

Before They Were Cardinals: Major League Baseball in Nineteenth-Century St. Louis. *By Jon David Cash*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. xiv + 279 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-826-21401-0.

Reviewed by Steven A. Riess

Jon David Cash, an adjunct professor of history at the University of Arkansas–Monticello, examines the early days of major league baseball in St. Louis, a leading center of the sport in the nineteenth century. This book, a revised version of his University of Oregon dissertation, explains that professional baseball in St. Louis was initiated as part of the city's rivalry with Chicago, which had surpassed it as the preeminent midwestern commercial center. Windy City boosters had established the White Stockings in 1870 to promote their city's reputation, and in 1874 St. Louisians, led by J. B. C. Lucas II, the richest man in the city, felt compelled to organize the Brown Stockings. The twenty-thousand-dollar team joined the National Association of Professional Baseball Players, the first professional baseball league, in 1875. That same year, it led the league in attendance and achieved fourth place, ahead of Chicago. The sport was so popular in St. Louis that it entered a second team in the league, the Red Stockings, staffed by former local amateurs.

The Brown Stockings joined Chicago and other western teams to form the new National League in 1876, a business-oriented association that would be better managed and would keep out small cities, bar cooperative teams, and give owners greater control over players. The Brown Stockings struggled, losing more money than any team in 1877 and dropping out in 1878, unable to meet its payroll. The team was reorganized as a successful independent squad, and in 1881 it was taken over by German immigrant and liquor entrepreneur Chris Von der Ahe, who got into baseball to promote his Golden Lion saloon, located a block from the Grand Avenue Baseball Park, which he renovated and renamed Sportman's Park. He recruited Congressman John J. O'Neill to be his vice president and signed up Al Spink, sports editor of the *Missouri Republican* and future publisher of the *Sporting News*, as his team secretary. The association added a second deck to the field for the 1881 season, raising capacity from 2,500 to 6,000 (increasing it further, to 12,000, by 1886). Von der Ahe got 40 percent of the gate in that first year, with the players dividing the rest, but he made most of his money from concessions.

In November 1881, the Browns joined the new American Association, a self-proclaimed major league. The owners were primarily involved in the beer business, and it became known as the "Beer and Whiskey League." Unlike the National League, it sought working-class fans by

charging just twenty-five cents for tickets, selling liquor, and playing on Sundays. In 1882, the American Association outdrew its rival by 30 percent, and the leagues merged the following year. The Brown Stockings were a big hit, leading the American Association in attendance in 1882 with 3,069 fans per game. Von der Ahe was an excellent showman and promoter, and he built the team into a pennant contender in 1883. Cash claims the team earned about \$500,000 in the 1880s.

The success of the major leagues encouraged the rise of the Union Association in 1884, led by Henry Lucas, son of the founder of the original Brown Stockings. Lucas invested in all the league's teams and owned the St. Louis Maroons. His team drew more than 2,000 fans a game, but the rival Browns averaged 3,926, the most in baseball. The Union Association collapsed after the season, but the Maroons were allowed to join the National League. They were sold after the 1886 season and moved to Indianapolis. The Browns, under the leadership of player-manager Charles Comiskey, became a juggernaut, winning four consecutive American Association championships between 1885 and 1888 and only losing out on a fifth in 1889 because of a forfeited game. In 1885, the Browns defeated the National League's White Stockings in the first World Series, a match that ran twelve days in seven different cities.

Cash discusses in depth the fight over Sunday ball that occurred in 1887, but he should have put the issue into a broader context. The politically connected Von der Ahe, like many owners of the time, employed his clout to fight for Sunday ball. He arranged a test case in a Sunday game against Baltimore, during the course of which he was arrested and the game halted. The case went before Judge Edward A. Noonan, a rising star in the Democratic Party, who had a reputation for supporting personal freedom. He declared that Sunday baseball was legal because major league baseball was not a business but a grand recreation that provided a safety valve for the working class. One year later, Noonan was elected mayor of St. Louis.

Cash makes several interesting points. He unravels the "true" story of Curt Welch's "\$15,000 slide" that brought home the winning run in the World Series in 1886. Cash found out that Welch did not steal home, as long thought, but scored on a wild pitch and probably did not even slide. He also notes that the club would have moved to New York City had it defeated the National League in the postseason championship in 1887. Finally, he turns upside down the conventional wisdom that the 1892 merger between the National League and the American Association was a disaster for the latter, which disappeared. Cash points out that eight of the twelve teams in the newly enlarged National League were originally American Association franchises.

The narrative abruptly ends with the story of this merger. After 1892 the team fared poorly, and Von der Ahe went bankrupt, largely because of bad investments and personal failings. The Browns were sold at a public auction in 1899. The final cursory section does not fully evaluate the extent of Von der Ahe's contributions and the role of St. Louis in early professional baseball. The author made excellent use of Chicago and St. Louis newspapers. He conducted research at the Missouri Historical Society but did not consult the National Baseball Library in Cooperstown. This is probably as detailed a study of major league baseball for these years as exists for any nineteenth-century city, and it provides a useful case study of the development of a sporting business.

Steven A. Riess is professor of history at Northeastern Illinois University. He is the author of several books on sport history, including City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports (1989) and Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era (revised edition). He recently directed a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar for college teachers on American sport and culture and is completing a study of the nexus of horse racing, organized crime, and urban politics in the late nineteenth century.