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"A Structure To Last Forever": The Players' League and the Brotherhood War of 1890

by **Ethan M. Lewis**



TIMOTHY KEEFE.



JOHN M. WARD.



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"It Will Be The Survival of the Fittest"⁴¹

During the months leading up to Opening Day of the 1890 baseball season, the Players' League won legal rulings which invalidated the reserve rule and permitted the PL to freely sign National League players. Those months were also filled with increasingly combative public statements on the part of both the National and Players' Leagues.

Members and supporters of each league attempted to gain the early lead in the propaganda war which was rapidly growing between them; the Players' League promulgated their image as friends of the toiling classes and the NL in turn portrayed the players as contract breaking radicals. The increasingly militant public statements on the part of both sides helped fuel a great deal of public speculation as to the eventual outcome of the conflict. During this time, the leagues compiled their rosters and schedules, and final preparations were completed for the tumultuous season which was to become known as the "Brotherhood War".

As mentioned above, virtually all of the National League players in 1889 were members of the Brotherhood of Players, and most of those men joined the Players' League for 1890. Among the stars were fifteen future Hall of Famers: [Jake Beckley](#); [Dan Brouthers](#); [Charles Comiskey](#); [Roger Connor](#); [Ed Delahanty](#); [Hugh Duffy](#); [Buck Ewing](#); [Pud Galvin](#); [Tim Keefe](#); [King Kelly](#); [Connie Mack](#); [Jim O'Rourke](#); [Hoss Radbourn](#), [Ned Hanlon](#) and [John Ward](#).⁴² Following all those desertions, the National League was left with few established stars, among whom were future Hall of Famers [Cap Anson](#), [John Clarkson](#), [Amos Rusie](#) and [Mickey Welch](#). The NL was forced to bring in many young players to fill their rosters; three of those rookies were future Hall of Famers [Jesse Burkett](#), [Kid Nichols](#) and [Cy Young](#).⁴³

The battle for supremacy was not only fought by the players on the field; the investors of both leagues also played a role in the struggle. As noted above, the Players' League's capitalists were generally well connected entrepreneurs, many of whom were involved in politics. Among the ranks of the National League owners were A.H. Soden, J.B. Billings and W.H. Conant in Boston; the aforementioned Albert Spalding in Chicago; John B. O'Day in New York and Col. John Rogers in Philadelphia.⁴⁴ These men had been owners of their clubs for many years, and had made a substantial investment developing their holdings, including the purchase of land and the building of ballparks. While the Players' League backers made similar investments, they did not have nearly as much equity involved as the NL owners, a problem that would lead to weakness on the parts of the PL men and a strong will to fight on the part of the National Leaguers.

At this stage of the struggle, the American Association was the question mark at the end of the sentence, "Will the Players' League survive?", as they held the balance of power in the struggle between the two titans. While the Brotherhood had chapters in AA cities, the PL had not attempted to lure AA players to the new venture. When most members of the St. Louis Browns of the American Association (1889 runners up) became the Chicago Players' League franchise, it was an exception rather than the rule. However, the National League also raided the AA, enticing the 1889 pennant winners the Brooklyn Bridegrooms to become the new Brooklyn NL club and luring many other top AA stars to come to the NL and replace Brotherhood men in the PL.

By losing its two strongest clubs, the AA was greatly weakened. Their control of markets and players, however, made them a key to the end of the baseball war: whichever side the AA supported would likely win. The AA had no real reason to support the NL, as the latter had violated the reserve agreement; on the other hand, the Players' League offered no reserve rule at all, and both leagues opposed Sunday ball, .25 admission prices and the sale of alcoholic beverages to fans which were the cornerstones of the Association. Throughout the season, rumors would swirl of the PL and AA joining forces, but ultimately, the most influential of the Association owners, Chris Von der Ahe of St. Louis opted to assume a neutral position, and did not align his organization to either warring league.

The initial battles in the Brotherhood War were fought in the pages of the respective league guides. At the time, [Albert Spalding](#) published the Spalding Guide as the official guide to the National League and sporting goods magnate Al Reach published the Reach Guide as the official book of the American Association. The Guides were the official source of team records, player statistics, official rules and the other bits of information baseball fans and reporters find useful. Recognizing that they needed such a repository of facts about their organization, the Players' League published their own guide as well, written by the League Secretary-Treasurer, Chicago sportswriter Frank Brunell. In the extraordinary year of 1890, each Guide took the opportunity to define the issues in the baseball war and apply "spin control" to make their League look good.

