

The American Indian Integration of Baseball

Reviewed by Jennifer Guiliano, Department of History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

JUNE 22, 2005 [archive](#)

Often relegated to brief paragraphs or footnotes in works of baseball history, *The American Indian Integration of Baseball* completes the first (of hopefully many) book length treatments of the Native American entry into baseball. Attempting to capture the experiences of Indians participating in sport from federal boarding schools to professional leagues from 1897 to 1945, Jeffrey Powers-Beck utilizes newspapers, periodicals, correspondence, interviews, early Indian school accounts, baseball historiography, and boarding school literature, in order to chart the everyday experiences of Indian men playing organized baseball.

Powers-Beck presents a dazzling array of primary source material culled from the archives of Haskell Indian Nations University, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and the National Archives and Record Administration, to name a few. These materials lead to the conclusion that "the legends like Sockalexis, Jim Thorpe, and Charles Albert Bender and the overlooked veterans of many Minor League seasons, like Frank Jude, Louis Leroy and Elijah Pinnance, were all submerged in the cauldron of racism, far different from the American myth of baseball's supposed 'melting pot.' These players triumphed in enduring the integration experience of name-calling, race-baiting, mob mockery, and mistreatment by players, managers, and fans, all part of the pervasive racism of America's 'Progressive' era" (2).

The text opens with a foreword by Joseph Oxendine that reads against many of the recent post-colonial readings of sport that view image appropriation as a discourse of colonial violence. Oxendine writes, "though it was not something they preferred, most Indians did not seriously object to being called, 'Chief.' Some sportswriters had fun with Indian images, creating near-burlesque climate with comments such as 'The Chief is on the warpath,' 'add another scalp to his belt,' 'put on war paint,' and so on. Of course, early in the twentieth century, political correctness, had not asserted itself" (x). The complexity of performance, particularly the racialized static displays within newspapers and the dynamic existence on playing fields, is downplayed within Oxendine's introduction. As a result, it primes the reader towards a more traditional interpretation of sporting experience in which baseball occupies a space where racial integration is without much of the violence, both cultural and psychological, that many Indians faced in the early twentieth century. The first three chapters, entitled "Chief: the American Indian Integration of Baseball," "Carlisle Indian Industrial School Baseball," and "The Nebraska Indians Baseball Team," are a series of inquiries into the origins of early organized ball players. Powers-Beck begins by positioning his reading of Indian integration against the canonical text *Baseball: the People's Game*, written by Harold and Dorothy Seymour, that argues that animosity towards Indians was mainly cultural. Powers-Beck argues that there is both a long tradition of cultural and racial prejudice towards Native athletes and a corresponding lack of historiographical tradition among baseball historians. As a result, it is impossible to read early twentieth century narratives of baseball without recognizing the intertwined nature of race and culture and the ways in which culture and race have dominated popular sporting narratives.

Powers-Beck uses chapter one to establish the dominance of federal Indian boarding schools as a site where Indian men learned about baseball as well as had a direct experience with assimilationist policies. Importantly, he concludes that excelling in baseball became a way in which Indian athletes, Indian students, and their indigenous communities were able, culturally, to resist white encroachment and controls on their daily lives. Sportswriters, school administrators, and Bureau of Indian Affairs officers each viewed baseball as a lens through which the success or failure of Indian assimilation could be charted. Thus, the familiar stereotypes of the virtuous Indian could quickly turn to the drunken lout and back to the noble savage depending on sporting success.

In chapters two and three, Powers-Beck turns towards the localized site of Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and argues that the physical nature of baseball was three-fold in its performance: first, for white administrators, it demonstrated the success of assimilationist policies in their endeavors to discipline Indian bodies and became a

revenue-generating avenue for the financially struggling schools; secondly, for male athletes, baseball became an employment opportunity that afforded men a relative measure of financial freedom away from the "outing" system fronted by the school and could generate personal and community pride; and lastly, for female students, baseball allowed them the opportunity to defy Victorian ideals of femininity by permitting rough and tumble behavior. An extension of John Bloom's *To Show What An Indian Can Do* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Powers-Beck devotes the majority of his discussion about Carlisle to the concerns of white administrators and the ways in which individual male athletes responded to the dictates of organized baseball.

A nuanced reading of chapter three on the Nebraska Indians Baseball team though offers potential for reading baseball history as labor history and as a history of sexuality. More specifically, male athletes were laborers for their schools and their baseball organizations and occupied an ambiguous space between amateur and professional. They enacted performances of Indianness on sporting fields both as athletes and as advertisers for baseball owners and managers prior to the games. Many of these performances, Powers-Beck contends, were about generating audiences and capital, not for the athletes as one would suspect, but for the baseball team owners. Further, while he downplays the masculine rhetoric that encompasses so many of the narratives and performances, there is an explicit aligning of baseball athletes with physical and sexual dominance as well as the creation of male pan-Indianism.

