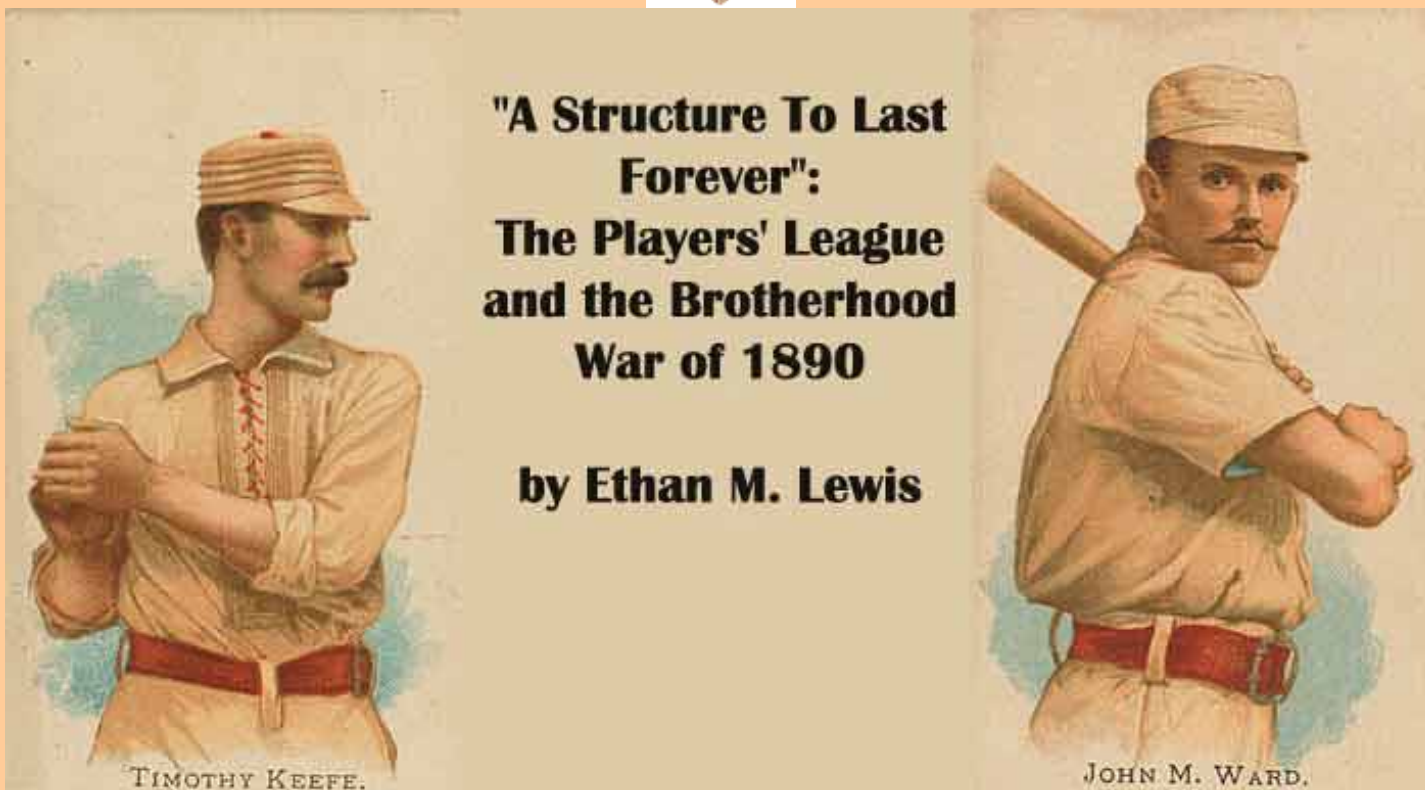


"A Structure To Last Forever":The Players' League And The Brotherhood War of 1890" © 1995,1998, 2001 [Ethan Lewis](#).. All Rights Reserved.



[Chapter 1](#) | [Chapter 2](#) | [Chapter 3](#) | [Chapter 4](#) | [Chapter 5](#) | [Chapter 6](#) | [Chapter 7](#)

## "The Brotherhood Is All Right"<sup>92</sup>

In spite of warnings by sportswriters and signs of public discontent with the battle, both sides continued the fight, each refusing to change their schedules or Sunday policies. Even though attendance was down, most Players' League clubs boasted of outdrawing their National League rivals. They felt that this showed that the public supported their cause and recognized that the highest caliber of baseball was being presented by the PL. The National League clubs were losing considerable sums of money, and insisted on hanging on, while the American Association was in dire straits indeed, and went looking to the Players' League for support. NL leaders worked frantically behind the scenes to uphold the illusion of

stability in their circuit, and began to recognize that, contrary to statements that the struggle was "a war to the death" the season might have to end in a settlement, rather than a clear cut victory. <sup>93</sup>