The first shot fired by the National League in the war actually preceded the publication of the Spalding Guide, and was a reply to the Brotherhood's "Manifesto". In their response, penned by [Spalding](#), Day and Rogers, the National League declared that it was formed in 1876 "as a necessity...to take [the game] from the hands of the ball players who had controlled and dominated the "National Association of Professional Base Ball Players."⁴⁵ The NL implied that baseball run by the players would result in "that contract breaking, dissipation and dishonesty" which had "undermined the game to such an extreme that it seemed an almost hopeless task to attempt its rescue."⁴⁶ The document further declared that the reserve rule was good for players, and enacted with their consent. It decried the Players' League as "an edifice built on falsehood" and its members as "overpaid players" who sought to "control [the game] for their own aggrandizement".⁴⁷

The Spalding Guide was edited and written by [Henry Chadwick](#), a longtime sportswriter who had spent most of his adult life helping to popularize baseball. Chadwick followed the party line and gave evidence purporting to show that under the reserve clause, nearly every player had seen his salary increase every year, including those who were sold. He declared the "Manifesto" a "revolutionary pronunciamento", and declared the Brotherhood men guilty of secrecy and ingratitude.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Chadwick characterized the PL as the instrument of its leaders, calling [Ward](#) the "chief conspirator" behind the "secessionists" and an employer of the "terrorism peculiar to revolutionary movements".⁴⁹ Ward was also singled out by many pro-National League papers as the leader of the PL, and was ridiculed with such names as "John 'Much-Advertised' Ward" and "'Judas' Montgomery Ward".⁵⁰

The Players' League tried to answer and refute the charges of the National League in their own guide. The Players' National League Guide, besides advertising Keefe and Becannon sporting goods, Arthur Irwin baseball gloves, and newspapers loyal to the Brotherhood, contained articles by [John Ward](#) and by [Tim Keefe](#) about the Players' League and Brotherhood, respectively. While the preface denied that the book contained, "suppositions, lectures or theories", both articles do contain rhetoric designed to sway the reader to the Brotherhood's side.⁵¹ [Ward's](#) article rehashed many of the points he made in other fora: the National League's disregard for the interests of its players; the reserve rule and the "odious classification law".⁵² [Ward](#) also indicated that the new league would be superior to the NL, when he described the PL capitalists as joining the cause "out of love for the sport and a desire to see it placed on a plane above that upon which it was being operated."⁵³

[Ward](#) also took care to define the Brotherhood's position as one of entrepreneurship, as opposed to disloyalty, or greed. "The conduct of the men", he wrote, "has thoroughly refuted the National League's declaration that the base ball player was not able to do business for himself."⁵⁴ He continued:

They show how undismayed by opposition, undaunted by desertions, unmoved by all the bluff and bluster a powerful enemy could devise, in the face of obstacles which might have crushed a less just or weaker cause, the new movement and its men went fearlessly on, turning neither to the right nor left, stooping to no dishonorable action, until today the Players' National League stands brightly forth as the strongest eight clubs in playing talent and general personnel ever gathered together, and the representation of all that is manly and honest in base ball. To the player it is a living monument for all time to come.⁵⁵

[Ward](#) attempted to sound chords which would resonate among his target audience, middle class professional men, who could afford to leave work and pay \$.50 to see a baseball game in the middle of the week. His appeals to "manly" and "honest" men meant to call to mind the virtues put forth by such popular writers of the day as Theodore Roosevelt. He also portrayed the members of the Brotherhood as Davids fighting the Goliath of the NL, a theme which is often effective in garnering support.

[Tim Keefe](#) took it upon himself to tell the story of the Brotherhood's founding and growth, and took pains to show his group as being on the side of justice. [Keefe](#) gave credit to the Brotherhood for eradicating features such as "the selling and buying of players, the reserve rule and the classification system", to accomplish which the Brotherhood was "forced by the arbitrary actions of the National League to secede from the latter organization".⁵⁶ [Keefe](#) further attempted to associate the Brotherhood with the best interests of baseball thus:

The only conclusion that a thoroughly informed and fair minded person can reach... is that [the Brotherhood] has benefitted and will continue to benefit and elevate the game in the future far more than the braggart National League ever claimed to have done in the past... In the day when the National League had a chance to show what it cared for the game when not associated with its own profit, the National League's exhibition was a mean and miserable one. No means, however dirty and enervating, were not called into play to wreck the Brotherhood and its kindred organization, the Players' National League. Both stand and will live on to a glorious old age. ⁵⁷

The Players' League was further endowed with the support of *The Sporting News* which had been established four years previously and was already one of the leading national sports weeklies. "We say all honor to [Ward](#), [Keefe](#), [O'Rourke](#), [Baldwin](#), [Irwin](#), [Pfeffer](#) and all others like them" declared the *Sporting News*' editors in November 1889. It is likely that the paper went to the side of the Brotherhood out of equal parts resentment towards National League owners (especially Spalding, who frequently derided the *Sporting News*' hometown of St. Louis) and a desire to establish themselves early on with the side which they felt would likely prevail. It also helped them appear independent to their readership, which may have been perceived as a positive thing. ⁵⁸ It is also possible that the paper was responding to the nascent reform movements in America at the time, the move against trusts and the attempt to re-establish the rights of the common worker. Whatever the motive, the positive coverage by *The Sporting News* could not have but helped the Players' League in their efforts to gain support nationwide.

