

Masculinity, Moguls, and Malt: The Shared History of Baseball and Alcohol

Kevin Grace*

In 1882, as Organized Baseball consciously worked to place itself in the American cultural landscape as a nationalistic entity, an upstart league was formed to challenge the primacy of baseball's ruling National League. The new organization was variously called the "Beer and Whiskey League" or the "Beer Ball League." Officially, it was the "American Association," and it was formed as a result of the National League's opposition to alcohol sales in the ballparks, along with its opposition to the playing of games on Sunday.¹ The new league's founders included brewers and distillers in St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Louisville, and Pittsburgh, not coincidentally cities which had large German-American and Eastern European populations, urban groups that enjoyed the social place of beer and Sunday recreation in their lives.²

After only a decade, the Beer Ball League was gone, its owners having stood up to the National League's alcohol ban, and negotiating to bring an end to a competition war by returning some of the renegade American Association franchises to the league. However, the Beer Ball League's insistence on its right to sell beer and liquor proved to be a benchmark in what has been a long relationship between baseball and alcohol. From its very beginnings as a recreational outgrowth of the saloon subculture, baseball has always been closely tied to beer and spirits. With the rise and fall of the American Association in the 19th century, the selling and enjoying of beer became a solid fixture in the national pastime, a symbol of the game itself, and a controversial image with which the owners of franchises, the fans, and temperance and prohibition activists have struggled for over a century.

The development of the saloon subculture in the first quarter of 19th century America had its impetus in defining masculinity and manhood for a population of young males displaced economically, socially, and culturally by the machinations of the Industrial Revolution and immigrant settlement in urban centers. That this saloon, or bachelor, subculture found validation and cultural identity in an environment of alcohol, gambling, and sport made these factors a part of the resulting voluntary associations that often featured the establishment of baseball clubs. The New York Knickerbockers team,

for example, was founded in the 1840s as a middle-class social club that also featured a fire-fighting component, a cricket club, and a baseball team. The club's post-game celebrations included banquets with their opponents for the day's contest and the enjoyment of spirits and cigars. The drinking and smoking were an expressive part of the camaraderie shared by young men of like background and livelihoods, and as a result, the consumption of alcohol and tobacco became an accepted aspect of sport celebration.³ Though baseball faced negative reaction from business owners and industrialists whose middle-class clerks enjoyed the game along with artisans and tradesmen, the saloon subculture also fostered the growth and enjoyment of bloodsports—boxing, dog-fighting, cockfighting, rat-baiting and other games whose reason for existence depended on gambling and male companionship. That baseball and bloodsports were often coupled in the public mind with saloon culture resulted in an adverse image that baseball strove to overcome.

Alcohol consumption also became symbolic of what it took to be a successful man. With aspirations beyond their working middle-class lives, young men playing baseball believed beer and liquor taken with their fellows—with whom they had just engaged in physical, athletic competition—marked them as men of the world. The drinking of alcohol, in effect, broadened their masculine world.

As baseball became increasingly popular in antebellum America, as it became entrenched as a leisure time activity—both for viewers and participants—the athletes who succeeded at it came to be viewed more and more as the masculine ideal. The image of strappingly virile, healthy young men playing what was already being touted by the time of the Civil War as the “national pastime,” became the image for young boys to emulate and young women to admire. That continuing temperance and prohibition movements in the United States sought to mitigate the socially undesirable effects of the urban saloon had little effect on the sporting life. Spurred by the war, the popularity of baseball had a dramatic rise in the late 1860s and early 1870s as the game spread from eastern and Midwest urban areas to small towns and rural areas around the country. With the professionalization of the game that was an inevitable part of the economic boosterism of the 1870s, and the desire on the part of fans to see—and thus pay for—the best baseball talent, baseball players became even more well-known to the public. The tobacco industry realized that a tie could be made between their product and the national game, and by the mid-1870s, advertisements using baseball themes were created to increase tobacco sales. The alcohol

industry soon followed by example, tying beer and whiskey with athletic achievement. Cap Anson and Buck Ewing, two of the game's biggest stars, appeared in a colorful ad promoting Burke's Beer. If the players familiar to young male fans enjoyed a certain brand of beer after a hard-fought game, then perhaps those young boys would grow to young men who enjoyed the same brand. It is an advertising technique still effective today.