As the season drew to a close, the baseball world could not predict the outcome of the Brotherhood War, but it was clear that the Players' League was holding its own on the field and at the box office. The Brotherhood War had in effect become a game of Monopoly, whose winner would be determined not so much by profits as by being the last league left in operation. As the season wore on and financial losses mounted for all the clubs, the National League attempted to sow discord among the Brotherhood by enticing some star players to return to the NL. The most notable example of this was when [Albert Spalding](#) offered "[King](#)" [Kelly](#), the playing-manager of the Boston Players, \$10,000 and a three year contract to rejoin Boston of the National League. [Kelly](#) declined, saying "I want the ten thousand bad enough; but I've thought the matter all over, and I can't go back on the boys."<sup>94</sup> At approximately the same time, New York Giants (PL) captain [Buck Ewing](#) was offered \$8,000 and part ownership in the National League club in his hometown of Cincinnati. <sup>95</sup> Perhaps as a result of these failed attempts, the papers soon filled with statements from players affirming their loyalty to the Brotherhood: "The Brotherhood will be in existence when the League is dead"; "The Players' League is a great success and we are happy and contented". <sup>96</sup>

Having failed to weaken the Players' League by defection, the National League began to set their own house in order. Throughout this period NL owners maintained a nonchalant posture for public consumption. A League director conceded that defeat was possible, but said he thought it highly unlikely. "I know that we are losing money, yet we started out this season with that idea. The Brotherhood teams are corporations and when they begin to waver they will go under at once. The League...is largely a personal concern. The men at the back of the clubs will fight long before they allow the League to go under." <sup>97</sup>

This prophecy came true in July. Early in the month, The Sporting News noted that "There can be no question that [New York (NL) owner John B. Day] has been a big loser on the season. With a high priced team on his hands and playing to empty benches he cannot stand the drain much longer unless someone comes to his assistance." <sup>98</sup> What the press did not know at the time was that on July 4, [Albert Spalding](#) and other NL owners had spent \$80,000 to prop up the NL Giants, whose bankruptcy would in all likelihood doom the National League. <sup>99</sup> League spokesmen continued to predict "but one outcome of this fight, and that is victory for the League."<sup>100</sup>

The Players' League also did their share of prevaricating in the press to put on a good front for the public. In spite of declarations of support in letters to the editor, published attendance figures varied greatly, and the public was unable to tell just which League held the upper hand. Depending on the paper one read, it was possible to perceive that "the public [continued] to favor the National League."<sup>101</sup> To combat this notion, [John Ward](#) gave frequent interviews as the season drew to a close stating, "The Brotherhood is in to stay" and "the Players' League has taken the place of the National League as the leading baseball association in the business."<sup>102</sup> However, while [Ward](#) was boasting that his Brooklyn franchise was on course to make a profit for the season, a lien for \$5,000 was placed on his ball field, Eastern Park, by construction contractors to protect an unpaid balance due them since March. <sup>103</sup> The Sporting News noted that this news, compared with [Ward's](#) season long comments "will cause many a liberal thinking critic to wonder how much truth there is in the statements of the average base ball magnate."<sup>104</sup>

In spite of such setbacks, the Players' League made two moves in the last days of the 1890 season which should have thrown the war to their favor once and for all. Soon after news leaked out of Philadelphia that the Athletics of the AA were bankrupt, and that players had not been paid for six weeks, they were bought by G.W. and J. E. Wagner, realtors and prominent shareholders in the Philadelphia PL club, with an eye toward consolidating both franchises in 1891. <sup>105</sup> Even more significant, was the sale of the National League Cincinnati franchise to a group of Players' League investors, including Albert Johnson, Edwin Talcott, Frank Brunell, and [John Ward](#) for \$48,000. <sup>106</sup> The purchase served to strengthen the Players' League considerably, as Cincinnati was a noted baseball town, and always drew large crowds. Furthermore, by buying a National League club in the midst of the season, the PL gained stature. Following news of the deal, the sporting press changed its tone, and began to clamor for a settlement in the war at any cost. "The trend of public opinion plainly tells the baseball magnates that some means must be devised in the coming Winter to bring the present strife to an end." The Sporting News noted, "The war has done baseball no good, and it would be ridiculous to continue it."<sup>107</sup> The Brooklyn Eagle observed that in that borough, "the game has certainly lost much of its former popularity.... The people seem to have had a surfeit and to be disposed to take a rest."<sup>108</sup> A writer in Chicago described the final PL game of 1890 thus:

That gurgling noise heard yesterday afternoon at 5 o'clock was the death rattle of old baseball. When Umpire Knight called the game at the end of the fifth inning, the few mourners who were present at the last rites silently arose and passed out with bowed heads and the air of men burdened with grief. It was somehow a fitting end to this sorry base ball season of 1890. The rain drizzled down intermittingly, the fog hung so low that the players looked like creatures of a mirage...Looking through the haze a man could imagine himself adrift in a mighty sea, with the fog waves tumbling at him. The players were dim blurs of white and black... The game amounted to nothing and ended in a tie."<sup>109</sup>

