

The Black Sox Scandal of 1919: Reactions from Baseball Fans in Chicago, Cleveland, and New York

By Devyn Luden



In 1919, baseball players on the Chicago White Sox were involved in one of the biggest cheating scandals in sports history. Eight members of the team intentionally lost the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds in return for receiving a large payout from big shot gamblers. Rumors of the scheme - eventually dubbed the “Black Sox Scandal” - circulated around Major League Baseball through the 1920 season until a trial was finally called against the accused players.

At the completion of the trial in 1921, the jury found the accused players to be “not guilty” of all charges despite compelling evidence and confessions from the players. In spite of the legal outcome, Major League Baseball banned the eight players from the 1919 Chicago White Sox from professional baseball for life. Many scholars have written about the players, the managers, the baseball commissioner, and the legal process of the scandal, but little has been written about what baseball fans had to say. Therefore, in my historical research, I examined newspaper editorials and letters to the editor in newspapers from Chicago, Cincinnati, and New York City to discover what Chicago fans - and fans of Chicago’s opponents - had to say of the

scandal. The newspaper clippings that I read revealed - not so surprisingly - that Chicago baseball fans complained that the punishment was too harsh, while baseball fans in Cincinnati and New York City generally thought the accused players got what they deserved. In spite of this difference, though, baseball enthusiasts as a whole tended to agree that the League needed to institute reforms that would better ensure that the sport of baseball would be saved from gambling and corruption.

The nearly two year period between the 1919 World Series and the completion of the court trial saw a large volume of editorials and opinion columns appear in periodicals all over the country. A topic that was highly debated was the level of punishment the White Sox players deserved. In particular, Cincinnati, the home of the 1919 World Series champion Reds, and New York City were two cities where the public unleashed intense criticism on the White Sox players and their actions. The editorial board of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 1920 opined that the appropriate punishment would be “to push the inquiry to the limit, to bring to the bar of justice upon every individual involved in it and to punish to the limit for everyone found guilty.”¹ Another column published in the *Trenton Evening Times* in 1920 discussed the story of White Sox pitcher Eddie Cicotte,



previously a household name who was idolized for the way he played the game (shown above). The editorial called Cicotte’s decision to take part in the scandal “the most monstrous piece of deception that has ever been penetrated in the history of American sport” which “crushed his wife and family with shame.”² Around the same time, popular sports writer Grantland Rice wrote a column for the *New York Tribune* stating, “They are the ultimate scum of the universe, and

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BLACK SOX TRIAL.



even the spotted civilization of the present time has no place for them outside a penitentiary.”³

Undoubtedly, Cincinnatians and New Yorkers considered these players to be incredibly evil and worthy of the shame they received. Some even insisted prison time if found guilty by the court.

To the contrary, opinions like these were hard to come by in Chicago based newspapers. In fact, one editorial published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* even acknowledged their lack of comment on the scandal stating “We wished to forget the stain upon our national game.”⁴ This same editorial also ridiculed the pending court trial citing the fact that White Sox players would have to miss scheduled games in order to appear in court and that “the fans of Chicago and Cincinnati have been jolted enough.”⁴ Chicago fans wished to forgive and forget the players and their scandal and to not disturb the game of baseball anymore with a court trial.

My investigation of these newspaper editorials also revealed greatly opinionated pieces on who should be deemed responsible for the Black Sox Scandal: the baseball players, the managers and the League, or the gamblers. Unlike the opinions on the degree of punishment for the players, the judgments of who to blame for the scandal generally varied from city to city and from person to person. Most commonly, the editorials focused the blame on the gamblers. In a second editorial written by Grantland Rice, he opined “a professional gambler can wreck any sport in the world - even baseball.”⁵ A different editorial published in the *Trenton Evening Times* just outside New York City took Rice’s argument one step further in blaming both the gamblers and the players. This editorial states, “Yet, after all perhaps it is better for baseball that players with the weakness of character to fall for the gamblers have listened to their temper and been exposed to public view.”⁶ While the trap set up by the gamblers may have been tempting, the integrity of a player should be strong enough to not risk the prestige of baseball.

Many editorials criticized the team managers and the League. A column by Henry P. Edwards published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* opined that it is the duty of the people in authority to keep gamblers away from their team. Edwards writes, “There is not a club owner but who knows that if the gamblers are allowed to continue to pull off their stunts of 1919, the game is wrecked and they can close their parks.”⁷ The failure of club owners to take responsibility for the scandal would only lead to future gambling schemes -

with the potential to end baseball’s reign for good. In accordance with the minimal discussion of the cheating scandal in Chicago newspapers, this entire *Chicago Defender* editorial states, “It is



plainer now why bullfighting holds its following in Spain. The bulls keep the game honest. Baseball players and managers please note.”⁸ Overall, baseball fans around the country had strong opinions on whether it was the players, the club owners, or the gamblers whose blunders led to the occurrence of the scandal.

Before the looming court trial had even begun, newspapers began to publish pieces discussing how this huge cheating scandal would affect baseball and its legacy. With certainty, the newspaper clippings revealed that people believed that the sport of baseball would survive this blemish on its honorable history. A 1920 editorial from the *New York Times* claimed “confidence in the game will die hard” citing the game’s growing prosperity and the increased

interest in the sport from fans - both new and old.⁹ In another piece published by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Henry P. Edwards wrote, “Ultimately it will have a good effect upon the national pastime. The guilty players are to be chased out of baseball and taught such a lesson that it will be many a year before any others will think of following their example and making a door mat out of the game.”¹⁰ It was beneficial to the sport that the players with intentions that spread farther than just winning games were to receive their due punishment. Fans were hopeful that the Black Sox Scandal would deter players -



of the present and future - from bringing shame to the sport again. No matter how terrible the actions of the White Sox players, the millions of fans around the country would not forget their love for the game of baseball.

The extent and severity of the Black Sox Scandal shocked the baseball world and left lasting impacts on the sport for years and years to come. Chicago fans advocated for mild punishment of the players while fan bases in New York City and Cincinnati found the scandal disgusting, some wishing for the utmost punishment for the accused players. Fans from all around the country debated whether the cheating happened because of the poor character of the accused players, the failures of the managers and the League to discipline their teams, or the

mischievous plots of the gamblers. Despite the backlash and harsh criticism the Black Sox Scandal brought upon the sport of baseball from 1919 to 1921, Major League Baseball was able to withhold their devoted fan base and continue on as America's favorite pastime to this day.

References

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