

The black sox scandal of 1919



Introduction

During the First World War, gambling was rampant in the United States and fixing games was either assumed as harmless or tolerated. The worse was to come during the post-war period. With the closure of horse tracks, the bettors and all their accomplices shifted to their local baseball pitches where they practiced the dirty game. They cunningly spread rumors of fixes and/or injuries in a bid to move the odds in one way or the other (Zumsteg 182).

The underworld operations between gamblers and other dubious characters with teams, players and fans facilitated the fix of a 1919 World Series Championship. Little known Cincinnati Red Stockings emerged victorious over the indomitable Chicago White Sox because the latter threw the game for the want of money. This paper looks at the background of the scandal, how stinginess the Black Sox boss led his players to party with gamblers. The figures behind the scam area also mentioned together with the role they played to make it a success. National Commission's ban of the eight conspirators from the game for life is one of the devastating consequences of the scandal. Lastly, it briefly looks at the profile of Joe Jackson and Eddie Cicotte.

The Background of the Scandal

The first ever World Series baseball game was played in the year 1903. Prior to that, a Mr. William C. Temple in a bid to popularize baseball offered a championship trophy to the winner and the first runners-up of the National League in the 1894 best-of-seven-game series. In 1901, the American League was established a move that surprised the insiders of the National League. A "cold war" ensued between the two teams where each league

competed amongst its own members. Eventually, a deal was made two years later called the “ National Agreement”. This deal other than outlining baseball’s employment, salary and travel packages, it produced a blueprint that merged the two into a major league which has been in place up to today (“ Baseball Almanac” para. 4).

In the 1903 World Series that preceded the deal, Pittsburgh (from the defunct National League) was competing with Boston (from the defunct American League). Both teams were topping their erstwhile leagues and were to measure the prowess of the each other under one umbrella. This debut attracted the interest of the American folks and from then henceforth, the attendance of professionally played baseball games soared more so in the post-World War I period. Following this growing interest on the game, the 1919 World Series was anticipated with baited breaths and considering that the season had recorded huge attendance, one is left to imagine for one’s self the anxiety that was rife (Meyer para. 2).

Most fans of baseball games got involved in gambling about the outcome of a game and great games attracted professional gamblers. At this time, the post-war depression was setting in hence public despondence about the economy. Racial tensions were high, and people generally were in a pandemonium mood. It therefore came as no surprise that the players of the Chicago White Sox, also known as the Black Sox, fell prey to the traps of arch-gamblers of the time in persons of William Thomas (a. k. a. Sleepy Bill), Billy Maharg, and Billy Burns (Meyer para. 3).

The Die Is Cast

As has been mentioned above, the 1919 World Series charged the atmosphere before the actual game. The two teams to compete were the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Red Stockings. Two years ago the Chicago White Sox had emerged the winners of 1917 World Series; in fact they had won 8 out of the last 9 World Series. That very year on September 24th they had clinched the pennant and hence were slated to be the likely winners of the year's World Series. Therefore people were betting on the loss of Cincinnati Red Stockings. This scenario was fertile for the operations of the wily gamblers. Knowing that almost everyone was touting for the Chicago White Sox's win, reversing their position against the multitude would attract more money but some underdog deal had to be done to get the money.

The internal dissension that characterized the Chicago White Sox players partly contributed to their vulnerability to the gamblers. First, among the players themselves there were two factions: one for the better-schooled members and the other for the illiterate members. Secondly there was a uniform resentment towards the club president Charles Comiskey. He was said to be underpaying his players making Chicago White Sox the poorly paying team in that period. In fact, it is said that the team acquired the name Black Sox when they continuously played with filthy jerseys after Comiskey had refused to bill their laundry; instead he asked each player to bill his. Seeing that his order was turned down, he resorted to slicing a fraction of each player's salary to bill the laundry. However, no study has yet substantiated this claim. Again it was said that he used to make promises of

monetary value to his players but in the long run he either reneged or shortchanged the player(s). Eddie Cicotte, pitcher, for example was to be awarded a bonus of roughly US\$ 10, 000 upon winning thirty games. Cicotte had won his twenty-ninth game and was then posed for his thirtieth win but was deliberately benched by his boss to avoid awarding the bonus (Weiler 36).

