

The Louisville Scandal

1877 was, perhaps, the bleakest year
in Falls City sports

By Daniel E. Ginsburg



The city of Louisville has a rich baseball history. Louisville was a charter member of the National League as well as the major league American Association. Pete Browning, perhaps the greatest hitter not in baseball's Hall of Fame, spent most of his career in Louisville. Honus Wagner, arguably the greatest shortstop in baseball history, launched his major league career in Louisville. Today, Louisville hosts one of the most successful minor league baseball franchises in the country--the Louisville Redbirds.

However, despite all of these positive contributions to baseball history, the city of Louisville will forever be linked with the 1877 game-fixing scandal, one of the most notorious gambling scandals in the history of baseball.

Contrary to popular belief, the 1877 Louisville scandal was not the first gambling incident in baseball history. Games were fixed by gamblers as early as 1865, and the National Association was riddled with scandal during its five-year history beginning in 1871. While part of the blame for the problem can be attributed to the moral code at the time - corruption was also prevalent in America during this time frame in both politics and business - organized baseball must take the lion's share of the responsibility for winking at corruption rather than taking a strong stand against it. Baseball officials and owners, worried that the exposure of gambling scandals would hurt the popularity of the game and injure their business, chose not to strongly investigate rumors of corruption or to take strong action against suspect players. In fact, dishonesty in the National Association was a

key factor in the demise of that organization and the founding of the National League in 1876. The National League promised to fight the venal practices, although initial rosters of National League teams contained most of the same players suspected of repeated game-fixing during the National Association days.

During the 1876 season, the Louisville team had taken a strong stand against corruption with the expulsion of George Bechtel for throwing a game and attempting to bribe teammates to throw future games. However, showing inconsistency typical of baseball's early days, the team acquired Bill Craver to play shortstop for the 1877 season, despite the fact that he had been a key figure in various underhanded deals going back to 1869.

Prospects looked bright for the Louisville Grays as the 1877 National League season began. In addition to Craver, the team had added outfielder George Hall, one of the great early sluggers. During the 1876 season, Hall became the National League's first home run champion, and finished second in the league in batting with an average of .366. With holdovers such as Jim Devlin, rapidly developing into one of the league's best pitchers, and Joseph Gerhardt, one of the best second basemen in the league, Louisville was expected to contend for the 1877 pennant.

The Grays entered August with a comfortable lead over second place Boston. In the opening days of that month, Gray's third baseman, Bill Hague, developed a painful boil in his left armpit, and based on the strong recommendation of George Hall, the club recruited Al Nichols to fill Hague's place. The light-hitting Nichols had been playing with an inde-

pendent team in Pittsburgh.

On August 13 the Grays had a record of 25-13, good for a 3 1/2 game lead over Boston with 22 games left in the season. The Grays then went into a seven-game tailspin, including losing four straight to Boston to knock themselves out of first place.

It is believed by many that the seven-game losing streak was the result of crooked play by Craver, Devlin, Hall and Nichols. However, much of the testimony about the Louisville scandal is conflicting, and to this day no one has a clear picture of exactly what happened and which games were played on their merits.

It appears that the problems were triggered by a Brooklyn man named Frank Powell, who was George Hall's brother-in-law.

According to Hall's later testimony, Powell had been urging Hall for over a year to increase his income by throwing games. At first Hall steadfastly refused, but finally, during the 1877 season, he began to weaken and proposed to

Devlin that they work together.

At the same time Devlin had been approached by a New York gambler named McCloud. McCloud offered Devlin money to throw games and told him that if he was ever willing to do so he should send a telegram to McCloud containing the word "sash."

The first game to be thrown was an exhibition game in Cincinnati. It was common in those days for National League teams to supplement their income and fill up their schedule by playing non-league games around the country.

Devlin received \$100 from McCloud and gave \$25 to Hall. He told Hall that McCloud had sent \$50, and that he and Hall would split the proceeds 50-50.

The next game thrown was an exhibi-

tion at Indianapolis. Devlin was paid \$100 for this game but ended up giving none of it to Hall. Louisville lost this poorly played game 7-3. Hall and Nichols then conspired to lose an exhibition at Lowell, Massachusetts. Devlin was apparently not involved in this one.

In addition to the throwing of these non-league games, there is strong suspicion that some of the league games were also thrown by the players. Before a game against Hartford, club president Charles E. Chase received an anonymous telegram to "watch your men." Louisville lost badly to Hartford that day, primarily through errors by Hall, Craver, and Nichols.

Chase received a telegram before the next game predicting that Louisville would lose again, and when this prediction came

true it raised the suspicions of Chase. At the same time, *The Courier-Journal* sportswriter John Haldeman became suspicious from watching the play of the Grays. An investigation was quickly launched.

