay the most for their services? How could a union, the type of organization usually associated with set pay scales limiting high-end compensation, win these rights for its members, especially at a time when the union movement was beginning a sharp decline? The players needed to appeal to their public's sense of freedom, liberty, and capitalist impulses, all without threatening the romantic traditions of the game and the business of baseball. Ultimately the players accomplished their goals, and even though the National Football League has surpassed Major League Baseball in national popularity, baseball remains an important national pastime and institution, and a very profitable one at that. In the decades since the baseball labor revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Major Leagues have continued to expand, adding six new teams since 1977. Teams and taxpayers alike sponsored a stadium construction boom the likes of which no reasonable sports observer might have predicted in 1970, demonstrating a willingness to sink billions of dollars into a business that still helps us define community, more than 140 years after the Red Stockings began to do just that for the people of Cincinnati.

There has been a dramatic shift in our sports culture in the years since the *MLBPA* and baseball management resolved the free agency issue. Baseball fans led the way in adopting a new outlook on professional sports, one much more attuned to the business aspect of the game. Fans still appreciate loyalty and

continuity in the teams they love, but they also have a growing appreciation for the significance of shrewd business and player personnel moves by team management. Information technology, first in the form of cable television and then the Internet, further fueled this shift by providing almost endless amounts of statistical information and commentary. With their new points of view firmly in place, fans are interested in much more than on-field play and maintaining team tradition; many have moved on to interacting with the game in a manner similar to that of a team's general manager. This trend is most evident in the way that fans embraced the rotisserie leagues that burst onto the scene in the early 1980s, right in the midst of the MLBPA's struggle to finalize the benefits of free agency. Today rotisserie leagues have morphed into the multibillion-dollar industry of fantasy sports. Today's younger fans, understandably, know little about a time when roster continuity and team tradition meant a great deal more than the strategic player personnel moves plotted by team management. These fans are completely a product of a new era, in which being a sports fan means not only following the game but debating the relative value of players in the lucrative free market of professional sports labor.

Finally, I would like to offer a few introductory words on sources. With the relationship between players and fans right at the center of this study, I put a premium on access to the right kinds of documentary sources. I started with the players' side of things and dove into the archives at the Giamatti Research Center at the Baseball Hall of Fame, which are the best collections of archived materials for all things baseball. MLBPA director Marvin Miller's papers in the Wagner Labor Archives at New York University were extraordinarily helpful in better understanding MLBPA strategy and its efforts to build public support. In an effort to understand the public dialogue around the players and their unions, I read thousands of articles, opinion pieces, and fan letters to editors from a variety of periodicals dedicated to the coverage of the game. I was helped in this by the fact that baseball is and was a newspaperman's dream. It gener-

ated compelling daily news items throughout the course of the season, as well as a fair amount of off-the-field action during the off-season. Many distinguished writers, men such as Red Smith, Shirley Povich, and Jim Murray, dedicated a good part of their careers to the coverage of baseball. These writers contributed to an expansive, well-considered discourse that helps us better understand evolving public sentiment regarding the players and their efforts to improve their lot through unionization. The ongoing conversation between these baseball writers and their readers provided valuable insight into the shifting nature of public sentiment and ultimately into the cultural shift that accompanied the start of free agency and the birth of a new era in professional sports.

Together these sources provided the necessary material to properly examine both sides of a relationship that forever changed our sports culture. Just as unions formed a collective workforce, they transformed a collective fan base. It is no longer enough to just root for your team, you must also follow the statistical achievements of the individual players on your fantasy team. Owners and players now compete independently for our interest and money on everything from merchandise-licensing agreements to luxury stadium seating to product placement during the annual Home Run Derby. As a result of the now-open nature of sports as a business, fans are far less patient with owners and players alike. While traditionalists would wait patiently through a two- or three-year rebuilding process in the hope of watching tomorrow's stars develop before their eyes, some modern-day fans can tolerate little more than one month of subpar performance before they call for drastic personnel moves. They are also far less patient with their aging, fallen heroes. A beloved perennial All-Star can quickly be seen as nothing more than a huge financial burden during the twilight of his career, and the fans who once adored him call stridently to get his guaranteed contract off the books. For better or worse, this is the sports culture we celebrate today, and this book is the story of how Major League Baseball players helped us get here.