Perhaps the gamblers might have known the frustration that was sickening the players. It argued that one member of the squad by the name Arnold Gandil (a. k. a. Chick) – the first baseman – who was known to have a protracted clandestine relationship with the gangsters was approached with the offer. Together with his colleague Cicotte they endorsed the deal and sort for more recruits since fixing a game of that category could not just be fixed by two players. Here it can be inferred that Gandil's dubious reputation might have led him to accepting the deal but Cicotte was out for a revenge against his boss who cunningly denied him his bonus. Because they were offered US\$ 100, 000 to divide among themselves this was an opportunity to make an extra dollar. The duo drawn from the illiterate faction of the team went fishing for willing conspirators from among their group. Pitcher Claude Williams (a. k. a. Lefty), shortstop Charles Risberg (a. k. a. Swede), and outfielder Oscar Felsch (a. k. a. Happy) were recruited. But infielder Fred McMullin forced himself into the group after he had secretly learned about it. He demanded that unless he was allowed in, he would report. An attempt to enlist Buck Weaver, the third baseman was futile for he refused outright to be a part of the complicity. The involvement of Joe Jackson, the star outfielder, in the conspiracy has been disputed ever since the scandal came

to be known. Some sources say that being illiterate Jackson participated in the deal with little knowledge of its repercussions, while others say that he received threats from some team members, yet some maintain that he did not participate at all (Albert, Bennett & Cochran 84). It is said that Joe Jackson was included in the plot so as to give credibility to the gamblers that the deal was sealed. Being one of the greatest hitters in the game, his presence was very vital for it spelt success to the conspirators.

In first game, Eddie Cicotte beam as the first batter of the game thereby sending signals to the other conspirators that the fix was on. As one would expect, the Chicago White Sox lose 9-1 in quite a suspicious manner. The following day still there was no improvement not only in the scores but also in the fashion in which they were playing and for this reason the team lost 4-2 to the Cincinnati Red Stockings. However in Game 3 there was a hitch occurred that pushed the White Sox to the top. A player of modest dexterity by the name Dickey Kerr, a member of the White Sox squad drew the start of the game. Unaware of the fix, the strong lefthander player ignored the calls by his scandalous team mates to roll over, instead he threw a three hit 3-0 that saved the White Sox from getting out of the race (“ Baseball Almanac” para. 2).

The turn of events made the Cincinnati Red Stocking players to intensify their concentration and focus. Having no idea that the game was being thrown, they pitched back-to-back shutouts during the fourth and the fifth games. Jimmy Ring steered them into winning the fourth game by 2-0 while Hod Eller’s (5-0) ensured that the fifth game was taken by the Reds. Ordinarily the series would have ended at that point with the Red’s win. But <https://assignbuster.com/the-black-sox-scandal-of-1919/>

the commissioner of baseball extended it to a best-of-nine competition arguing that the intense following of the series during the postwar warranted more games for the entertainment of fans (“ Baseball Almanac” para. 3). The following two games were won by the White Sox (5-4 and 4-1) arguably because they wanted to contain more suspicion. Real drama was experienced in the final game where the Cincinnati Red Stockings literally dominated the game. The White Sox players who were complicitly resolved to let them loose, throwing the game to the opponent at 10 to 1 (Meyer para. 7). The Cincinnati had been aided to win their first ever World Championship in their debut into the series.

After the game had been lost as expected the money was to be shared among the participants. The principal plotters reaped a good sum: Gandil received US\$ 35, 000; Risberg got US\$ 15, 000 and Cicotte US\$10, 000. Others were given quite a raw deal: Williams Jackson, McMullin and Felsch each got US\$ 5, 000. Gandil who was the ring leader refused to divide the spoils to Weaver arguing that he had failed to support the others in facilitating the fix (Chermak & Bailey 9). Lefty Williams was sent with an envelop containing US\$ 5, 000 to give to Shoeless Jackson who turned it down. Rather than keeping the money, Williams threw it on the ground and left. The following day, Jackson decided to go and see his boss Comiskey with the money. Unfortunately for him, Mr. Comiskey was not in his office but his assistant Mr. Harry Grabiner was. He showed the money to Grabiner explaining its origin. Perhaps this was how the saga reached Charles Comiskey (Meyer para. 10).