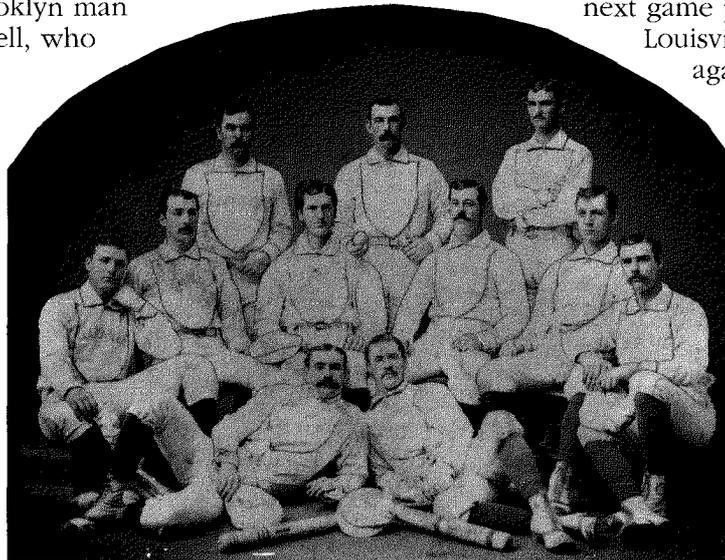
One of the key tip-offs for Chase

was the fact that substitute Al Nichols was receiving a tremendous number of telegrams.

President Chase confronted Nichols, demanding permission to read these telegrams. Nichols indignantly refused, but relented after Chase said that refusal was an admission of guilt. While the telegrams were vaguely worded, two from P. A. Williams, a Brooklyn pool seller, raised a great deal of suspicion.

At this point, the investigation began to pick up steam. Haldeman then expressed carefully worded suspicions in *The Courier-Journal*, and Chase prepared to confront the players.

Chase's first target was Devlin. According to Chase, he told Devlin that he knew that he had been throwing games, and "I want a full confession. I'll give you until



1877 Louisville team

8:00 P.M. to tell me the whole story.”

Before Chase could hear back from Devlin, George Hall approached him offering to confess. According to Chase, Hall explained, “I know I have done wrong, but as God is my judge, I have never thrown a league game. If I tell you all I know about this business, will you promise to let me down easy?”

Chase responded, “I know everything you have done, and I can’t make any promises.”

Hall took this to mean that Devlin had confessed, and Hall did likewise. He admitted throwing the exhibition games and named Nichols as the prime culprit. In reality, it appears that Nichols was merely following Hall’s and Devlin’s leads and serving as a go-between from the players to the gamblers, which accounts for the large volume of telegrams.

The entire team was then summoned to a meeting at Chase’s office and all the players were requested to sign an order giving the directors permission to inspect all telegrams sent or received by them. Chase added, “There is no reason not to grant this request. Refusal to go along with this order will be construed as an acknowledgment of guilt.”

All the team agreed to sign this order with one exception - Bill Craver. He had been under suspicion for his play throughout the year, and his past record certainly did nothing to inspire the confidence of Louisville management. Craver told Louisville management, “You can (open the telegrams) if you will pay me the two months salary you owe me.” Craver’s wires were not opened; Devlin, Nichols, and Hall had not set such a condition on the reading of theirs.

Hall’s confession took place on October 27. Three days later a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Louisville club was held to hear the evidence. Based on this evidence, and with strong support from National League president William Hulbert, the board unanimously resolved to expel Hall, Craver, Devlin and Nichols from the Louisville club.

While it was proved that Hall, Devlin, and Nichols threw games, no real proof in this case was ever brought against Craver. In fact, other than his refusal to let the Louisville club open his telegrams, the only evidence against Craver was a statement by Nichols and team-

mate George Schaffer that Craver’s play caused him (Schaffer) to make errors, and Schaffer’s repetition of a conversation with Nichols in which Nichols implied that he “thought some of the players were not working on the square. I understood him to mean Craver.”

Craver denied all charges, and sent a blistering letter to *The Courier-Journal*. His protests fell on deaf ears however, and at the National League’s annual meeting in December, the Louisville four were permanently expelled from professional baseball.

These expulsions, and the tremendous publicity they received, finally sent a message that the National League would not tolerate corruption and crooked play. While many worried that this public exposure would damage baseball, in fact the expulsions had the opposite effect by demonstrating to the fans and the press that the owners were serious about cleaning up the game.

While the banishments proved good for baseball in general, the entire scandal proved disastrous for the Louisville Grays. Stripped of three of their best players, most observers felt that the club would quickly fold. However, the Grays managed to struggle on, trying to put together a team, before finally submitting their resignation to the National League on March 8, 1878.

In the aftermath of the Louisville scandal, a new era dawned for professional baseball. Because of the actions taken by the Louisville management, and the strong support of National League president William Hulbert, confidence in the game’s integrity was restored. While the exposure gave baseball a black eye, the players’ expulsion and Hulbert’s unrelenting attitude to their pleas for reinstatement established a strong code for the National League, which held during the rest of the century. No gambling or game-fixing would be tolerated.

This allowed the game to grow and prosper and truly become the national pastime.

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