This marriage of beer and baseball was not consummated without protest, however. In the development of the muscular Christianity movement, players and owners often felt the pressure to cease their identification with alcohol. In an age when professional ballplayers were marked by their high living off the field, there were numerous examples of players who were drunk, who under the influence of alcohol did not play, or who upset the competitive balance of their teams.

Years later, in 1915, sports journalist Hugh Fullerton, who would later uncover the 1919 World Series gambling scandal, began to document Organized Baseball's involvement in temperance. Fans were aware of drunken behavior through newspaper accounts of suspensions and fines, but Fullerton sought to document the damage done by drinkers. He examined baseball record books from 1903 to 1914 and selected the names of thirty-two active players he knew personally to be heavy drinkers. He then compared the drinkers' statistics with twenty-four players who either did not drink heavily or drink at all. His basis was the notion that "a bottle of beer does not harm me," a statement he received from heavy drinkers. In studying batting averages, Fullerton found that initially in their careers, drinkers were the better hitters, but over time, non-drinkers were consistent and actually surpassed the drinkers. In studying base-stealing, his statistics did not show a difference between drinkers and non-drinkers, but in pitching, he found that non-drinkers pitched more games and won a greater percentage of them. After their careers were over, the non-drinking players followed on Fullerton's temperance campaign were found to be more prosperous, in business, and even alive over drinkers by three-to-one margin.

Owners often were in a quandary, reluctant to discipline their stars for their occasional binges. But when it came to an issue of image versus investment, i.e. when a ballplayer's drinking habits resulted in negative community feeling for a team, then owners and managers were required to remedy the situation. Mike "King" Kelly, a peripatetic star whose heavy drinking caused him to wear out his welcome on more than one team, was often followed by detectives hired by his teams' owners to document his saloon

forays, and one supposes, to try and keep him out of those places. At one point while playing for Chicago, Kelly had to be suspended for a considerable amount of time until he was sober enough to play. In the case of the National League in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the increasingly public perception that ballplayers were often foul-mouthed, drunk, and disorderly louts threatened the owners' financial investment in their communities and in the national pastime. Steps were taken: a decision was made to eliminate beer sales at ballparks, and those teams who refused to follow the dictum would be removed from the league. Cincinnati was forced out of the National League in 1881.

There were other issues, of course, which led to the expulsion, such as the fact that Cincinnati also insisted on playing games on Sunday. But intent on making a socially relevant response, the National League would brook no exceptions that might consider the ethnic or cultural element that found expression in beer and Sunday ball.

In the years leading up to the National League's decision, beer and liquor sales had become a recognized part of a baseball club's income. The St. Louis and Cincinnati teams, for instance, reckoned that they earned between \$4000 and \$5000 each year on beer sales alone. It was not only Cincinnati that would suffer from a beer ban. The so-called "moguls" of baseball—middle-class entrepreneurs who were often tied to saloons and political bosses, as well as those men such as Charles Comiskey and Albert Spalding who had grown up with baseball and sought to make their living from it—aspired to gentleman status and affected the trappings they perceived to be those of gentlemen: cigars, clothing, and a capacity to hold one's liquor. Still, if polite society frowned on alcohol consumption, then their enterprises would follow what was becoming a Christian, Anglo-Saxon response to immigrant, Catholic, and Jewish involvement with baseball.

