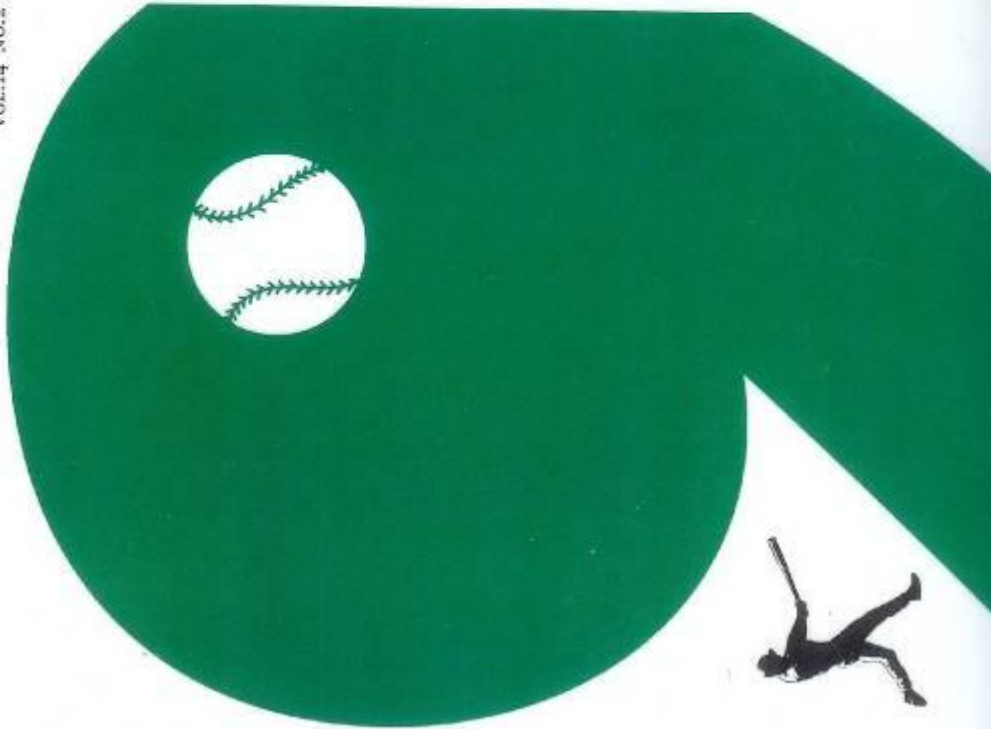


NINE: A Journal of Baseball History & Culture

VOL.14 NO.2



Matty and the Browns

A Window onto the AL-NL War

STEVE STEINBERG

This is the story of Christy Mathewson's signing with the St. Louis Browns for the 1903 season and of the Browns' owner Robert Hodges later giving up his claim to Matty in order to foster peace between the American and National Leagues. In the literature of baseball and team histories and biographies, only Fred Lieb, in his less well known history *The Baseball Story*, mentions this and notes its significance.¹

The American League fueled its rise in 1901 and 1902 with audacious player raids on the established National League. In 1901 the stars lured to the upstart league included Cy Young, Nap Lajoie, Jimmy Collins, Fielder Jones, Calvin Griffith, and even umpire Tom Connolly. AL attendance that first year came within 12 percent of that of the NL, which had just dropped its four weakest teams. The American League continued its aggressive recruiting in 1902, and its attendance exceeded that of the older league by 34 percent that year.

The National League was reeling from the relentless attacks, and Ban Johnson's American League was clearly winning the war. The other winners were the players, who were at the center of lucrative bidding competition. No longer tied to only one club by the reserve clause, they received large raises of 200 percent and more by jumping to the new league or by using the threat of jumping to gain raises from their existing clubs. The salary wars, intensified by declining attendance in cities that had teams from both leagues, were eroding profits. But the new American League seemed to have wealthy owners with staying power and deep pockets.

Before the start of the 1902 season, the weak Milwaukee Brewer franchise of the AL was sold and moved to St. Louis, where it took the name of the Browns, who had a rich St. Louis history as champions of the American Association in the 1880s. St. Louis quickly became the cutting edge of the great baseball war, as the Browns undertook the most spectacular talent raid of one team by another in baseball history, stocking their roster with stars from the National League's St. Louis Cardinals.