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Introduction: People, Place, and Promotion

Exploring the Baseball/Heritage Relationship

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Some may question both the necessity and wisdom of publishing another book examining baseball's past. After all, for well over a century, baseball has been lauded, eulogized, romanticized, and idealized, escalating it to something more than just a game. It is also an academic topic that has been widely written about, particularly its history. The game's heroes, famous games, beloved stadia, and links to other social and political pasts—particularly in the United States—have been explored in many different ways by numerous scholars. And yet, as much as baseball history has been a staple of popular and academic discourse for some time, how baseball's past is used today—in other words, its heritage—remains relatively unexplored. As such, this book seeks to explore how the heritage of baseball is understood, interpreted, commodified, performed, and, in some cases, marginalized in order to address contemporary needs, issues, and concerns.

This is not to suggest that the baseball/heritage relationship is entirely absent from academic literature. Topics such as the creation and interpretation of historic and replica baseball stadia (Friedman & Silk, 2005); the narrative constructions of baseball museums and halls of fame (Springwood, 1996; Ramshaw et al., 2019; Ramshaw & Gammon, 2020); and baseball's use in nostalgia-based retro marketing (Kim, 2016), to name but a few, have been explored across various fields and disciplines. However, as clubs, leagues, fans, and sponsors—not to mention public agencies—continue to use and, at times, grapple with baseball's heritage, a collection such as this could not be more timely.

The “national pastime” is at a critical stage—both in the United States and beyond. The demise of baseball has been predicted countless times over the years, and yet each spring, like a hardy perennial, it always returns, as a reassuring constant that offers much-needed stability in a world of change and uncertainty. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, baseball was thought to be the first major U.S.-based sport to return—in part as a “tonic” to heal the nation—though it resumed well after other leagues had begun play, thus ceding the spotlight to other sporting distractions, and only continued in fits and starts due to coronavirus outbreaks within a number of different clubs. Of course, the events of the pandemic, coupled with the pessimistic perception of baseball’s cultural importance, led many to opine on the future of the sport. Baseball’s waning relevance in U.S. culture is of course not new—as the prophetic observations of Koppett (2016) illustrated: “The game that used to be the central sun of the spectator sports solar system is now only one of its planets—still the largest, but nevertheless only a planet” (p. 221). Today, it may not even be the biggest planet. As a result, there have been discussions exploring the feasibility of making the game more appealing to a younger, time-starved, less patient generation, while also attempting to retain some of the game’s most treasured assets, specifically its rituals, traditions, and heritage. Many of the chapters in this book reflect this tension between the past and the future in the sport, particularly in the United States. Baseball’s heritage can be an asset, though at times—and depending on the circumstances—it can be a millstone as well. Indeed, we are at a crossroads with regard to how we interpret and analyze baseball’s heritage. Unsurprisingly, nostalgia features heavily in a sport that has changed little from its early development. As a consequence, throughout the ages, romance for an idealized past has occupied baseball fans and cultural commentators alike. Today, the nostalgia is far more self-aware than it was in the past, though the temptation to be drawn back to more innocent, uncomplicated times remains irresistible for many. Such sentimentality may in part be fueled by aims in some political circles to “Make America Great Again,” though it may have more to do with an aging population that has more interest in the past than for an uncertain future—not just their own, but baseball’s too. During the pandemic-shortened MLB season in 2020, many of baseball’s most treasured traditions were cast aside—including drastic rule changes, game schedules, and playoff formats, not to mention spectators in the stands—while other heritages were recognized (such as the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Negro Leagues) and maintained (such as a league-wide Jackie Robinson Day) despite the pandemic and the absence

of fans at ballparks. How baseball uses, celebrates, and ignores its past is very much a part of the sport's present and future in the United States.

While the sport's home may be grappling with this Janus-head approach, baseball has made great strides to reach beyond its traditional U.S. base. Baseball has a long history in many other parts of the world—including in Asia and the Caribbean—and the sport, particularly at the professional level, seeks broader global engagement, not only in terms of spectators and consumers but for labor as well. While many countries have used baseball in the U.S. as a template, including as reference points for heritage and culture, many countries have their own baseball-related heritage quite apart from (and, sometimes, in opposition to) the United States. This book recognizes and explores the fact that the baseball/heritage relationship is not only an American phenomenon; that its heritage, meanings, values, places, and performances are often quite local or regional. And yet, even then, there is a tension between the domestic and international baseball worlds. The best league is largely U.S.-based; much of the baseball labor seeks to “make it” in the U.S., and the power and allure of American baseball heritage is a global phenomenon (to illustrate, neither of the editors of this book are, in fact, American). As with all cultural markers, new generations bring new interpretations and, of course, new heritages. How such changing perceptions of the game—both at the domestic and international levels—will impact the manner in which the game is experienced and valued is largely unknown, though will undoubtedly include changes to meaning-making, cultural relevance and identity, and fandom.