The National League, believing that (by virtue of the reserve rule) they had the right to the Brotherhood men's services, sued in state courts to get injunctions barring the players from working for any baseball league other than the National League. For several months, all eyes were upon the courtroom of New York Supreme Court Justice Morgan J. O'Brien, who was hearing the first of these cases, which was brought against [John M. Ward](#) by the Metropolitan Exhibition Co., a.k.a. the New York Giants. The argument by the plaintiff was that the reserve rule applied to any baseball entity, whether it was a signatory to the National Agreement or not. ⁵⁹ [Ward's](#) position, as argued by his counsel Henry Howland, was that the case was not being brought against [Ward](#) as a person, but against the Players' League itself, and that the action was "purely an exhibition of buncombe on the part of the plaintiffs and intended from its inception to terrorize players and prevent them from signing with the Players' League, thus crushing out its life."⁶⁰ Howland further decried the National League's position that the reserve clause made contracts renewable. He said that [Ward](#) signed a contract only for seven months of 1889, "and for any court to construe the reserve rule as interpreted by the league officials was worse than the ancient cruelty where the victim was put in an iron chamber never realizing his danger until he saw the walls contracting and knew he was to be crushed."⁶¹

[Ward](#) won his case, on the grounds that the standard contract consisted of an inequitable balance between the players and the owners. The Judge denounced the standard player contract for having a lack of mutuality between the contracting parties, and "upon the grounds that the contract is indefinite and uncertain."⁶² In a celebration dinner at Nick Engle's Tavern in New York following the decision, [Ward](#), "the Spartacus of the Brotherhood" was told that "he was as great as President Lincoln. The latter had freed the Negro; [Ward](#) had broken the shackles of the ball players."⁶³ [Ward's](#) case set a precedent, and as a result of the decision in his favor, other ballplayers won suits refusing injunctions. [John Montgomery Ward](#), who had written against the inequities of the player contract for years, was the standard bearer in the victory over "baseball law" in court. As a result of the victory, the Players' League was able to proceed with their plans to open the 1890 season in opposition to the National League.

Notes

41. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* March 2, 1890.
42. *Baseball Encyclopedia* pp. 41-42. Other notable players include: William "Dummy" Hoy (who was given his unflattering sobriquet due to his inability to hear or speak, and to whom is given credit for inventing the strike and out signs); Arthur Irwin; Arlie Latham; Silver King; Tip O'Neill (for whom the late Speaker of the House was named); Hardie Richardson; Billy Sunday (who retired at the end of the season to become an evangelist); Patsy Tebeau and John Tener (who later became Governor of Pennsylvania).
43. *ibid*, pp. 41-42.
44. [Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*](#) .
45. [Spalding, *America's National Game*](#) p. 173.
46. *ibid* p. 173.
47. *ibid* p. 176.
48. "Reserve Rule Benefits" *Chicago Tribune* March 23, 1890. The arguments were refuted the following day by Secretary Brunell of the PL, who declared them "intricately untrue and elaborately doctored to serve the purposes of the 'old masters' of base ball. "Do The Figures Lie?" *Chicago Tribune* , March 24, 1890; [Seymour *Baseball: The Early Years*](#) , p. 232.
49. [Voigt, *American Baseball*](#) p. 162; [Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*](#) p. 232.
50. [Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*](#) p. 232; "Caught on the Fly" *The Sporting News* November 16, 1889.
51. *Player's National League Guide* p. 2.
52. *ibid* p. 4.
53. *ibid* p. 4.
54. *ibid* p. 5.
55. *ibid* p. 6.
56. *ibid* p. 9.
57. *ibid* pp. 9-10.
58. "The Sporting News is the only sporting paper in America not controlled by the League bosses," the paper boasted, "Quite naturally, then, it is the only one to stand by the players in their fight for right and liberty." "Caught on the Fly" *The Sporting News* October 6, 1889.
59. "First Blood For Us" *The Sporting News* January 11, 1890.
60. "Not A Chattel" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* January 16, 1890.
61. *ibid*

62. Ward File, [National Baseball Library](#). The Judge declared that the contract "failed to disclose what are to be the terms and conditions of the agreement between the parties in the event that the plaintiff should exercise its option, which is accorded, to reserve the defendant for the ball season of 1890."

63. "Current and General Gossip" *The Sporting News* February 8, 1890.

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