

Chapter 4 Excerpt

To Curt Gowdy, it was the last moment of innocence in American life. The year was 1946, and the occasion was a Major League Baseball game at Yankee Stadium between two all-white teams in front of 63,000 cheering, jeering, mostly white fans. The teams playing that day, the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees, would resist integrating their teams for almost another decade, and America at large was almost as racist and as determined to deny African Americans the benefits of citizenship as it had been a decade earlier.

In Alabama, on the urging of the Executive Committee of the State Democratic Party, the state constitution was amended to restrict the right of Negroes to vote. In Arkansas, Governor Laney announced his intention of barring Negroes from voting in Democratic Party primaries, and the State Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of legislation designed to prevent Negroes from voting for State officials in Democratic Party primaries. In California, the State Bar Association upheld the ban on Negro members. In Mississippi, Senator Bilbo urged whites to employ all means possible to prevent Negroes from voting. The rising tide of brutality against Negroes, epitomized by the lynching of nine of its members in the South that year, was protested in Harlem. Paul Robeson denounced racial inequality in the South; and Dr. C. H. Foreman warned that the outbreak of violence against Negroes was due to a rise in fascism in the United States.

But to the young white sportscaster in his broadcasting tower, America would never again be as good or as pure as it was that magical day in Yankee Stadium.

More accurately than any other activity, sporting or otherwise, baseball has reflected the state of the American nation. In the introduction to the 1997 *Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture*, Peter Rutkoff described the game as a “unique social and cultural mirror.” Baseball, he explained, was a game that “provided the males of America with heroes aplenty... where fathers passed along skills and lore to their sons.” Baseball’s masculine ethos, he elaborated, “brought women to the ballpark to witness but not share the rituals. Even the innovation of Ladies Day...only opened the public spectacle of baseball to the distaff sex. The dugout, locker room, and road remained enclaves closed to all save the male participants who guarded the secrets of sweat, liniment, tobacco, and philandering.”

David Halberstam has also eloquently described baseball’s historic role in American life. Baseball, he wrote in the, *Summer of '49*, “was not so much the national sport as the binding national myth. It was also the embodiment of the melting pot theory, or at least the white melting pot theory of America.”

It is not difficult to understand how a young white American male, with an enviable position with the most glamorous baseball organization in the world, could believe that all was right with the world. In 1946, blacks and white women were still quiescent, and with Europe exhausted and Africa and Asia still subjugated or destroyed, civil rights legislation and the global economy were still several decades away. For white American men, those years immediately following World War II were truly magical. They stood by dint of nationality, race, and gender, unchallenged as the pre-ordained masters of the universe. Wherever their glances fell, at home or abroad, submissive women and subjugated races affirmed their special status.

This special status was reaffirmed most satisfyingly on the baseball field. The best boxers and the fastest runners may have been black, but only white men played Major League Baseball. Baseball was different and special and very precious. It was, Halberstam has written, “rooted not just in the past but in the culture of the country; it was celebrated in the nations’ literature and songs.” Like nothing else, baseball defined how white men saw America and themselves, and defending that heritage against a black

onslaught was for millions of them as sacred a responsibility as defending the shores of America.

Allowing black men to compete against and defeat white men on the baseball field was therefore simply intolerable. Adrian “Cap” Anson, the captain of the Chicago White Stockings and the greatest white player of his time, had set the example. By 1886 the Cuban Giants, the first great black team in history, was strong enough to beat the Cincinnati Red Stockings of the National League; a year later they almost beat the champions, the Detroit Tigers, losing 6-4 in the ninth on an error. Naively, but understandably, hope among blacks was high that because they had proven their ability to compete against the very best white players, the majors would soon open their doors.

But that hope, like so many others, was smashed one chilly April morning in 1887 in Newark, New Jersey. John Holway described the events: “The Chicago White Stockings were scheduled to play Newark of the Eastern League, whose pitching star, thirty-five game winner George Stovey, was a light-skinned Negro from Canada. Chicago captain Adrian Anson, the greatest player of his day, stomped off the field rather than face Stovey. His walk set a pattern that would last exactly sixty years. One by one blacks were eased out of organized baseball. The long blackball decades had begun”

Despite the ban, black baseball continued to flourish. In 1903, the Cuban X-Giants beat the Philadelphia Giants 2-1 in the century’s first black World Series, a month before the Pittsburgh Pirates and Boston Red Sox played the first modern white World Series. But the next year, Sol White, the manager of the Philadelphia Giants (who Holway describes as the “first great black organizer”) lured away the X-Giants’ star pitcher, Andrew “Rube” Foster, who would himself become a great manager and the founder of the Negro National League. In the rematch, the Phils trounced the X-Giants and remained on top of the black baseball world for the next few years.

By 1906 the Phillies, who had won 108 and lost 31 games that year, were so good their white owner, sportswriter Walter Schleichter, sent a letter to the New York papers challenging the winner of the white World Series to meet his club “and thus decide who can play baseball the best, the white or the black American.” But the White Sox, who had beaten the Cubs that year, refused the offer. To white men, including some of the game’s greatest stars, being outplayed by blacks—who were then almost unanimously regarded as intellectually and physically inferior to whites—was a disgrace that could neither be risked nor tolerated.

The great Ty Cobb was one of those white men. The Detroit Tigers, Cobb’s team, were then the champions of the American League. They had visited Cuba in 1909, minus Cobb himself and Sam Crawford, and had won only four games while losing eight. One of their losses was to a no-hitter by Eusaquio Pedroso. The Tigers returned for revenge the following year, this time with Cobb and Crawford. They won seven and lost four, though Cobb was thrown out every time he tried to steal, and three American blacks—John Henry Lloyd, Grant Johnson, and Bruce Petway—outhit him. Cobb stomped off the field and vowed never to play blacks again. And he never did on either American or foreign soil.