Baseball Across a Changing Nation

Baseball has been part of the culture of the United States since the earliest days of the nation, and the ways in which the game has changed through the centuries provide opportunities to explore changes in U.S. society.

Historical Background

Baseball came to American shores as an immigrant, a variant of the many bat-and-ball games common in England, and it expanded and adapted as the new nation did. It was heavily concentrated in the northeastern U.S. in the early decades of the 19th century, but the upheavals of the Civil War led to its spread, as young soldiers from other regions learned the game from their comrades and brought it back home with them at war’s end. The new technologies and communications tools that facilitated the nation’s expansion did the same for baseball. New developments in printing made it possible to publish advertising cards with images of baseball teams and players, as well as baseball-themed sheet music with vivid covers. The rise of inexpensive illustrated newspapers provided readers with daily updates on teams around the league, while the telegraph and the telephone carried the results of games across the country at lightning speed. By the time cities began springing up on the west coast of the continent, their residents could keep up with their favorite teams back east almost as well as Bostonians or Baltimoreans could.

As the U.S. became a more urban and industrial nation in the late 19th century, baseball saw a surge in popularity. While it had been known as a “gentleman’s game” several decades before, now it pulled in men and women of the working world who claimed the game as their own. In factory towns and cities across the country, workers found leisure in a sport that
was likely much less physically demanding than their own jobs. By 1900, baseball had become a popular sport for young people in cities, played in improvised neighborhood fields called sandlots. During an era of public debate over urbanization, baseball was sometimes presented as a cure to what were seen as the ills of urban life. The expansion of U.S. influence worldwide during the late 19th century and 20th century was accompanied by the international expansion of baseball. The U.S. government used baseball to promote goodwill abroad, both in foreign countries and in newly-acquired U.S. territories, and military authorities ensured that troops overseas had ample facilities and opportunities to play ball.

At home, Depression-era government camps for migrant farm workers had regular baseball games, and during World War II, residents of internment camps for Japanese Americans organized dozens of baseball teams, playing their games behind barbed wire, under the eye of armed guards.

Even as baseball expanded its reach geographically, the major professional leagues excluded or marginalized many players based on racial or gender identity. African American players were excluded from the major professional leagues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, instead playing in all-African American leagues or on independent professional teams. After the World War II, Jackie Robinson and other African American players integrated the major leagues, enduring hecklers and death threats to do so. Native American players participated in the major leagues, but were often subject to insults and racial slurs, and were portrayed in stereotypical ways in team promotions and news coverage.

A number of Hispanic players born outside of the U.S. played in the major leagues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly Cuban-born players, who encountered fewer obstacles than other Hispanic players did. Armando Marsans became the first Cuban-born player to play for the major leagues on July 4, 1911.

Women have played baseball for more than a century, on college teams, in amateur leagues, and on independent semi-pro and professional teams, even though they continue to be excluded from the U.S. major leagues. In the early 20th century, a number of barnstorming professional teams made up mostly of women, often called “bloomer girl” teams, traveled the country playing local all-male teams. During and shortly after World War II, when many male baseball players were in the military, major-league executives launched a multi-city women’s professional league that lasted for almost a decade, providing women in baseball with the highest level of visibility that they have experienced to date.

Baseball continues to change in our own times, and continues to provide valuable opportunities to explore the ways in which a popular sport can both reflect and advance changes in larger society.
Invite students to select an illustration or photograph to analyze, and ask them to respond to the following prompts:

- Why did you select this particular image?
- If the photographer or illustrator came to your class, what questions would you ask?
- Write a caption for your image

Assign or allow students to choose a depiction of a baseball game, identifying or describing the following:

- Who is playing the game?
- Who is the audience for the game?
- What is the setting?
- What equipment do the players have?
- How was this depiction made?

Create a timeline: Ask students to select a number of items, research the items, and identify significant events and social changes that took place at the time each item was created. As a follow-up question, ask students to identify a social change that is currently taking place in the United States and describe ways in which they see baseball either reflecting or contributing to that change.
Additional Resources

Baseball Americana
https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/baseball-americana/about-this-exhibition/

Branch Rickey Papers
https://www.loc.gov/collections/branch-rickey-papers/about-this-collection/

Baseball, Race Relations, and Jackie Robinson
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/robinson/

Baseball’s World Series
https://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/baseball.html

Baseball, Race and Ethnicity: Rounding the Bases
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/bases/

https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbc0001.2003juv05880/?sp=51


https://www.loc.gov/item/94508290


https://www.loc.gov/item/92514548


https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200033481


https://www.loc.gov/item/00563587

"Three Indian Stars of Baseball Chief Myers, Benders, and Johnson," *The Tacoma times*, June 3, 1918.


https://www.loc.gov/item/ncl2004000115/PP/

[https://www.loc.gov/item/2008677923/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2008677923/)

[https://www.loc.gov/item/2014688347/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2014688347/)


[https://www.loc.gov/item/2008677276](https://www.loc.gov/item/2008677276)

[https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.18576/](https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.18576/)


*American soldiers in India have taught these Burmese nurses to play softball*. Photograph. 1942? Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017871571/