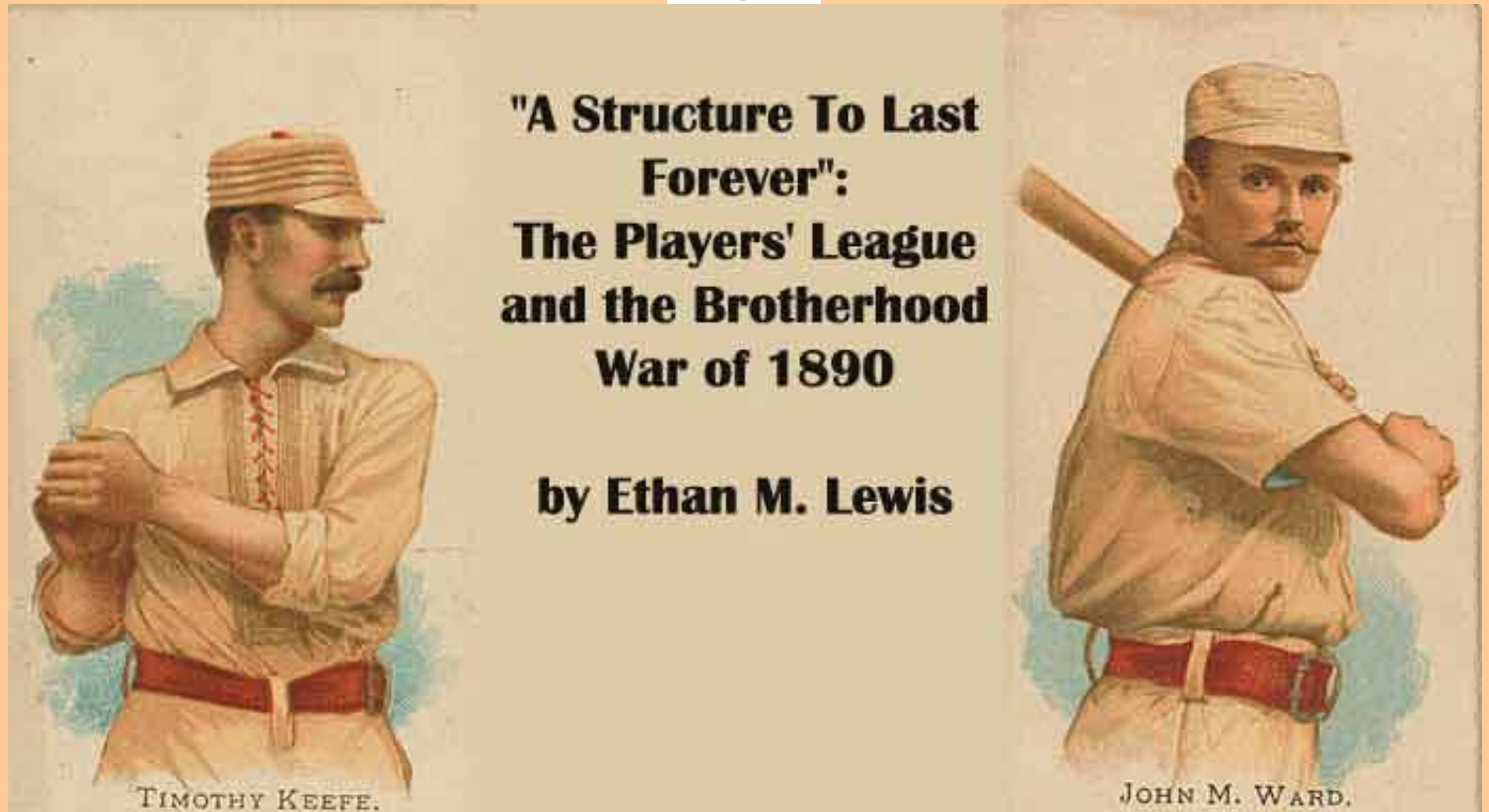


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## "Printer's Ink and Bluff"<sup>64</sup>

As the season of 1890 progressed, the war turned into a popularity contest, the success of which was quantifiable every day by counting the attendance figures of baseball games. Rumors of exaggerated attendance figures grew popular, and the public became increasingly turned off by appeals to their loyalty and dishonesty on the part of the

clubs, resulting in overall lower attendance in 1890 than in 1889. It became evident that several clubs were losing money, and the question of the day became, "which side will lose the least amount of money." To further up the ante in the struggle for supremacy, the National League scheduled their games to run head to head with Players' League contests. Once the season began, the issues of attendance and profitability became paramount, even over the outcomes of the games themselves.

