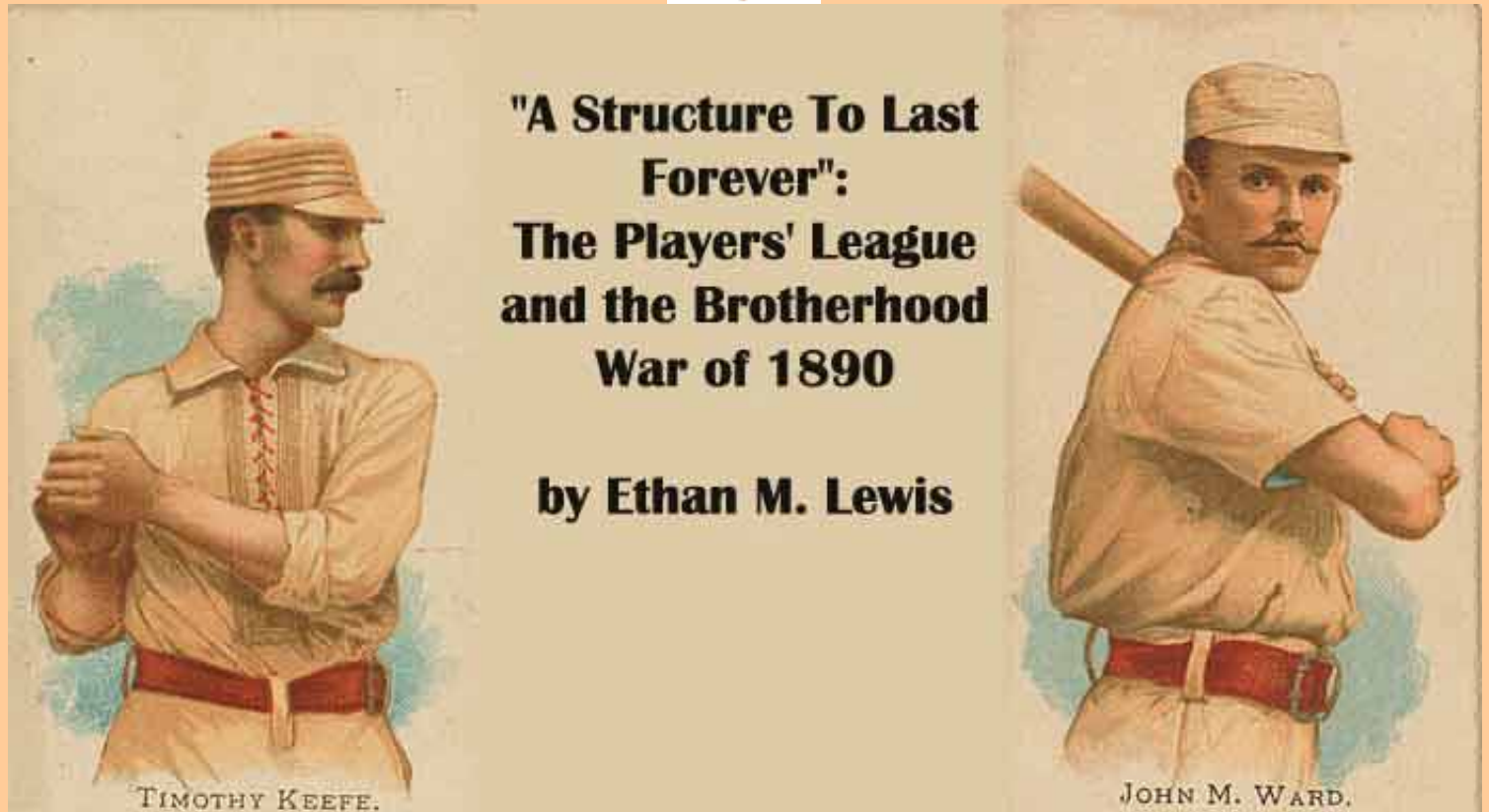


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## Conclusion

The final defeat of the Players' League had far ranging effects on baseball in particular and professional sports in general. In baseball, salaries were lowered, the Brotherhood ceased to exist, and within a year, the National League was the only major league left, existing as a bloated, inefficient twelve-team baseball monopoly. As a result of the

failure of the Players' League all subsequent professional sports organizations have been organized on the hierarchical basis first promulgated by the NL, wherein players are treated as employees and assets, and have no input in league management and very little role in deciding the conditions of their own employment. Several Players' League leaders continued to fight against Organized Baseball in later years, but many others tried to erase from their memories any trace of involvement in the Brotherhood War. Ultimately, the men who were at one time in a position to revolutionize sports have faded into the deepest recesses of sports history, where they are often misunderstood and more frequently ignored.