The season of 1890 ended in drama and disarray. In the Players' League, the Boston Players won the pennant over [Ward's Wonders](#) in spite of having played three fewer games due to rain outs. In the National League, the Bridegrooms became the only team in history to win consecutive pennants in two different leagues, and in the American Association, the Louisville Colonels became the first team in major league history to go from "worst to first" replacing 1889's 27-111 record with an 88-44 record in 1890 which was the best in the majors. While several clubs compiled strong records and probably turned a profit, many did not. Pittsburgh of the National League could only manage a 23-113 record, and Buffalo of the Players' League did barely better at 36-96. Both versions of the New York Giants were disappointing, with the Players' League entry finishing third and the National League entry winding up a disappointing sixth place at 63-68. <sup>110</sup>

Financially, both Leagues failed to make a profit, with estimated losses in the National League ranging anywhere between \$300,000 and \$500,000. <sup>111</sup> The Players' League suffered an operational loss of approximately \$125,000. <sup>112</sup> The Sporting News estimated the losses of both Cleveland franchises at over \$50,000. <sup>113</sup> The American Association was even worse off; in addition to the bankruptcy of the Philadelphia ballclub, the Brooklyn AA team also went under, and finished the last month of the season in Baltimore. Overall, every outpost of big-league baseball was adversely affected by the Brotherhood War. However, as impetus for a settlement grew, the Players' League seemed to be the circuit least hurt during the season, and by virtue of its control over the game's star players, in the best position to come out of the peace talks unscathed. <sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, as events transpired, the Players' League, having won the war, proceeded to lose the peace.

---

## Notes

92. *The Sporting News* August 9, 1890.

93. [Spalding, \*America's National Game\*](#) p. 185.

94. *ibid* p. 187.

95. "A Sensational Story" *The Sporting News* July 12, 1890.

96. "The Brotherhood All Right" *The Sporting News* July 26, 1890. Quotes from Charles Comiskey and Fred Pfeffer.

97. "Boston Briefs" *The Sporting News* July 12, 1890.

98. "Day a Big Loser" *The Sporting News* July 12, 1890.

99. [Voigt \*American Baseball\*](#) p. 166. As NL representatives to the nation's largest city, and defending champions, the failure of the New York franchise would very likely have been the victory the Players' League needed to bring the NL to

the bargaining table. Voigt also noted that as a result of this bailout, the New York franchise "became the virtual satellite of Chicago" for most of the 1890's. Seymour writes that Spalding and Soden of Boston each bought \$25,000 of club stock, and F.A. Abel of Brooklyn and Al Reach of Philadelphia each put up \$6,250. Whatever the figure, it is clear that a secret effort to prop up the New York franchise was undertaken. [Baseball: The Early Years](#) p. 238.

100. "A Chat With Spalding" *The Sporting News* July 26, 1890.

101. "Notes Of The Ball Field" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* July 24, 1890. A typical letter is the following: "I am a travelling man selling goods out of Chicago and I am also a full-fledged base ball "crank". Nearly all of the boys on the road are like myself good baseball cranks and I can safely say that nine out of ten favor the Brotherhood as against the old League.' Will Crum." "A Traveling Man" *The Sporting News* May 3, 1890.

102. "Notes of the Ball Field" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* August 31, 1890; *New York Clipper* September 13, 1890.

103. *New York Clipper* September 13, 1890, September 20, 1890. Within a week of the first lien, four other contractors also obtained liens totaling over \$10,000. Ward maintained that these were sub-contractors who should have been paid by the general contractor. On August 29, while the season was still on and Ward's Wonders were in first place, the firm of James Riley and Sons began foreclosure proceedings on Eastern Park.

104. "Ward's Club In Trouble" *The Sporting News* September 6, 1890.

105. *The Sporting News* September 13, 1890.

106. *The Sporting News* October 4, 1890; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* October 5, 1890.

107. "Caught on the Fly" *The Sporting News* October 4, 1890.

108. "Brooklyn Pleasures" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* October 6, 1890.

109. *The Sporting News* October 11, 1890.

110. *The Baseball Encyclopedia* pp. 160-167.

111. [Voigt, American Baseball](#) p. 166; [Seymour, Baseball: The Early Years](#) p. 238.

112. [Seymour, Baseball: The Early Years](#) , p. 238.

113. "Caught On The Fly" *The Sporting News* October 25, 1890.

114. While attendance figures for 1890 are unreliable, those for 1889 are not, and it is indisputable that the NL did not reach its attendance figures of 1889, which were 1,355,468. Equally without question is that the AA did not draw close to 1889's 1,576,254. [Pearson, Baseball in 1889](#) pp. 158-159.

[Chapter 1](#) | [Chapter 2](#) | [Chapter 3](#) | [Chapter 4](#) | [Chapter 5](#) | [Chapter 6](#) | [Chapter 7](#)

"A Structure To Last Forever":The Players' League And The Brotherhood War of 1890" © 1995,1998, 2001 [Ethan Lewis](#).. All Rights Reserved.