People, Place, and Promotion: Exploring the Baseball/Heritage Relationship

Heritage is a complex and frequently misunderstood term, although succinctly it is best understood as “what we inherit from the past and use in present day” (Timothy, 2011, p. 3). Harrison (2013) further described the presentism of heritage, noting that heritage addresses both current considerations and inherited concerns, while Waterton and Watson (2015, p. 1) viewed heritage as “a version of the past received through objects and display, representations and engagements, spectacular locations and events, memories and commemorations, and the preparation of places for cultural purposes and consumption.” There are, of course, many different heritages, each of which connects past places, people, and practices to contemporary needs, considerations, and concerns. Sport is one such topic in heritage.

Ramshaw (2020, p. 4) defined sport heritage as “the recognition and use of the sporting past as a means of addressing or illuminating a variety of contemporary social, cultural, and economic processes and practices” while the sport/heritage relationship can be viewed in a variety of contemporary sporting practices—including baseball. Ramshaw and Gammon (2005; 2017) further explored the heritage/sport relationship by delineating the *heritage of sport*—which would include intra-sport heritage such as famous players, performances, and records—and *sport as heritage*—which includes sport-based heritage, which has a broader societal recognition and impact. There are many examples of the heritage of sport in baseball—many sports have heritages which are recognized, celebrated, and commodified by the teams, leagues, and fans of particular sports. Baseball is perhaps unique in its ability to generate examples of sport as heritage. Jackie Robinson, who most certainly had heritage of sport aspects to his legacy through his on-field records and achievements, is perhaps the most pertinent representation of sport as heritage, as his breaking of the “color barrier” in Major League Baseball is an important part of both American history and heritage, as well as a well-known moment in global sport heritage. Many of the locations of baseball heritage—stadiums and venues, as well as halls of fame, statues, and memorials—tell a broader story of American culture and society, urban development, and heritage conservation. The performances of baseball heritage—whether playing or going to a game—often reflect more about the culture and heritage of a nation than they do of the sport itself. This is not only true in the American context, but internationally as well (as several chapters in this book demonstrate). As such, while the heritages of baseball are certainly important to how the sport is played, promoted, and consumed, baseball’s role in revealing broader heritages is one of its most intriguing characteristics.

In approaching baseball’s heritage, we are reminded of Graham et al. (2000) who explained the duality of heritage: that heritage is simultaneously a cultural and economic resource. Often the cultural and economic aims of heritage are in conflict with one another; the cultural aims look to create, solidify, or justify the cultural uses of heritage while the economic aims look to exploit the consumer demand for heritage products, experiences, and consumers. In applied terms, the duality of heritage pits the curator (who, perhaps, is most concerned with the cultural uses of heritage) against the gift shop manager (who, perhaps, wishes to sell souvenirs of the latest blockbuster exhibition). In baseball, there are times when the duality of heritage may be in conflict; when the economic uses of baseball’s heritage

might shape who or what is culturally remembered and celebrated. A team museum, for example, may only represent great performances and beloved players, and not more controversial seasons, teams, and incidents. On the other hand, the cultural and economic aims of baseball heritage may be in concert. The annual celebration of Jackie Robinson not only celebrates his momentous achievements but also might add to ticket and souvenir sales at the ballpark. As such, approaching baseball's heritage under the themes of *people, place, and promotion* is a recognition of the simultaneous uses of baseball's heritage—some of which are in concert while others are in conflict.

Because heritage is shaped by contemporary needs—be they economic, cultural, and/or political—what is included and discarded as part of the heritage canon will often change. The uses of heritage in baseball—though long a part of how the sport's past has been interpreted, marketed, and consumed—has taken on a more central role in recent years. In particular, while teams continue to use heritage in fairly typical and recognizable ways—such as in the creation of heritage-themed merchandise, promotions, and ballpark experiences—how baseball heritage is recognized and by whom, as well as how the sport is connected with larger heritage contexts has been pushed to the forefront, particularly in the United States. Indeed, during the creation of this volume, significant social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo changed how baseball's past is viewed, which in turn changed how baseball's heritage is interpreted and recognized. Historic racialized team names and logos—such as the Indians of Cleveland—have recently been discarded in light of Black Lives Matter protests, while the very history of professional baseball from a statistical perspective is no longer segregated, as statistics from players in the Negro Leagues are now harmonized with those of Major League Baseball. The #MeToo movement, which revealed the widespread impact of sexual assault, abuse, and harassment, changed baseball's heritage as well—in particular, it spurred the removal of in-stadium heritage markers for past players who were accused of sexual assault, such as Roberto Alomar of the Toronto Blue Jays. The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly changed baseball's heritage, including the collecting of COVID-19 related baseball artifacts for museums and halls of fame; famous and historic baseball stadia becoming COVID-19 testing and vaccination centers (not to mention free testing and vaccination sites being part of the “ballpark experience” in 2021); MLB stadiums segregating spectators based on their COVID-19 vaccination status; and “living legends” from baseball's past—such as legendary New York Mets pitcher Tom Seaver and former