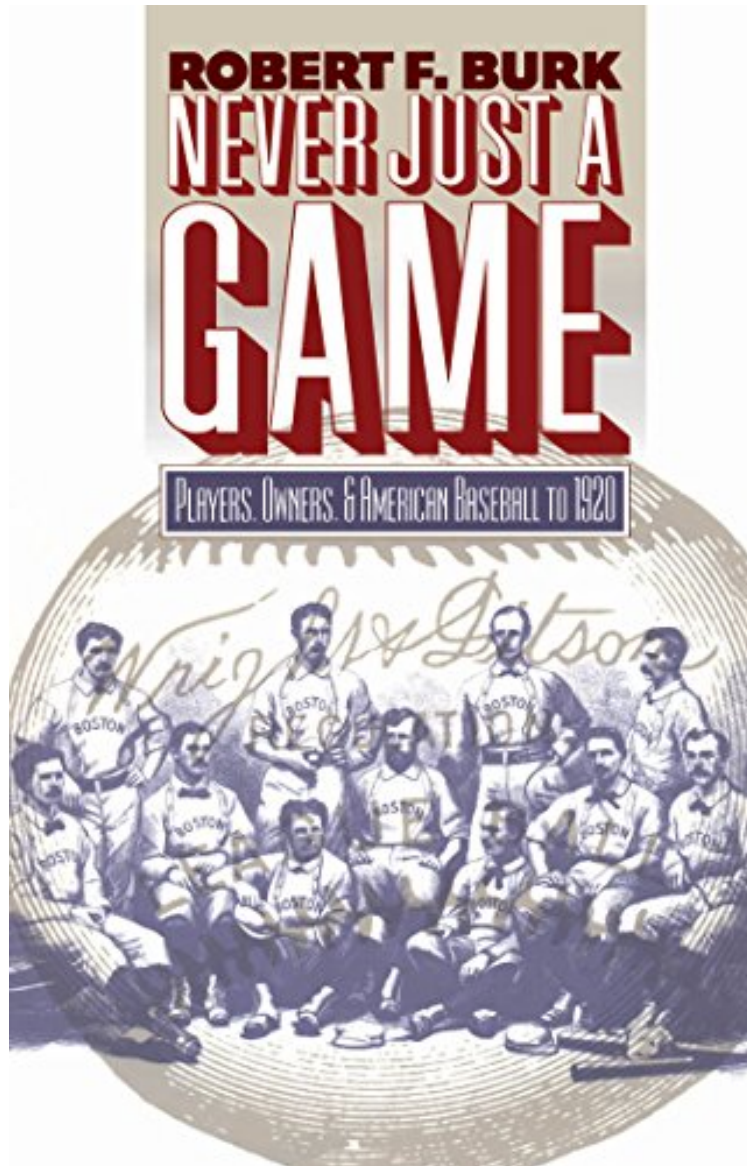


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Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920

Robert F. Burk

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Robert F. Burk : Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920 before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Study of Labor Relations in Major League Baseball By Roger D. Launius This work is the first volume of a two-part study on labor relations in Major League Baseball (MLB). It deals

