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A People's History of Baseball

Mitchell Nathanson



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Baseball is much more than the national pastime. It has become an emblem of America itself. From its initial popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, the game has reflected national values and beliefs and promoted what it means to be an American. Stories abound that illustrate baseball's significance in eradicating racial barriers, bringing neighborhoods together, building civic pride, and creating on the field of play an instructive civics lesson for immigrants on the national character.

In *A People's History of Baseball*, Mitchell Nathanson probes the less well-known but no less meaningful other side of baseball: episodes not involving equality, patriotism, heroism, and virtuous capitalism, but power--how it is obtained, and how it perpetuates itself. Through the growth and development of baseball Nathanson shows that, if only we choose to look for it, we can see the petty power struggles as well as the large and consequential ones that have likewise defined our nation.

By offering a fresh perspective on the firmly embedded tales of baseball as America, a new and unexpected story emerges of both the game and what it represents. Exploring the founding of the National League, Nathanson focuses on the newer Americans who sought club ownership to promote their own social status in the increasingly closed caste of nineteenth-century America. His perspective on the rise and public rebuke of the Players Association shows that these baseball events reflect both the collective spirit of working and middle-class America in the mid-twentieth century as well as the countervailing forces that sought to beat back this emerging movement that threatened the status quo. And his take on baseball's racial integration that began with Branch Rickey's "Great Experiment" reveals the debilitating effects of the harsh double standard that resulted, requiring a black player to have unimpeachable character merely to take the field in a Major League game, a standard no white player was required to meet.

Told with passion and occasional outrage, *A People's History of Baseball* challenges the perspective of the well-known, deeply entrenched, hyper-patriotic stories of baseball and offers an incisive alternative history of America's much-loved national pastime.

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