In reaction to the National League, Denny McKnight of Pittsburgh gathered men from several cities to create the new American Association, a league that would give its clubs the freedom to peddle alcohol. In Cincinnati, Justus Thorner formed a new Reds, with the slogan, "*Liberty for All*," meaning, of course, that liberty was connected to the freedom to sell beer. In Louisville, the Frank Fehr Brewing Company became the owner of an American Association entry. In Baltimore, brewer Henry von der Horst fielded a team. Perhaps the owner most identified with beer and alcohol was St. Louis' Chris von der Ahe, a saloon owner who saw baseball as one more means of entertainment. Von der Ahe purchased the St. Louis Browns, and

soon after built a beer garden in the ballpark. Emphasizing the connection between drinking and fun, von der Ahe used the team to promote his saloon, and in turn made beer a vital part of a baseball-amusement park complex.⁴ And, as ownership of the Cincinnati baseball team passed to the John Hauck Brewing Company, that particular brewery realized not only concession income could be earned at the ballpark, it also required of its licensed concessionaire that only Hauck's beer would be sold on the premises. In a contract between the Cincinnati Base Ball Club and the Franck and Trefzger Company in 1887, Hauck granted concession rights to the firm with a curious stipulation that no wine, beer, or intoxicating liquors could be sold in the grandstand or private boxes. Presumably this restriction did not include the bleachers. For the former areas, alcohol had to be purchased at a concession stand.

Additionally, Hauck included a stipulation that no beer, wine, or intoxicating liquors could be sold to anyone who appeared intoxicated, or the Cincinnati Base Ball Club could forfeit the contract. And, no beer other than that manufactured by Hauck could be sold at the ballpark. This alcohol concession was sold for \$2100.⁵

The National League ultimately emerged victorious in its attrition fight with the upstart American Association, but not without making concessions. The teams admitted back into the National League in 1892 would be allowed to sell beer.

As the 20th century approached, the selling of beer and alcohol at baseball games became as much of a tradition as the game itself. The combination of the two, further emphasized in ballpark billboard advertising of local beer brands, was seen as a validating male experience.

But not so to one of the greatest critics of America's pairing of baseball with beer. Evangelist Billy Sunday, a former professional baseball player with the Chicago White Stockings and Pittsburgh Pirates from 1883 to 1890, railed against the evils of alcohol in his sermons, and often brought his baseball experience into play. Sunday spoke first-hand of the drinking ballplayers he had known, and how they had dissipated their careers because of John Barleycorn. Using a flamboyant, histrionic preaching style, Billy Sunday incorporated baseball terms and movements into his revival performances, exhorting his listeners not to "strike out against the devil," but to "slide home to salvation." And, to give up the grain. One of his most famous sermons, which he used in revivals and camp meetings throughout the Midwest, was

entitled “Get on the Water Wagon:”

What is your raw material, saloons? American boys. Say, I would not give one boy for all the distilleries and saloons this side of Hell. And they have to have 2,000,000 boys every generation. And then you tell me you are a man, when you will vote for an institution like that. What do you want to do, pay taxes in money or in boys?⁶

But it was those American boys imitating the heroes of American males: the professional athletes. Billy Sunday’s popularity and effectiveness came from his tales of personal experience. When beer and alcohol sales continued to increase despite the exhortations of preachers and prohibitionists, it was difficult to convince baseball’s leaders to adopt any measure that would limit their income.

August “Garry” Herrmann, the president of the Cincinnati Reds from 1902 to 1927, was a German-American child of the urban boss system. Rising to political power in Cincinnati under George Barnsdale Cox, Herrmann was installed as the Reds president when Cox and the local Fleischmann brothers, Julius and Max, purchased the team. Herrmann’s considerable political acumen ended the “Great Baseball War” between the National League and another new league, the American. In 1903, he created the World Series. He became the de facto commissioner of baseball when he was selected to chair the three-member National Commission that governed baseball. In that role, he was besieged by petitioners to fight Sunday baseball, to fight “lewd dancing” in the ballparks, and to fight alcohol sales.⁷

Among the correspondence Herrmann received is a 1921 letter from the Juvenile Protective Association in Cincinnati. Because the Reds were subletting Redland Field for motion pictures and dances, the result was “immoral dancing of the most extreme type.” The sender, Frank Nelson, took the Reds to task for not monitoring the situation, saying many of the girls involved were under age eighteen. “The whole atmosphere—including the vulgar conduct which we have observed between girls and men in the unlighted portions of the grand-stand—is questionable and presents a dangerous situation.”⁸