The Players' League released the schedule for their inaugural season in March of 1890. Soon afterward, the National League released their own schedule, which directly paralleled the PL's; by arranging to put its games into direct competition with the PL (resulting in many conflicting dates in cities with more than one club, and necessitating fans to choose between the two Leagues) the NL showed they were willing to fight without quarter. In Chicago alone, the White Stockings (NL) and Pirates (PL) had forty-eight conflicting dates out of a total of seventy home games. <sup>65</sup> In Philadelphia, where there were three teams (National League, Players' League, and American Association) involved, the conflict was even greater; on thirty-two occasions all three clubs were playing at once; on sixty occasions, the Phillies (NL) and "Buffinton's Beauties" (PL) conflicted, including twenty six dates in May alone. <sup>66</sup> The Athletics (AA) and Phillies conflicted on thirty-seven dates and the Athletics and Beauties conflicted on thirty-five occasions. <sup>67</sup>

[Albert Spalding](#), head of the National League "War Committee" intimated that he would "conflict with the Players'...in every way possible". <sup>68</sup> The Players' League accepted the challenge, declaring that "as the season goes on, and we prove our superiority to the National League in caring for the public and giving it better baseball than it has ever seen before the average attendance in our favor will increase."<sup>69</sup> At this point in time, the PL could have made three choices: 1) change their schedule wholesale; 2) change it slightly by adding Sunday games; or 3) do nothing. With but a month to go before the first games of the season, the first option was out of the question. But it would not have been impossible to add Sunday games. Many parties, such as The Sporting News clamored for it. <sup>70</sup> However, the leaders of the Players' League, in particular [Ward](#), did not feel that by breaking the Sabbath they would attract the class of customer they desired; to that end they also charged \$.50 admission, the same as the NL, as opposed to the AA's \$.25 policy. <sup>71</sup> Ultimately, they chose to leave their schedule as planned, and thus committed, each League realized that attendance was crucial to the success of their ventures. For every head to head contest, the team which drew more spectators won a battle. The sporting person's eyes were drawn to the turnstiles.

While the Players' League experiment was a dramatic departure from established forms of organizing sports leagues, it was not a socially radical movement. At this point it is interesting to note the similarities between the Brotherhood and the Knights of Labor, America's predominant labor union in the late 1880's. Just as the Brotherhood sought to make players more than simply wage earning employees, the Knights of Labor were organized against the wage system, and supported the idea of a society based upon co-operative production. <sup>72</sup> Just as the players looked back to the days of the National Association, in the belief that they had some autonomy in that era, so did the Knights look back to the days before large industries employed the majority of workers.

Oddly, though, the leaders of the Knights were opposed to strikes and other revolutionary activity such as that espoused by anarchists. They believed in conservative means of making their will felt. "I will never advocate a strike unless it be a strike at the ballot box", wrote the leader of the Knights of Labor in 1889. <sup>73</sup> This is consonant with [Ward's](#) reluctance to lead the Brotherhood into a strike in 1889, instead choosing to form a new league, which was operated on different lines from the NL and AA, but was firmly ensconced within the capitalist, free enterprise system. [Ward](#) sought to restore a system of co-operation between players and owners, albeit with a new group of owners more amenable to co-operation.

The Players' League decision to shun Sunday baseball is a further example of the conservatism of their movement. The leaders of the PL considered themselves to be middle class professionals, and as such, supported institutions such as blue laws and Sabbath observance, which did not meet the needs of the poorer, laboring classes. They were not willing to contribute to what they considered to be an immoral practice for monetary gain. This elitist judgement would contribute to the failure of the Players' League, but was unavoidable considering the self-image of the men

who made the League's decisions.<sup>74</sup>

The season of 1890 began on April 19. In Boston, the Brooklyn Players' League team, in their uniforms of blue and gray lined up against the Boston Players' in their white and scarlet uniforms before the large crowd of ten thousand spectators.<sup>75</sup> The Brooklyn NL club, the Bridegrooms, also played in Boston that day, but before a much smaller crowd of 4,000.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the majors, the Players' League came out on top on Opening Day, drawing 26,000 to the NL's 17,000.<sup>77</sup> The Sporting News cheered, "The Brotherhood teams have scored the first blood and the first knock down."<sup>78</sup> Opening festivities in both Leagues were grand affairs designed to draw crowds. Both New York teams hoisted pennants proclaiming them to be the previous year's World's Champions; teams everywhere were greeted by marching bands, flags, speeches and parades.<sup>79</sup> A ceremony opening the Players' League season in every ballpark was one in which both teams lined up facing each other, raised their caps to their opponents and shook hands, reproducing in life the poster which all Brotherhood clubs were using for promotional purposes.<sup>80</sup>

