

1877 International Association Championship

Post-Game Analysis

Thanks to our entire broadcast crew from Radio Tecumseh. Before we take questions, a bit of post-game commentary.

The Tecumsehs' victory has not been widely recognized as the first international baseball championship by a Canadian team. Why? Probably because the Association has not been recognized as "major league". But why is this? And is the reasoning sound? The two most important characteristics of "major league" status are stability and calibre of play. Let's look at these more closely.

Stability refers to strength of ownership, franchise retention from one year to the next, and the ability of teams to complete their schedules. In these respects, it is true that the International Association did not distinguish itself.

For the Association's 1877 season, not all of its seven original competing franchises completed their championship schedules. The Lynn Live Oaks disbanded before season's end. Following the season, two more franchises disbanded, and three new ones were added. The numerous cities comprising the Association for 1878, including the non-championship participants, included places as small as New Bedford, Massachusetts and Hornellsville, New York. The Association was too large, scattered over too large a geographical area, and financially shaky. By 1880, it was out of business.

But what of the National League, the Association's only rival? Now regarded as a long-standing bastion of consistency, the League of 1877 was all of 1 year old. In its first season, 1876, it consisted of 8 teams. Here's how it evolved over the course of the next three years alone:

- 1877 (6 teams): Drop New York, Philadelphia
- 1878 (6 teams): Drop Louisville, Hartford, St. Louis
Add Providence, Indianapolis, Milwaukee
- 1879 (8 teams): Drop Indianapolis, Milwaukee
Add Buffalo, Cleveland, Syracuse, Troy

Instability was the rule, as league founder William Hulbert struggled to find reliable competition for his Chicago franchise. During the first decade of the League's existence, 21 teams were members at one time or another. In fact, National League expansion and contraction, and replacement of franchises with others, was to be commonplace for the next few decades. It wasn't until the settlement of its dispute with the Western League at the turn of the 20th century that the League settled into the largely stable structure that we know today.

So, yes, the International Association was unstable. But so was the National League. Rather than considering this a weakness peculiar to the Association, then, it's more reasonable to view this instability as a typical characteristic of the professional baseball landscape at that time.

With respect to **calibre of play**:

- One of the biggest issues facing baseball in its professional youth was the problem of “revolving”, or contract jumping. It was very common for players not to meet their contractual obligations, abandoning one team for another in the same league, or moving to another league, in mid-season. Such was the case between the Association and the League in 1877. The more players switched from one league to the other, the more homogeneous the player pool of the two leagues became. It therefore becomes hard to accept that either league could boast a calibre of play noticeably better than its rival's.
- The Association's players themselves considered the two leagues equal, and its organizers viewed themselves in no sense as “minor” operators. As validation of this view, the International Association was a precursor of the Eastern and International Leagues of today; in fact, four International Association cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Columbus) are still active members of the Triple-A International League.
- In 1877, the supposedly superior National League lost 72 games to outside clubs.
- Collectively, the players on the top 6 International Association teams of 1877 accumulated more past or future seasons of major league play than did the players of the top 6 National League teams. (Thanks to historian and researcher David Nemecek for that fact.)

Clearly, then, the Association's calibre of play was at least the equal of the League's, if not better.

The positions used to argue that the Tecumsehs' league of 1877 was not major league seem tenuous at best. The International Association should be recognized as a major league, and its championship as a major league championship. (Some baseball historians do so already.) The London Tecumsehs' victory was Canada's first on the international baseball stage, and its only major league championship until 1992. It deserves to be recognized as a significant milestone in Canadian baseball's historical development.

However....Did the Tecumsehs come by this championship entirely on merit, or did they benefit from some inexplicable oversight or largesse on the part of their opponents? The latter is a possibility, as we'll see.