with the nineteenth century experience, as well as the early years of the twentieth century through the "Black Sox" scandal and the appointment of Kennesaw Mountain Landis as the first MLB Commissioner. Burk notes in his preface how he decided upon a title: "for those who operate professional franchises, and for those employed by them in the sport, baseball has never been 'just a game'." Its history has been marked by "bitter off-field struggles between players and management over prestige, power, and profits." It also included fights "over who would have access to its opportunities, how its profits would be divided, and...who would control its operations" (p. xi). Mining several primary sources, many at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, Burk fashions a narrative of divergent wills. He draws the familiar story of how companies formed in the 1860s and 1870s to field baseball teams, played each other, and eventually established leagues. The owners hired players, treating them like other labor groups in the United States. Like other workingmen, the players sought to maximize their salaries and benefits, and confrontation resulted. In virtually all instances, these disputes ended with the owners gaining greater authority over their employees, and the players gained resentment at these developments. He also relates the already well-known rebellion led by John Montgomery Ward to invigorate the Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players and start a league of its own in 1890, as well as the establishment of several rival leagues whose competition served to raise the income of the players. Most of these efforts ended in failure, and the one instance when it did not, with the rise of the American League, the owners of both leagues combined to create a stable business climate. Burk also spends considerable effort on the creation of the owners' ingenious "reserve clause." Arising in the "Gilded Age" of the latter 1870s, this became a seemingly inviolate section of all players' contracts that allowed the team the right to reserve the services of their players for the next season even without a signed contract. This clause was dreamed up by coal baron William A. Hulbert set about ensuring that the power in MLB resided with the owners rather than the players. It stated that the club had the right to renew a player's contract following each season--effectively making the player's contract the property of the team that first acquired him for the rest of the player's career. While the contract, and hence the player could be traded, a player could not unilaterally choose to play for another team even if he did not have a current signed contract. The manner in which this legal means of controlling players was concocted and adopted amounts to some of the most interesting sections of this book. It was not until the 1970s that the players finally overturned the "reserve clause" and entered the current age of "free agency." What resulted from these labor disputes was a stable business in which MLB owners made considerable profits and could exploit players without much fear of anything. For example, he discusses the manipulation of MLB rules to depress individual players' statistics, thereby reducing their bargaining position at contract negotiation time. In the process of this narrative, Burk unpacks the economics of MLB in its first half century. While there is much to praise in this book, I recommend caution when considering parts of it. First, Burk is working from sketching economic records and his tables of salaries, club costs, etc., do not betray the fact that much of his analysis is based on educated guesses rather than on "hard data." Second, Burk is biased toward the players in these disputes and his narrative paints the owners as evil conspirators. While I also support the side of the players, one must be aware that the owners were probably not as evil as sometimes noted nor the players as saintly as too often concluded. Finally, the issue of a conspiracy of owners to beat down and control the players is certainly present, especially when reviewing the history of the "reserve clause" and the prohibition of African American players, but it is important to question the level of collusion that might have existed among the MLB owners. The premise that the owners acted in total agreement, in lock step, as a cartel to maximize their profits belies the inherent competition between them, both on and off the field. Rather, they often disagreed and fought each other fully as much as they fought the players. We have seen this in the period since 1920 as well, and it is an important point to consider when reading this very fine book. I recommend "Never Just a Game" as an important benchmark in the non-buff study of baseball history. It should find a place on the bookshelves of all those who take MLB history seriously. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A book for true fans of the game! By A Customer Burk does a great job detailing the often overlooked facets of professional baseball, ie. the business aspects of the game. A very rewarding work that meshes history with the freshness of a great read. Very worthwhile for the diehard baseball advocate. Groundbreaking research here.

America's national pastime has been marked from its inception by bitter struggles between owners and players over profit, power, and prestige. In this book, the first installment of a highly readable, comprehensive labor history of baseball, Robert Burk describes the evolution of the ballplaying work force: its ethnocultural makeup, its economic position, and its battles for a place at the table in baseball's decision-making structure. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growing popularity of baseball as a spectator sport and the dramatic upsurge of America's urban population created conditions that led to franchise competition, the development of rival leagues, and trade wars, in turn triggering boom-and-bust cycles, franchise bankruptcies, and league mergers. According to Burk, players repeatedly tried to use these circumstances to better their economic positions by playing one team off against another. Their successes proved short-lived, however, because their own internal divisions, exploited by management, undercut attempts to create collective-bargaining institutions. By 1920, owners still held the upper hand in the labor-management battle, but as today's sports pages show, owners did not secure a long-term solution to their labor

problems.

A fascinating story, well told. ("Choice")Burk proves that when it comes to baseball's money issues, the more things change--the more they stay the same. ("USA Today Baseball Weekly")The book will appeal to both the serious student of business history and the layman with merely an interest in the game itself. ("Business History")"Never Just a Game" will be useful for many economic, business, and labor historians, even those who are not sports fans. ("Journal of Economic History")A detailed study of baseball's labor-management relations from the first all-professional team, the undefeated 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings, to the 1919 Black Sox, an era when the owners, not the players were in total command. (Jerome Holtzman, "Chicago Tribune") A very carefully argued and meticulously researched book.--Australasian Journal of American StudiesThe best study of the sport's turbulent early labor wars.--North Carolina Historical Burk has provided the clearest and richest account of baseball's evolution as a business that I have seen. His narrative is well written, lively, and thoroughly enjoyable.--Andrew Zimbalist, author of Baseball and Billions: A Probing Look Inside the Big Business of Our National PastimeNever Just a Game will be useful for many economic, business, and labor historians, even those who are not sports fans.--Journal of Economic HistoryBurk proves that when it comes to baseball's money issues, the more things change--the more they stay the same.--USA Today Baseball WeeklyA meticulously researched account of the history of labour-management struggles in baseball up to 1920. . . . It is also a lively, highly readable volume filled with fascinating anecdotes about players, rule changes, and so on. As such, the book will appeal to both the serious student of business history and the layman with merely an interest in the game itself.--Business HistoryA fascinating story, well told.--ChoiceA detailed study of baseball's labor-management relations from the first all-professional team, the undefeated 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings, to the 1919 Black Sox, an era when the owners, not the players were in total command.--Jerome Holtzman, Chicago TribuneA fascinating look at baseball's origins, including the early days before it dawned on those involved that baseball could become a money-making enterprise. The preface alone is worth the price of the book.--NINEFrom the Inside FlapThe first installment of a comprehensive labor history of American baseball, describing the evolution of the ballplaying work force to 1920: its ethnocultural makeup, its economic position, and its battles for a place at the table in baseball's decision-making structure.