In 1891, salaries in baseball were drastically reduced. [Tim Keefe](#) went from earning \$4,500 to \$3,000; [Jim O'Rourke](#) saw his salary lowered by \$1,000; [Roger Connor](#), after batting .372 and leading the PL in homeruns took a cut from \$3,500 to \$3,000. <sup>129</sup> To establish rosters for the 1891 season, PL players were restored to the clubs which owned them in 1889, as the long term PL contracts were voided when the League disbanded, and with no alternative, the players were forced to sign with whom the remaining Leagues told them to sign. This led to conflict between the AA and the NL, as each failed to fully honor this agreement, and raided the other organizations for players. The result was the 1891 "Association War", which once again featured lawsuits, conflicting schedules, and the loss of a great deal of money. The American Association, already gravely weakened by the Brotherhood War, collapsed after the 1891 season, putting four of its' entries into the National League and the other four franchises received \$130,000 to quit baseball. <sup>130</sup>

The result of this merger was an unwieldy [twelve team circuit](#) which saw ten teams finish out of the running every year. The National League finally became the "baseball trust" which [Ward](#) had warned of, and it quickly re-established the reserve rule and the practice of selling players. In 1900, the American League (AL) was formed to challenge the NL's exclusive control of major league baseball, but it too was organized by capitalist entrepreneurs, who relied on the reserve rule and allowed no input from players over League decisions. One of the AL's first owners was [Charles Comiskey](#), who just as [Albert Spalding](#) had done before him used a new league to move to the ranks of ownership; he even took the name "White Stockings" for his team.

In an interview arranged by Spalding at Christmastime, 1890, [John M. Ward](#) revealed the toll which the tumultuous season just past had taken on him. Ward had been a tireless worker for the Players' League, as well as the shortstop and manager of the Brooklyn team, where he enjoyed his best season as a player, hitting .369 and leading the league with 207 hits. <sup>131</sup> While his comments apply most completely to himself, Ward's sentiments doubtless represented those of many Brotherhood leaders:

To tell you the truth I have thought but very little about baseball for the last three weeks, but I should say that it's pretty muddled...It doesn't make a particle of difference to me what is done by the League. I am satisfied to go out of the business and may. I worked faithfully for principle, and don't know but now may be the best time to stop. I will enjoy a little country life from now until the first of the year, and then go into a law office here in New York and practice my profession. I am not certain that I will remain in the business. I certainly will not unless I have something to say in the matter. <sup>132</sup>

[Spalding](#) generously (as befits a victor) told [Ward](#), "Well John, if you had died last June the Players' League would have gone to rest. You were the man who, singlehandedly, kept it alive." Showing the grim strength of spirit which made him a leader, [Ward](#) replied, "I was almost dead long before that, but struggled along, thinking the other fellows were in a bad way." <sup>133</sup>

[Ward](#) played for four more years, two with Brooklyn of the National League and the final two once more with the Giants. He retired at the age of 34 after seventeen years in the big leagues. In 1896, he successfully petitioned the Giants to remove his name from their reserve list. While many sportswriters suspected that [Ward](#) wanted to return to the game, he insisted that he only wanted to live his life free of the loathsome rule. Interestingly, one of those most opposed to giving [Ward](#) his freedom was Giants shareholder and former Players' League turncoat Edward Talcott. <sup>134</sup> [Ward](#) continued to fight the good fight for players rights; as a lawyer he often defended baseball players

in disputes with ownership. [Ward](#) also ventured into the ranks of management later in life, as part owner of the NL Boston Braves in 1912, and as secretary of the BrookFeds of the upstart Federal League in 1914. <sup>135</sup> While he was always proud of his work with the Brotherhood and Players' League, when he was inducted to the [Baseball Hall of Fame](#) in 1964, his plaque omitted any mention of either enterprises.