In an attempt to derive a possible play-by-play for the game, we worked backwards from the game accounts in the newspapers to a hypothetical scoresheet. As we progressed up and down the batting orders, and across the innings, everything made sense until the top of the 9th inning. To set the stage for the 9th, let's back up. Here is the Tecumsehs batting order:

- 1 Phil Powers C
- 2 Fred Goldsmith P
- 3 Mike Burke SS
- 4 Joe "Dutch" Hornung LF
- 5 George "Foghorn" Bradley 1B
- 6 Marshall Quinton 2B
- 7 John Henry "Herm" Doscher 3B
- 8 Jake Knodell RF
- 9 Tommy Smith CF

The London 7th inning ended with a strikeout of Herm Doscher, the #7 hitter. Due up in the London 8th, then, were the numbers 8, 9 and 1 hitters. Here's how the **London Free Press** described the action:

In the eighth innings, Knodell reached first on called balls, but he could not get further, Powers being caught on the fly by Holbert, and Hornung off his base by Goodman. Smith closed the innings by fouling to Dolan.

There are a couple of mistakes here. Baserunner Knodell is misidentified as Hornung, and Smith (the #9 hitter) would have been retired before Powers (the #1 hitter). However, the point is that the numbers 8, 9 and 1 hitters did come to bat in the 8th, and were retired, with no runners scoring and none left on base. The London 9th inning, then, should begin with #2 hitter Fred Goldsmith.

To the **London Free Press** again for the 9th, with the score 3-0 London:

Smith took the bat for the last innings for the home team, but Galvin's delivery again proved too much for him, and he retired on three strikes. Powers made a two-baser amidst cheers, and on Goldie's base hit, aided by Dolan's muff near home plate, Phil ran home, Goldie at the same time taking his third. Burke then sent a pretty one to right field and Goldie tallied in the midst of deafening applause. Hornung's base hit sent Burke to second, and, on Galvin throwing wildly to Goodman, the base runners were advanced a bag. Quinton, however, retired the side immediately afterward by flying to Galvin, and Bradley to Dolan.

What goes on here? The sequence of batters is correct if Smith indeed led off the inning. But Smith and Powers, the numbers 9 and 1 hitters, had just been retired in the previous inning. It seems that these two batters received an extra at bat apiece.

To check this, we summarized the hypothetical scoresheet into a box score. Remember that our scoresheet includes the apparent extra (and illegal) plate appearances by Smith and Powers. Our box score matched the box published in each of the **London Free Press**, the **London Advertiser**, and the **New York Clipper** (some days later). Here's the London half of the box score:

TECUMSEH	TB	R	1B	PO	A	E
Powers, c.	5	1	1	14	1	1
Goldsmith, p.	4	1	1	1	10	1
Burke, s.s.	4	1	1	1	5	0
Hornung, l.f.	4	1	2	1	0	0
Bradley, 1b.	4	1	1	4	0	0
Quinton, 2b.	4	0	0	4	0	0
Doscher, 3b.	3	0	0	1	0	0
Knodell, r.f.	3	0	0	0	0	0

Smith, c.f.	4	0	0	1	0	1
Totals...	36	5	6	27	16	3

TB here stands for Times Batted, what we today would call plate appearances, rather than at bats. As such, this column must be a gradually declining sequence, assuming the batting order has been cycled through properly. Two things stand out. First, the 5 TB for Powers is possible, but only if he was the last batter of the game for London. He was not (Quinton was). Second, how can Smith, the #9 hitter, have come to the plate more often than did the numbers 7 and 8 hitters?

Interestingly, the two obvious flaws in the box score reflect the same difficulty as was encountered with the scoresheet: the two affected batters are the same. This supports the possibility that the extra at bats really did happen. But how could this be? How could Smith's leading off the 9th, when he had just been retired in the 8th, not have been noticed by the Alleghenys? In a game of this magnitude, with the pennant on the line, surely they would have protested. One might argue that, yes, they did notice, and said nothing because they preferred to face #9 hitter Smith leading off the inning, rather than #2 hitter Goldsmith. But that meant facing Powers, arguably London's best hitter, again in the 9th, when one would think they'd be relieved to have disposed of him in the 8th.

We'll never know. Evidence suggests that the extra batters were allowed to happen, but whether this was the result of oversight or largesse (or strategic decision) remains a mystery.

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