

Before the World Series: Pride, Profits, and Baseball's First Championships. *By Larry G. Bowman.* DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. x + 252 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$32.00. ISBN 0-875-80307-5.

Reviewed by George B. Kirsch

This volume is a study of major league baseball in the United States during the 1880s and early 1890s, particularly the "World's Championship Series," which was played between pennant-winning teams of the National League (NL) and the American Association (AA) between 1884 and 1890. The National League, founded in 1876 and the oldest professional baseball organization in the nation, faced a formidable rival in 1881, when a group of entrepreneurs launched the American Association. The upstart league instituted three policies that were designed to attract spectators: a twenty-five-cent admission price (compared to the National League's fifty-cent fee), Sunday games, and the sale of liquor. The latter two were banned by the senior circuit. In early 1883 representatives of both leagues and the minor Northwestern League signed a national agreement, binding the three organizations to respect all player contracts, to refrain from raiding each other's players, and to experiment with interleague preseason and postseason exhibition games.

Larry Bowman devotes a considerable portion of his narrative to the annual postseason World's Championship Series between the victors of each league that began in 1884. Fans who are familiar with the modern format of the World Series will be surprised and amused to read about the informal arrangements made by club owners (not league executives) for these first playoffs. Each year, near or at the end of the regular season, the owners of the respective championship teams negotiated an agreement that covered the number and location of contests, ticket prices, compensation to players (if any), and the selection of umpires, including the amount of their pay. The schedules varied considerably, from the three games played in the inaugural year (when the Providence Grays [NL] defeated the New York Metropolitans [AA] 3-0) to the fifteen contests of 1887 (when the Detroit Wolverines [NL] defeated the St. Louis Browns [AA] 10-5). In several series, games were scheduled at neutral sites, and sometimes they were played even after one team had won the championship. In his conclusion, Bowman notes

that while the playoffs held between 1886 and 1889 were modestly successful at the box office, overall the seven World's Championships were a failure. He attributes the bad results to poor scheduling and the cold, wet weather and limited daylight that spoiled many of these late October matches. But perhaps the most significant undermining factor was the hostility of the players, who were forced to compete with little or no guarantee of extra compensation for postseason play.

Bowman also reviews the conflict between baseball management and labor during this era. With this topic, he is on familiar ground as he relates how owners in both leagues conspired to limit salaries and maintain the reserve clause that gave them the right to renew contracts annually without the ballplayers' consent. The players' struggle to overthrow these constraints came to a head with an open revolt by John Montgomery Ward and his Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players, which resulted in the formation of a new Players League in 1890. But that league failed after just one season, and the American Association survived just one more year, expiring after the 1891 campaign. In 1892 the National League gobbled up four clubs from the defunct American Association and expanded to a twelve-team structure. In 1901 it faced a new challenge with the creation of the American League. The modern World Series began in 1903 after the National League signed a pact with its latest rival.

*Before the World Series* is a more detailed account of the planning and results of the World's Championship Series of this period than can be found in any of the standard works on late-nineteenth-century baseball, such as those by Harold Seymour, David Voigt, Steven Riess, and Robert Burk. It is clearly written, spiced with entertaining anecdotes, and full of useful background material on the rules and style of play of early baseball and the urban context of the cities with major league franchises. It is also grounded in solid research in the periodical literature of the era. However, its treatment of the players' social backgrounds is superficial, as is its coverage of the business and economic aspects of early professional baseball. Although Bowman does include estimates on attendance figures and profits for the postseason events, he does not provide enough detail about how the owners ran a baseball business in the 1880s, especially how they managed matters such as the choice of sites and construction of ball parks, public relations campaigns to attract spectators, ticket prices, the sale of liquor and other

## **BUSINESS HISTORY REVIEW**

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**BOOK REVIEWS**

concessions, and expenses beyond players' salaries. This work succeeds as a standard baseball narrative, but its coverage of the economic aspects of the sport in the 1880s does not go far enough.

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