The majority of the rest of the narrative concentrates on the period from 1903 to 1919. Chapter four features the integration experiences of Charles A. Bender, John Tortes Meyers, and Jim Thorpe. Powers-Beck argues that these three men articulated different strategies of confronting anti-Indian sentiment: Bender "was a canny and intense performer, a World Series hero who faced whooping crowds, race baiting, and disparaging caricature. In the midst of it, he denied feeling any prejudice, but the suffering showed on his body and in his pitching, and he later admitted, 'I couldn't let it out'" (95). John Meyers, the "slow footed catcher," tolerated the domination of his manager, who batted him eighth and seldom trusted him to call pitches, but he spoke his mind about being treated as " 'a foreigner,' a 'stranger' who 'didn't belong' because he was an Indian" (95). Not surprisingly, Powers-Beck claims Thorpe as the greatest athlete of his time and "perhaps of his century" and lauds him for his sporting success in the face of a lack of training in baseball and hostile management and crowds. These short biographical vignettes are promising in their ability to examine individual strategies to combat racism; however, often the reader is burdened by statistics of individual sporting success. Powers-Beck is strongest when he looks at how media outlets constructed hostile environments for players, yet he leaves the question of who is producing these narratives largely uninvestigated. His analysis of the ways in which the media ultimately created the conditions surrounding Jim Thorpe's downfall could only be enlivened by corresponding questions about sportswriters themselves and how these narratives connected to national anti-Indian sentiments.

The experiences of athletes who spent little time in the major leagues often paralleled those of Bender, Meyers, and Thorpe. Chapters five, six, and seven concentrate on the lives of Louis Leroy (who played only briefly in the Major Leagues), George Howard Johnson (with his fourteen year stint at the "big game"), and Moses Yellow Horse. While the themes of caricature, hate speech, and race baiting continue, Powers-Beck moves more freely away from the baseball diamond. In the life of Louis Leroy, readers begin to see the effects of the baseball lifestyle on families. The death of his child is reported to Leroy secondhand because he is traveling. For Johnson, the financial success of baseball allowed him to create a sanctuary for his family on a horse farm, but his continual desire to secure their future placed Johnson in conflict with his own team, the notorious legal battle with the Cincinnati Reds in 1914 over contract jumping. It is finally with the life of Yellow Horse that the violence of race baiting and anti-Indian sentiment becomes concrete. Moses Yellow Horse responds physically to the taunts of Ty Cobb and hits Cobb in the leg forcing him to leave the game on a stretcher. This violence, though, is of a man pushed to the edge. With injury and the demise of his Major League career, Yellow Horse, like many athletes, turned to alcohol. In the end, Powers-Beck presents the redemption of Yellow Horse. He swears off drinking and become a vibrant member of his community, so much so that he was honored by the Pawnee community on his sixtieth birthday. Combined, these chapters reveal that the integration experience was ultimately always a perilous experience. Athletes, no matter their level of sporting success, faced a deck stacked against them. Integration was never easy for these athletes and their successes; as such, Powers-Beck celebrates even minor victories against racism in baseball.

The epilogue of *The American Indian Integration of Baseball* mentions the historical legacies of the integration experience in the form of Indian mascots in Major League Baseball. A brief overview argues for the similarities between newspaper cartoons and the current manifestations of Chief Wahoo and the Atlanta Braves icon, but

ultimately, and rightly so, does not trace the evolution of these images. Instead, the epilogue functions as a recapitulation of Powers-Beck's call to scholars to embrace studies of the Indian integration experience. He writes, "the integration experiences of American Indian players in professional baseball promised new opportunities for both Indian and non-Indian communities. Sadly, as long as the chants and chops continue, the promise is yet to be fully realized" (176).

Ultimately, *The American Indian Integration of Baseball* is a worthwhile read that opens new areas of investigation to sport historians, in general, and baseball historians, in particular. Scholars looking to build off this work will find an immense archive already charted, thanks to Powers-Beck, Joseph Oxendine, and John Bloom. Two appendices provide detailed listings of American Indian Major League Players from 1887-1945, Major League players with American Indian Ancestry, and profiles of Carlisle Indian Industrial School's star players with team records.

Scholars should turn now towards contextualizing the experiences of Indian athletes. How did major national events, including World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, affect the integration experience? Is there an evolution in the gendered rhetoric surrounding Indian entry into baseball? And lastly, how does Indian athletic involvement in baseball fit with narratives by other minority athletes in the deadball period?

Jeffrey Powers-Beck, *The American Indian Integration of Baseball*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 281 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 0-8032-3745-6

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