Other letters sent him throughout his tenure addressed the issue of Sunday baseball in various cities around the country. Herrmann had his own

take on moral behavior: he frequently bet with other owners and American League president Ban Johnson on the outcome of games, and in the Palace of the Fans, the Reds ballpark from 1902 to 1912, there was a “Rooters Row” at field level, fronted with chicken wire to prevent drunken abusive fans from fighting with ballplayers, and, vice versa. Several concession stands at the Palace sold hard liquor—in hard bottles, thus necessitating the protective fence. As a colorful, boisterous self-styled man of the people who billed himself as “the champion beer drinker and sausage eater in baseball,” it was rather out of character for him to take such petitions seriously.

In 1911, Garry Herrmann received a letter from Cora F. Stoddard, the corresponding secretary of the Scientific Temperance Federation in Boston. Stoddard noted a reference to Herrmann in a periodical in which it was said that Herrmann believed the sale of liquor inside ballparks should be prohibited, and to set an example he would be selling only soft drinks in Cincinnati’s Palace of the Fans. The periodical further stated that Herrmann believed that baseball and booze didn’t mix; the sale of whiskey and beer in the bleachers was conducive to disorderly conduct.

Anxious that the article about Herrmann and baseball was true, Stoddard was writing to Herrmann to verify that. If it were true, the temperance movement would have a solid stance on baseball’s grounds:

Such statements are of considerable interest to the general public and particularly so to teachers and social workers who constitute a good part of our readers. However, we do not care to use statements which have not been carefully verified. Accordingly we would appreciate it if you would state whether or not the quotation is correct in all particulars. Might we also enquire what regulations, if any, you may have governing the use of light or strong drinks by the men on the teams. Any statement along these lines will be gratefully received⁹

There is no record of a response from Garry Herrmann. Given his own inclination for a life filled with beer and good food—and his attention to profits from the ballclub—it is highly unlikely that he would have cast a disapproving eye on alcohol sales and consumption. As it would turn out, the onset of Prohibition did nothing to ease Herrmann’s own beer consumption. With his extensive political and social connections, he was able to maintain a steady supply for himself in the 1920s. In December 1920, for example, Herrmann was at a baseball meeting in New York. He wired his son-in-law,

Karl Finke, the secretary of the Reds, to send him a barrel of Cincinnati's Herancourt beer on the train, marking it for "John Smith." Even during Prohibition, Herrmann was able to obtain beer and have it shipped wherever he happened to be.¹⁰

In fact, Garry Herrmann's *bon vivant* lifestyle would mark him as the personification of beer and baseball until New York brewer Jacob Ruppert purchased the Yankees in 1915. Ruppert's fortune and his Knickerbocker beer cemented the relationship between barley and ballgames. Thereafter, the tradition of brewery-backed baseball clubs continued in the 20th century with such men as Emil Sick of Seattle, Jerold Hoffberger of Baltimore, and most notably, August Busch of St. Louis.¹¹ Busch purchased the St. Louis Cardinals in 1953 and on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ownership in 1978 remarked that although the team had often lost money, the beer sales made up the loss. He emphasized that sales had risen from 6,000,000 barrels a year to more than 35,000,000, due in part to the association with the Cardinals.