Trial and Banning of the Conspirators

Following the increased cases of gambling in baseball, the National Commission chairman talked Judge Charles McDonald into convening a grand jury in Cook County, Illinois to investigate the matter; though the real intention was to look into the 1919 World Series. In September 22nd, 1920, the grand jury convened and players from the major league who had heard of the fix testified against the Black Sox players of the previous series. Eddie Cicotte broke the ice by confessing his guilt to Comiskey's attorney Alfred Austrian. Shoeless Jackson and Williams also followed suit and confessed. Those involved were revealed and Comiskey suspend them as a result of the overwhelming evidence and implications. Ultimately, the grand jury indicted the eight players for conspiring to injure the business of Comiskey as well as to defraud the public (Chermak & Bailey 9).

The baseball governing body was dealt a blow by these confessions and indictments. They were forced to do something and save the image of the game. In the public eye, they had failed to contain evil gamblers and dubious players from ruining baseball. In an attempt to save its face, the then incumbent chairman resigned and Kenesaw M. Landis, a Federal Judge was appointed. The criminal trial was made against the eight players but the jury acquitted then arguing that no evidence had been put forward that they attempted to defraud the public. Despite of this verdict, Landis banned the eight from playing baseball for life. He argued:

“ Regardless of the verdict of juries, no player that throws a ball game, no player that entertains proposals or promises to throw a game, no player that sits in a conference with a bunch of crooked players and gamblers where the

ways and means of throwing games are discussed, and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball” (“ Baseball Almanac” para. 3).

In deed the eight players did not participate in any competitive baseball game until their deaths. Weaver was also banned because although he had not participated he knew of the plot but failed to report it.

Shoeless Joe Jackson

He was one of the best hitters the game had ever had. As has been said, his involvement in the scandal is controversial. In fact, Walter Johnson who was once a Washington pitcher confessed that he considered Joe Jackson the greatest natural baseball player. His credibility had not been tainted before and the gusto and talent with which he was playing his position endeared him to a lot of fans. During the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds, his performance did not raise suspicion for he is the one who hit the single score that Black Sox had in the last game with the Reds. In the series he is said to have batted .375; .71 points above his previous World Series in which he had 12 hits breaking the World Series record, hitting the only homerun in the entire World Series (Meyer para 8).

But his confessions to the grand jury of his participation in the scandal as well as the envelope that he showed to Mr. Grabner prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he was a complicity, however passive. For this reason he could not be immune from Landis’ ban and therefore had to live the rest of his life after the incident without playing his favorite game.

Eddie Cicotte

He was the assistant of Gandil in the Chicago White Sox squad and one of the arch-plotters of the scandal. It is said that after the First World War the club was flourishing yet players were being underpaid. The manager William (a. k. a. Kid) tried to appeal to the owner Comiskey for the players' financial relief but he refused. Comiskey's coldness particularly infuriated Cicotte who was one of the best performers (Broeg 64).

Gandil heavily influenced Cicotte's participation in the scandal that would ruin his career for the rest of his life. He gave in to the idea if he would get US\$ 10, 000. Many historians contend that his intentions were secondary to the money but primary to a revenge on his boss Comiskey who had denied him the bonus. As a matter of fact, he was the one who opened the first game by batting out 9-1, and deliberately lost the fourth game 2-0 by committing two errors in a single inning. In the seventh game, he was probably a little disturbed by his conscience and as such had a double-cross along the line and won, 4-1 (Broeg 64).

Eddie Cicotte was the player who confessed his participation in the scandal making others to follow suit. After the ban, he moved to Detroit Michigan to become a game warden and a security guard at a Ford assembly plant till his retirement (Broeg 65).

Conclusion

The Black Sox Scandal shook the entire fabric of baseball fraternity. Changes that were made to the National Commission leadership immediately after the discovery of the scam endeavored to redeem the reputation and the professionalism of the sport. The eight players that orchestrated it were the <https://assignbuster.com/the-black-sox-scandal-of-1919/>

major casualties of the radical change that followed. The aim of the ban was a signal not only to players of baseball but also to those in other games that the sporting world requires persons of integrity and would ruthlessly deal with crooked ones.

The scandal completely changed the image of the Chicago White Sox and they had to wait for forty years before winning another World Series. The performance became so dismal that fans started claiming that the team was jinxed by the scandal. World Series of the year 2005 was the last one they won in the recent history.

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