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Book Review: *A Game of Brawl*

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Repository Citation

Peterson, S. D. (2007). Book Review: *A Game of Brawl*. *The Sport Literature Association*.
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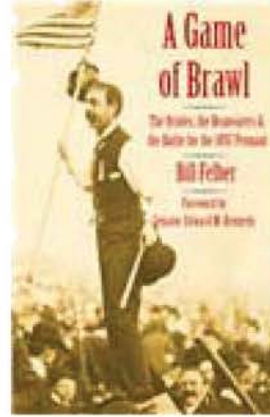
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a game of brawl

Reviewed by Scott Peterson, University of Maine

DECEMBER 5, 2007

Felber's book is more than just a close account of the 1897 baseball season: on the way to the September showdown between the Baltimore Orioles and the Boston Beaneaters, his readers attend what passed for spring training in the 1890s, observe the struggles of the lone umpire on the field, and follow the efforts to open up Sunday baseball by thwarting the Blue Laws. Beyond providing a historical narrative of a key season, Felber uses journalistic accounts from that year to give us a cultural history that recreates the consciousness of the people who witnessed these events, emphasizes the importance of baseball players turned sportswriters, and focuses on the language of the time.



In his "Sources and Acknowledgements," Felber describes how he used accounts from the Boston and Baltimore newspapers, sporting magazines, and papers from other major league cities to "triangulate" the events he discusses. Going beyond the metaphorical meaning of baseball and mere statistics, we hear John McGraw (who was a player in 1897) claim how an "artful kicker" can earn his team 50 victories a year (5), along with the rejoinder of Henry Chadwick (the acknowledged father of baseball writing), who felt the profanity involved in "kicking" had led to "a marked falling off in attendance of ladies" (136). Chadwick's opinion illustrates both the codes of a genteel society and organized baseball's efforts to gain legitimacy (and revenue) by bringing women out to the ballpark. These examples and many others show how Felber's use of the journalism of the day brings out the attitudes, motivations, and expectations of the people living the same history - and story - he is seeking to tell.

Another strength of Felber's book is that he features the writing of two major league players turned sportswriters: John Morrill and Tim Murnane. Filtering his account through their words - and by extension, their consciousness - he treats his readers to early expert analysis. When Morrill says, "all of New England is baseball crazy" (141) or speaks of the need "to suppress" the "shoestring gamblers at the South

End grounds" (196), these words carry considerable weight. Felber's focus on Murnane allows us to see two sides of him: one that praises "one of the greatest catches ever seen on a ball ground" (228) and one that claims how the presence of Louis Sockalexis "harks back to the stirring scene when clubs were used for other purposes than base hits" (147). Felber's close analysis also allowed him to uncover Murnane's blackface persona, a "fan" named "Darkhue White," who commented on the game in African American 'pidgin,' along with a number of other ethnic voices. This allows us to see what was accepted in Murnane's time, but also shows that the writer was familiar with the comedic traditions of George Ade and Mark Twain.

Felber's method also focuses on the language of 1897. By immersing himself and his readers, he is able to decode references to the ailments ("malaria" for syphilis) and recoveries ("Turkish bath" for drying out from an alcoholic binge) of the players. We can also see the evolution of a term like "work" in Murnane's writing as it moves from "delighted at its fine work" (31) to "inside work" (174). In the first use, "work" translates to "play," while the second refers to "game" or "tactics." This immersion helps Felber show how the "inside work" or "inside game" of the dastardly Orioles became a recurrent theme in their moral struggle with the virtuous Beaneaters. This struggle is further illustrated with a number of quotes from various sources, capturing the consciousness of observers and commentators, as well as supporting Felber's argument that many Americans viewed that season's pennant race as a contest between good and evil. For example, as far away as Louisville, Kentucky, the mindset was that Boston's defeat of Baltimore represented a "victory for clean, honest baseball. A throwdown to rowdyism" (243).

As a history of the 1897 season, Felber's book is effective; as a cultural history of the game and America at the end of the 19th Century, it's even better. This book will appeal to Boston fans (who will be glad to learn of their city's 12 championships prior to the six - and now seven - won by the Red Sox), to sports historians, and to American Studies scholars. By using the journalism of the day to create his book, he shows how such writing reconstructs the mindsets of the people who lived it. What's more, it lets us see sport journalism as a form of consciousness and prepares us for the leap to consider baseball writing as an embodiment of an American mindset.

Felber, Bill. *A Game of Brawl*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 295 pp. \$24.95 hardcover.