A great deal of attention was focused upon the attendance figures. In part because they were the barometer of success for the Leagues and in part because they were so often lies. With the exception of [Ward's](#) team, every club supplied its turnstile count to the press for publication, and quite naturally the clubs did their best to look good. Years after the Brotherhood War, [Albert Spalding](#) wrote, "if either party to this controversy ever furnished to the press one solitary truthful statement...a monument should be erected to his memory."<sup>81</sup> [Spalding](#) gave a humorous example of this:

I recall being present one day at Chicago when the attendance was particularly light. At the close of the contest I was talking to [club] Secretary Brown, when a reporter came up, asking: "What's the attendance?" Without a moment's hesitation the official replied "Twenty-four eighteen." As the scribe passed out of hearing, I inquired, "Brown, how do you reconcile your conscience to such a statement?" "Why," he answered, "Don't you see? There were twenty-four on one side and eighteen on the other. If he reports twenty-four hundred and eighteen, that's a matter for his conscience, not mine."<sup>82</sup>

The Sporting News also noted the low attendance at ball games. With tongue in cheek they reported the attendance at one game in a National League city as "fifty-two people (including the ball players), six babies and seven yaller dogs".<sup>83</sup>

Low attendance was not strictly a laughing matter, however. [Albert Spalding](#) worried that the pre-occupation of fans with the battle between leagues took a toll upon those people's allegiance to the game itself. He noted that before the advent of the Players' League, "men took a personal pride in the team of their city if that team played winning games", but that in 1890, when two or more clubs were vying for attention, the fan "does not know how or where [his team] stands, or whether he ought to be glad and rejoice or feel blue, and the consequence is that he becomes disgusted with the whole proceeding."<sup>84</sup> [Spalding](#) observed that the fan more interested in the outcome of the struggle than in the game itself could discern the attendance figures in the paper, without ever going to the games. He closed his comments with a forecast that "interest in base ball will soon die out. I regret to say it, but I am convinced that it is the case."<sup>85</sup> Players' League officials dismissed [Spalding's](#) comments as poor-mouthing for publicity and an attempt to make the PL look bad, stating, "The Players' League is more than satisfied with the outlook."<sup>86</sup>

Inasmuch as [Spalding's](#) comments were an attempt to portray the Players' League as destructive to the national game, they were responded to properly by the PL. However, there was some truth to his statement; attendance for the three Leagues in 1890 was significantly down from where it had been for two Leagues in 1889. Certain exceptions occurred, such as Decoration Day (May 30), when every team played a.m./p.m doubleheaders to charge separate admissions. On that holiday, more people went to ball games than did the previous year, but most teams drew far fewer fans than they expected to.<sup>87</sup> On July 4, the total aggregate attendance at the three leagues was 116,000, compared to 200,000 for the previous year.<sup>88</sup> Non holiday games fared even worse.<sup>89</sup>

Before the season was half over, the national press was begging for an end to the struggle. "To carry on the war is

only proving financially disastrous," declared *The Sporting News* "With conflicting dates all over the country the crowds to one or the other must be diminished as the season progresses....Have not the rival forces had enough of the losing fight to change their dates and avoid any further trouble?"<sup>90</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, an opponent of the Brotherhood, observed that "too many cooks spoil the soup", and noted that the attendance for the three Brooklyn teams in 1890 did not equal the Bridegrooms' (the city's lone representative the previous year) 1889 gate. The *Eagle* blamed the Players' League for baseball's drop "to second, if not to third place in the favor of the amusement seeking public."<sup>91</sup>

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## Notes

64. [Spalding, \*America's National Game\*](#) p. 179.

65. "The Schedules Compared" *Chicago Tribune* March 24, 1890.

66. The club was named after their playing manager, pitcher [Charlie Buffinton](#). This is similar to Ward's team being dubbed "Ward's Wonders" or the Chicago (NL) club being referred to as "Anson's Colts", after manager [Cap Anson](#) and the contemporary term for young players.

67. "Conflicting Dates" *The Sporting News* March 29, 1890.

68. "A Fight To The Finish" *The Sporting News* March 29, 1890.

69. "The Schedules Compared" *Chicago Tribune* March 24, 1890.

70. The National League did not play on Sunday, in part due to local regulations and in part due to religious observance; the American Association was formed to combat this and other moralistic stances by the NL, such as their no alcohol policy, earning the AA the sobriquet, "Beer and Whiskey League". [Charles Comiskey](#), captain of the Chicago Brotherhood team asked, "Are the players in it for their health or their money?", acknowledging that Sundays were the days of the highest attendance for AA clubs. *The Sporting News* was eager to see the Players' League survive and put a club in St. Louis, and wrote, "Sunday games for a St. Louis Brotherhood club would be a gold mine. Remember this prediction of the weather is first class next Sunday." "Welcome Old Guard" *The Sporting News* March 29, 1890.

