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"The 125th Anniversary"

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For the past six weeks or so I have been looking with some curiosity at the patch being worn by major league baseball players this season. It is the logo of major league baseball with an inscription reading "125th Anniversary."

As a student of baseball history I was immediately intrigued by this commemoration of some great event in the history of the national pastime. My only question was, what happened in 1869 that would be worth celebrating the 125th anniversary of anyway?

So I began to search my historical memory, files, and books to determine what great event took place that year. My first inclination was to think that perhaps it was the formation of the National Association of Base Ball Players, the NABBP. When I checked it out, I found that, no, that happened in 1858. Well perhaps then it was when the National Association was taken over by the professionals, and it became the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, the NAPBBP. But no, that happened in 1871, and so the 125th Anniversary of that event will have to wait until 1996.

Well perhaps it was the first big baseball tour conducted by the Washington Nationals which took them to seven midwest cities, and saw them lose only once, and that to the team from Rockford, Illinois, for which the 17 year old Albert Spalding was pitching. But no that is not it either, as that took place in 1867, and we have already missed that anniversary.

I knew by this time that I was on the wrong track. It was not some major national baseball event or development that was being celebrated. So I took the easy way out and called someone connected to a major league team and asked him what he had on this 125th Anniversary thing. He looked at press guides and found that what was being celebrated was the beginning of major league baseball, which was being marked by the founding of the Cincinnati Reds as the first professional baseball team in 1869. Later on ESPN I heard Keith Olberman say that what was being celebrated was the 125th Anniversary of the first all-professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds.

By this time it was becoming obvious to me that major league baseball, in the year of the introduction of multi-divisional play and the wild card system, was digging desperately to find some tradition to celebrate to offset what was being called in some quarters, a serious attack on baseball tradition. I guess

someone, somewhere, figured that if you could celebrate some anniversary or another that would go back at least a century, then public attention could be diverted from this controversy.

A look at the two possible claims for the 125th Anniversary will reveal just how clever major league baseball's PR guys really are. First, there is the claim that this marked the beginning of major league baseball. The obvious question here is, what constitutes major league baseball in the mid-19th century? The answer is we really don't know, although the formation of either the NABBP or the NAPBBP or the National League might be claimed as the beginning of major league baseball. These took place in 1858, 1871, and 1876 respectively. As far as I can tell, the formation of the Cincinnati Red Stockings added or subtracted nothing to any concept of major league baseball which was already ongoing in the late 1860's.

Well then what of this business of the Reds being the first professional team? We know that there were a number of professional players, players being paid to play, for at least a decade prior to the key 1869 date. As for an all-professional team we know that such teams existed for some time prior. In 1863 at the meeting of the National Association there was a proposal made to draw a distinction between professional and amateur teams in the organization, with a professional being defined as anyone who plays baseball for "money, place or emolument." By 1863 a number of teams fit this description. In 1868 Henry Chadwick, the first baseball reporter and the inventor of the box score, wrote that the Philadelphia Athletics had three teams: one professional, one amateur, and one "muffin" team.

So clearly the Cincinnati Red Stockings were not the first all-professional team. If that Reds team has any distinction in this respect, and probably it doesn't, it is in the fact that it might be the first team in which all players were openly and admittedly under contract.

So when you see that logo, let it tug at your heart, this is an important celebration, this celebration of the first baseball team on which all players were admittedly under contract and not paid under the table. What a great concept, what a significant memory, an anniversary of a non-event. Baseball has entered the post-modern age. It should really make you swell with pride, put a tear in your eye, and make you want to go to the old ball park. Baseball fever. Catch It!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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