Baseball's involvement with beer abated during Prohibition, but with repeal in 1933, suds at ballparks again became a ritual of the American male. Celebrity endorsements picked up again, idealized athletes promoting the refreshing benefits of different brands. However, it was with the dramatic increase of radio and television sponsorship of baseball games in the 1950s and 1960s that the ties between beer and baseball were further strengthened. Specific beers became identified with specific teams and their cities: Burger and Hudepohl in Cincinnati, Schmidt's in Philadelphia, Knickerbocker in New York, and, Budweiser in St. Louis.¹² Longtime Cincinnati Reds broadcaster Waite Hoyt, a Hall of Fame pitcher and recovering alcoholic, was inextricably associated with Burger Beer's sponsorship of Reds broadcasts. Publicity shots often included Hoyt with a case of Burger. And, often radio broadcasts for other teams would preface a great play or a home run with the exclamation of the sponsoring beer, a "Rheingold homer," for example. Fans of the older ballparks would recall the massive signs in the outfield—Knickerbocker, Schmidt's—and today's scoreboards and fences often contain ads for Budweiser and other beers.

In recent years, Organized Baseball has continued to wrestle with the social problems of alcohol abuse and the considerable revenues earned from the alcohol industry. Commercials during game broadcasts promote responsible drinking; and the TEAM concept, Techniques for Effective Alcohol Management, distributed to teams and concessionaires attempt to create an

acceptable role for beer and baseball.¹³ The handbook counsels vendors and team personnel in recognizing signs of alcohol abuse and impairment, and how to serve the public while maintaining safety. The shared heritage of alcohol and baseball, a link that goes back more than 150 years, emphasizes, however, that baseball, male bonding, and cultural definitions of masculinity and manhood are part of the social makeup of the game.

NOTES

*Thank you to Don Heinrich Tolzmann, Director of German-American Studies at the University of Cincinnati for his reading of portions of this paper.

1. See David Nemeec, *The Beer and Whiskey League: The Illustrated History of the American Association-Baseball's Renegade Major League* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1994) for an account of the league. Nemeec thoroughly chronicles the league year-by-year, with statistics and anecdotes of the players, but does not really address the social issues involved in the league's creation.

2. The best treatment of the connections between race, ethnicity, and sport can be found in Steven Riess's excellent monograph *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

3. See Benjamin Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) for a concise discussion of the relationship between saloon behavior and sport in the early nineteenth century.

4. J. Thomas Hetrick in his book *Chris von der Ahe and the St. Louis Browns* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999) writes a fascinating biography of the colorful owner and discusses the role of von der Ahe's saloon and beer vending as part of his baseball entrepreneurship.

5. *Records of the Cincinnati Baseball Club* archival collection (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Historical Society). In another document, club president Aaron Stern wrote to John Hauck's son, Louis, the team secretary, with his news that he had sold a candy "privilege" or concession: "I will retire tonight and hope to study up some other new privilege. Perhaps you may think of me. Call on me when you are downtown and bring your voucher book...Please mention the sales to John Hauck. This is just like finding \$225.00. Never realized a mill for these items before." A cushion "privilege" later brought \$75.00, but it was the beer privilege that proved most lucrative.

6. A full text of the sermon appears in Lyle W. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1991). Sunday also thought Organized Baseball could do more to eliminate tobacco use. He teamed with activist Lucy Page Gaston to fight tobacco and cigarettes, with a focus on ballplayers and young men who admired them. The tobacco fight continues in the Major Leagues today with a ban on all tobacco use in the minor leagues and an active tobacco-education program that discusses the risks of smokeless tobacco. Billy Sunday also preached against dancing and card-playing, certain from his own experience the Organized Baseball lacked a social commitment to bettering American life.

7. *August "Garry" Herrmann Papers*, National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. See James Edward Miller, *The Baseball Business: Pursuing Pennants and Profits in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) for an account of Hoffberger's ownership of the Orioles and his use of the team to sell his beer.

12. See Curt Smith, *Voices of the Game: The First Full-Scale Overview of Baseball Broadcasting, 1921 to the Present* (South Bend, IN: Diamond Communications, 1987) for a discussion on the use of catch phrases and ads using beer names.

13. See, for example, Employee Handbook, TEAM Training: Techniques for Effective Alcohol Management (Chevy Chase, MD: S.W. Morris and Company, Inc., 1987). Prepared for Major League Baseball. The handbook counsels vendors and team personnel in recognizing signs of alcohol abuse and impairment, and how to serve the public while maintaining safety.