71. In a special Sunday service at Christ Church in Brooklyn, Ward and the entire Brooklyn Players' team were the guests of honor. The pastor praised the PL as "an organization which has always respected the Sabbath". He acknowledged that "the Players' League had many opportunities to increase its wealth by playing Sunday ball, but out of respect for the day, had always refused. He commended the team to the congregation". *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 2, 1890. It is evident that this is the type of reward the PL was seeking, rather than the pecuniary sort advocated by [Comiskey](#). *The Sporting News* pointed out the hypocrisy of this strategy when it noted that Brotherhood players, including Ward had played baseball on Sundays before, on barnstorming tours, and warned "under all the circumstances it would have been well for the Brotherhood not to have legislated against [Sunday games]. The day may come when the Brotherhood or National League may want [to expand into] St. Louis, and when that day comes, they will have to take the Sunday games with her. "Local and General Gossip" *The Sporting News* April 12, 1890.

72. [Jeremy Brecher, \*Strike!\*](#) (Boston: South End Press) 1972. p. 29. Brecher quotes Grand Master Workman

Terence Powderly, head of the order, thus, "The fundamental principle on which the organization was based was co-operation...of the various callings and crafts by which men earned the right to remain upon the earth's surface as contributors to the public good." That co-operation sounds very similar to that realized by the Brotherhood in the form of the Players' League.

73. *ibid*, p. 30.

74. In spite of their similarities, the Knights of Labor ignored the Players' League. In his book, [\*Baseball in 1889: Owners vs. Players\*](#) (Bowling Green State University Popular Press: Bowling Green, Ohio) 1993, Daniel Pearson writes that the "American Federation of Labor...eventually publicly supported the Players' League." p. 72. Pearson's book is the only place I have seen this mentioned. There is no reference to organized labor's overtures to the Brotherhood in the sporting press or major papers I consulted.

75. "Ward's Team Meets Defeat In The Opening Game At Boston" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* April 20, 1890.

76. "The Attendance at NL and PL Games" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* April 20, 1890. The Brooklyn National League team was to the man the same team which had won the American Association pennant the year before. The club's owner, Charles Byrne, moved his club to the National League in the off-season, replacing the Indianapolis franchise in the League. They owed their odd nickname to the fact that seven of the members of the team were married before the 1888 season. Pearson, *Baseball in 1889* p. 20.

77. Besides the games in Boston, the PL out drew the NL in New York 8,000 to 6,000 (or 12,000 to 4,000 according to *The Sporting News* ) ; and in Pittsburgh 7,000 to 1,000. The attendance for the opening week was 31,885 for the Players' League; 16,367 for the National League; and 5,078 for the American Association.

78. "Caught on the Fly" *The Sporting News* April 26, 1890.

79. The New York Players' League team (Giants) were the identical team which won the World's Championship, with the exception of Ward, who was in Brooklyn. Naturally, they felt they deserved a pennant. So too, did the National League's New York franchise (also the Giants). To further confuse matters, the teams ballparks were next door to each other, close enough that spectators in one park could hear the cheers in the other grounds.

80. "Two Victories" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* May 1, 1890.

81. [\*Spalding America's National Game\*](#) p. 179.

82. *ibid* p. 181. The Sporting News published a similar story about the St. Louis Browns of the AA, and noted "If the League and Players' turnstiles are as elastic as the St. Louis article, there is a heap of prevaricating going on. The only reason for posting up attendance here is to keep up courage." July 12, 1890.

83. "Caught on the Fly" *The Sporting News* May 31, 1890.

84. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* May 7, 1890.

85. *ibid*.

86. Comments of John Addison, Vice-President of the Players' League *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* , May 7, 1890.

87. The Players' League drew 42,197 fans compared to 28,120 for the National League and 20,734 for the American Association. In 1889, the NL drew 41,446 and the AA 42,132 fans. So while the PL drew average attendance, the NL and AA only attracted about half of the normal holiday crowd. "Yesterday's Attendances"

*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* May 31, 1890.

88. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* July 5, 1890.

89. For instance, the week before Decoration Day, Ward's Wonders drew crowds of 502, 316 and 357; while the Bridegrooms attracted 429, 421 and 509 patrons on the same days. Viewed in this light, Ward's Decoration Day crowds of 6,916 and Byrne's total of 10,110 are highly atypical.

90. *The Sporting News* May 10, 1890.

91. "The Local Base Ball Situation" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* July 6, 1890.

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