

Much More Than a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball Since 1921. *By Robert Fredrick Burk*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 384 pp. Illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82592-1; paper 0-807-84908-1.

Reviewed by Steven A. Riess

Robert F. Burk is the author of the award-winning *Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920*. His new book is a continuation of the earlier one, updating that account of the relations between players and owners in professional baseball. Burk's study of the struggles between players and management over access to job opportunities, rights of workers, and the administration of the industry has resulted in an excellent, detailed historical analysis.

Burk previously argued that, before 1920, professional baseball had become a popular entertainment. In the 1870s, there was a growing division of power between the players and management, marked by the formation of the National League (NL) in 1876. In the economic wars for urban markets, the NL crushed or merged with its adversaries. Burk asserts that a new era began after the Black Sox scandal and the establishment of the commissioner system in 1920, just prior to the 1922 Supreme Court ruling that upheld organized baseball's cartel system. Burk claims that the era's most representative individual was not Commissioner Kenesaw M. Landis, but Branch Rickey, framer of the farm system that tightened control over the players, instigator of integration, and leader in the scouting and recruiting of Latin American ballplayers. Burk indicates that the developments in the broader society that primarily affected the game were the Great Depression, the rise of industrial unions, World War II, radio and television, and the demographic shift to the Sun Belt.

Burk calls the post-1960s period "the inflation era." It began with the expansion of the major leagues to the Sun Belt and the rising significance of television. Players became less pliable, Burk claims, because of the civil rights struggle and the "new tide of youthful political activism and protest" that inspired players to begin questioning authority and to appreciate collective action. Thus, they were prepared for Marvin Miller's transformation of the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) into the industry's "most powerful force for change" (p. ix). Yet baseball players were actually among the least socially conscious of all professional athletes and were less politically active as well.

Burke points out that the major leagues were very profitable in the 1920s, when each club averaged \$115,000 in annual profits. Players' salaries rose from \$5,000 to \$8,000 over the course

of the decade, but their share of team budgets fell to about 35 percent. The key figure in player-management relations was Commissioner Landis, who cracked down on fixes, immorality, barnstorming, and contract jumping. Yet Burk argues that Rickey was the true innovator. He formalized the farm system, thereby enabling the St. Louis Cardinals to produce a steady supply of new players, tightly control their rate of advancement, limit competitors' access to talent, and make money by selling surplus players.

During the Depression, major league baseball losses amounted to about 25 percent, greatly exceeding the 10 percent experienced by all other commercial entertainment, and the value of franchises dropped by one-third. Owners cut rosters and, by 1935, had dropped average salaries from \$8,000 to \$5,000. The majors juiced up (with a tighter cover and lower stitching) the ball in 1930 to increase fan appeal, resulting in record batting productivity. They moved to a deader ball in 1931 because players demanded higher salaries for hitting so well.

Burk gives considerable attention to ethnic succession and social origins among ballplayers. He asserts that by the late 1920s eastern and southern Europeans were held back by a bottleneck in the minors, but he does not substantiate this claim. Burk holds that owners tried to tailor squads to their constituencies, which might have been true of the Giants and Dodgers (p. 50) but certainly not of the Yankees. He argues that players in the intrawar years were more likely to be from blue-collar or farm backgrounds than in the past (p. 49). However, his source (a book I wrote in 1989, entitled *City Games: The Evolution of Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*) actually reported an increase in players from white-collar families to nearly half the cohort.

Burk appropriately emphasizes the importance of Marvin Miller in the third section of the book. The MLBPA, organized in 1954, was originally extremely ineffective. In 1966, Robin Roberts and Jim Berg recruited Miller, a long-time U.S. Steelworkers official, to take over the union. He quickly doubled pension and disability payments and forged a strong sense of brotherhood among union members. He also began a fight to raise salaries that averaged \$19,000 in 1967. Burk focuses on efforts to gain leverage through various basic agreements signed with organized baseball and on events like the 1970 lawsuit brought by Curt Flood, who charged baseball with conspiracy for denying him employment when he refused to be traded from the Cardinals to the Phillies. The Flood case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled against him. However, Miller successfully negotiated a new salary sum of \$15,000 in the 1973 basic agreement and secured salary arbitration. The most significant event was Peter Seitz's arbitration on behalf of Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally in 1975 that legitimized free agency. Miller went on to lead a successful two-month strike in 1981 after the owners tried to curb salaries that had risen to an average of \$143,756 in the prior year. Average salaries skyrocketed to \$329,408 in

1984 and are now well over \$1 million. While Burk gives Miller considerable credit, he also blames the arrogance, confusion, and poor decision-making by management (owners and commissioners alike) for their loss of control over their employees. Burk also delves into the other important events in recent worker-management relations, including collusion, player and umpire strikes, and the banning of Pete Rose.

Although Burk's study is derived primarily from secondary sources, he did refer to the Branch Rickey files at the Library of Congress, transcripts from the Albert Chandler Oral History Project at the University of Kentucky, and the rich subject files and Lee Allen Notebooks at the National Baseball Library. His discussion of the 1990s was heavily drawn from periodicals such as *USA Today*, *Sporting News*, *Baseball America*, and the *New York Times*.

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