Other men who first showed their mettle in the Players League and went on to become owners include [Ned Hanlon](#) and [Connie Mack](#), who owned and managed the Philadelphia Athletics for 53 years. As mentioned above, [Charles Comiskey](#) became owner of the (AL) Chicago White Sox, and his tight-fisted ways as an owner are reputed to have led to the Black Sox scandal of 1919. [Orator Jim O'Rourke](#), one of the earliest Brotherhood firebrands and a shareholder of the Buffalo PL team eventually became president of the New England League, a minor league, and denied that he had ever been in the Brotherhood. <sup>136</sup>

The failure of the Players' League has been blamed on many things. [Ward](#) blamed "stupidity, avarice, and treachery" by the capitalists; capitalist J.E. Wagner blamed players such as [Buck Ewing](#), who reportedly betrayed the PL and advocated the conglomeration of the New York Clubs (which Ewing denied). Frank Brunell, former PL Secretary, blamed "the treacherous eagerness" of the New York and Brooklyn capitalists, who allowed themselves to be outsmarted by [Spalding](#), as well as a failure to raise more stock, which would have enhanced the clubs' ability to handle the adversity of 1890. <sup>137</sup>

All of those are good reasons, to which may be added the failure to change their schedule to avoid the conflicting dates which so adversely affected attendance and public opinion; as well as the fundamental problem of entering into a co-operative relationship with men whose only stake was monetary. The Brotherhood started the Players' League to redress the inequities of life under the National Agreement, and to prove that they could successfully manage the business at which they had spend years training. The players were armed with conviction and very little money, both of which they heavily invested into their new enterprise. The wealthy capitalists towards whom they turned for aid were initially strongly in favor of helping the players, and were opposed to the practice of "selling players like they were so much cattle"; these men also invested both capital and conviction. Unfortunately, when confronted with the loss of considerable sums of money, the Players' League backers found it judicious to sacrifice principle to profit. The Brotherhood men were no less principled than they had been, but without the financial aid of their supporters, the Players' League and the Brotherhood died.

In an editorial at the end of 1890, the *Sporting News* attempted to assess how history would judge [John Ward](#) and his Brotherhood:

[John Ward](#) might have gone down in history as a great man in a small way had he succeeded in placing the Brotherhood on a solid footing and breaking through the impenetrable baseball line. Others, like, him, might have shared in the glory, providing, of course, their efforts had been crowned in success....[Ward](#) and those who fought with him might have been written down in history as great had that one word, success crowned their efforts. As it failed to follow them, however, there are no crowns for them and when they are gone they will be thought of as fellows of no great shakes at all. <sup>138</sup>

On the one hand, as mentioned above, this judgement is prescient; the Brotherhood and the Players' League receive little if any attention by baseball historians. This is mainly due to a lack of proper perspective on the part of those scholars. It is true that the PL failed, and that by 1892 players were under as strong a yoke as ever before. But that does not mean that the leaders and organizers of the Players' League should not be recognized for the vision and creativity they possessed. While the Brotherhood did look back with a longing gaze at the National Association days, it was in itself a truly revolutionary organization, which alone of any prominent industrial union of the day attempted to create a truly co-operative business partnership between skilled laborers and capitalist entrepreneurs. The Brotherhood men, contrary to public opinion, viewed themselves as gentlemen and professionals, who deserved respect and fair treatment and earned enough money to qualify for such.

Modern baseball players are in a similar position as the men of the Brotherhood were over a century ago. They are confronted with arrogant owners who are intransigent in their desire to trample the players' rights in pursuit of their own profits. Like the Brotherhood men, they are very well off in comparison to the general population, are members of an effective union and are extremely disgusted with their treatment by the owners. "Replacement" baseball shows that the owners do not respect the major league players.

Perhaps the time has come for a new Players' League, populated by the players of the Major League Baseball Players' Association, which could learn from the lessons presented by the Brotherhood's failure. It is likely that today's players, who have much more money at their disposal, and access to television (which could put the new league on a stable financial footing, as well as help take their case to the public) and modern advertising could withstand the hazards which doomed the Players' League. Perhaps then, [John Montgomery Ward](#) would receive the credit he deserves as a visionary and gifted leader, and perhaps the Players' League of 1890 would be recognized as the forerunner to a less exploitative form of professional sports.

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## Notes

129. *The Sporting News* February 14, 1891.
130. [Seymour, Baseball: The Early Years](#) pp. 260-261. Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis and Louisville joined the NL at this time.
131. *Baseball Encyclopedia* , p. 1568.
132. "Ward and Spalding" *New York Clipper* December 20, 1890.
133. *ibid.*
134. [Lowenfish and Lupien, The Imperfect Diamond](#) p. 52.
135. Voigt, "John Montgomery Ward", [Biographical Dictionary of American Sports](#) .
136. [John Thorn and Pete Palmer, eds. Total Baseball](#) (New York: Warner Books) 1989. p. 375. [Lowenfish and Lupien, The Imperfect Diamond](#) p. 50.
137. [Seymour, Baseball: The Early Years](#) p. 248.
138. "Ward and Success" *The Sporting News* November 22, 1890.

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