

The Chicago Black Sox Scandal

1919

The Chicago “Black Sox” scandal involved the 1919 Chicago White Sox baseball team. The team was one of the greatest ever assembled. However, the players were unhappy with their salaries. Although they were the best baseball players of the time, they were paid less than players on inferior teams. Charles Comiskey, the White Sox owner, intentionally kept his players’ salaries low.

Comiskey did not spend a great deal of money on the team. A good example of this was the salaries of the team’s two best players, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson and Buck Weaver. Each was paid \$6,000 a year, while some less talented players on other teams were paid a minimum of \$10,000 a year. Their salaries angered White Sox pitcher Eddie Cicotte. His contract stated that if he won thirty games in a season, he would receive a bonus of \$10,000. Comiskey, however, chose to have Cicotte sit out games so Comiskey would not have to honor this part of Cicotte’s contract.

Comiskey’s salary policy also angered Oscar Felsch, Arnold Gandil, Charles Risberg, and Claude Williams. Still, the White Sox players were left with few options because of Major League Baseball’s reserve clause. The reserve clause stated that a player who did not accept a contract from his team could not play on another team in the league. Some of the White Sox players conspired to get revenge on Comiskey. The men decided to “throw” the 1919 World Series they were playing against the Cincinnati Reds. Gamblers who knew the game was “fixed” would make a large profit betting on the game.

It was Gandil’s idea to throw the World Series. Through contacts in the criminal world, Gandil found Abe Attell, a former boxing champion. Attell provided the money to pay the White Sox players to lose the World Series. The players demanded that Attell give them the money before the game. Gandil, Felsch, Risberg, and Williams agreed to participate. Jackson’s role in the scandal remains unclear. Infielder Fred McMullin was not asked to join the scheme; but when he learned of the plan, he threatened to reveal the plot unless he was paid. Weaver refused to participate.

The World Series was scheduled to begin on October 1, 1919. Before the Series, rumors circulated that the games were fixed. As a result, many people began betting on Cincinnati to win, causing the odds against Cincinnati to fall.

“Shoeless” Joe Jackson’s role in the Black Sox Scandal is most intriguing. He always maintained he was not part of the plot. Jackson led both teams in the World Series with a .375 batting average, threw out several base runners, and made no errors while playing in the outfield. However, in the games the White Sox lost, Jackson’s batting average was .286, and half of his runs batted in occurred in those games. In addition, Jackson was one of the best defensive players in baseball, but he let a two-run triple get by him in one of the games. In another instance, Jackson was throwing the ball to home plate after a Reds player singled, and it appeared to be an easy out for the White Sox. Gandil yelled to Cicotte to catch the throw and to prevent the out. Cicotte made more errors during the World Series as well; he made three errors in one inning of Game 4. Williams, another pitcher on the White Sox, lost three of the games he started. When the White Sox began winning a few games in the World Series, those involved in the scandal were told to lose Game 8 (the World Series was a best-of-nine series during this time). In Game 8, the Reds crushed the White Sox.

The next season, there were rumors about corruption in the 1919 World Series. When the White Sox were battling the Cleveland Indians for the American League pennant in 1920, more rumors circulated. A grand jury began an investigation in September 1920. Cicotte and Jackson confessed to the scandal. This came at a bad time for the White Sox because they were tied for first place with the Indians. In order for the White Sox to win the pennant, they needed to win the last three games of the season and hope the Indians lost at least one of those games. After the scandal became public, Comiskey suspended all the players who had known about the scandal (including Weaver, who had not accepted the offer to be a part of it). Gandil was not suspended since he was playing semi-professional baseball. Without the suspended players the White Sox lost two of their three games, and they finished second behind the Indians.

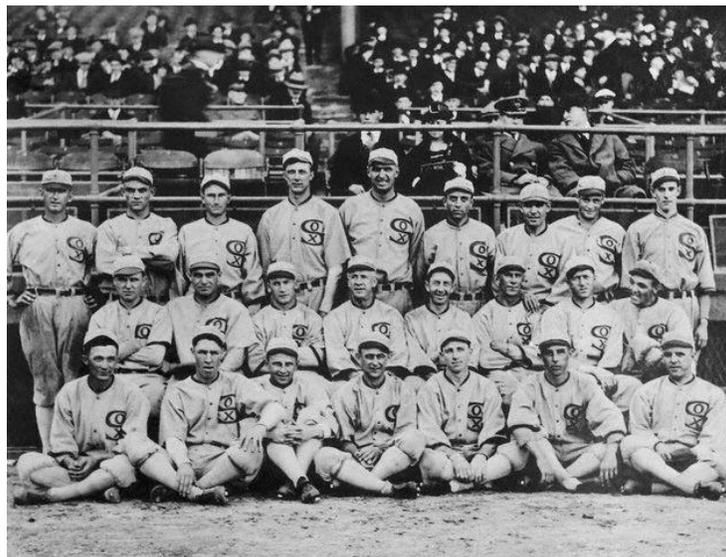
Meanwhile, the players accused of fixing the 1919 World Series faced criminal charges. Before the trial started, however, much of the evidence against the players disappeared from Cook County Courthouse. Two of the main pieces of evidence, the signed confessions of Cicotte and Jackson, were among the missing information. When the confessions could not be produced, Cicotte and Jackson claimed they were innocent and had done nothing wrong. As a result, the jury acquitted all of the men accused of wrongdoing. Remarkably, the signed confessions later surfaced in the possession of Comiskey’s lawyer.

Despite the acquittals, Major League Baseball did not forgive the accused

players. The sport's integrity had been damaged, and this angered team owners. Kenesaw Mountain Landis, a former federal judge, was appointed Major League Baseball's first commissioner. Landis stated, "Regardless of the verdict of juries, no player who throws a ball game, no player who undertakes or promises to throw a ball game, no player who sits in confidence with a bunch of crooked ballplayers and gamblers, where the ways and means of throwing a game are discussed and does not promptly tell his club about it, will never play professional baseball." Cicotte, Felsch, Gandil, Jackson, McMullin, Risberg, Weaver, and Williams were banned from baseball for life. Landis also banned Joe Geldon of the St. Louis Browns. Geldon had learned of the scheme and informed Comiskey in the hope of receiving a monetary reward.

The player ban damaged the Chicago White Sox, and they plummeted to seventh place in the American League during the 1921 season. They did not win another American League pennant until 1959, and the White Sox did not win a World Series until 2005. This became known as the "Curse of the Black Sox." "Black Sox" players who tried to sign with the other teams were unsuccessful. Landis ordered that any player who played with or against a "Black Sox" player would be banned for life from baseball.

Jackson continued to profess his innocence until his death in 1951. In addition, players involved in the scandal said that Jackson was never present at any meeting with gamblers or anyone involved in fixing the 1919 World Series. According to the players, Jackson's name was used to gain credibility with the criminals involved in the scheme. The Black Sox scandal was the subject of the books, *Eight Men Out* and *Shoeless Joe*, and the movies, *Eight Men Out* and *Field of Dreams*.



Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. Why were Chicago White Sox players unhappy with Charles Comiskey, the team's owner?
2. What was the motivation for the White Sox players who threw the 1919 World Series? Did they want revenge on Comiskey, or did they want money for themselves? Explain.
3. What was infielder Fred McMullin's involvement with the Black Sox?
4. Was "Shoeless" Joe Jackson guilty in the Black Sox Scandal? Explain.

