



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*The Battle that Forged Modern Baseball: The Federal League  
Challenge and Its Legacy* by Daniel R. Levitt (review)

Steve Treder

NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture, Volume 21, Number 2,  
Spring 2013, pp. 159-161 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nin.2013.0005>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/520265>

**Daniel R. Levitt.** *The Battle that Forged Modern Baseball: The Federal League Challenge and Its Legacy.* Lanham MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2012. 314 pp. Cloth, \$39.95.

Steve Treder

To the extent that it's known at all to most modern baseball fans, the Federal League tends to be known merely as a footnote, a peculiar triviality. The league played ball for just three seasons, and in only two of those (1914 and 1915) did it endeavor to, in Daniel R. Levitt's word, "challenge" the Americans and Nationals to be taken seriously as a third major league. And in that endeavor, of course, the Federals failed.

Failure isn't something that tends to be celebrated by historians; as the old saying goes, "History is written by the winners." And the winners in this case, the American and National leagues, quite definitely went on to forge their own historical narrative in which the Federal League was, if not forgotten, then relegated to the background. Why should anyone care about these obscure losers?

Levitt's book goes against that normative grain and takes the Federal League episode seriously. We discover that, yes, the Federal League failed to take root, but its brief and desperate struggle is not only quite a story in its own right—among the decades-before-their-time innovations that the Federals either seriously considered or actually implemented were the designated hitter and night baseball, and a Federal League franchise built the edifice we know today as Chicago's Wrigley Field—but the legacy of the Federal League's challenge of the operational structure of "organized" baseball is immense.

Levitt's previous book was his 2008 biography of Ed Barrow, a landmark achievement that vividly demonstrated the author's *bona fides* as a "business of baseball" expert. No other historian of the sport surpasses Levitt's skill at grasping a bewildering tangle of financial and legal strands, and weaving them into a coherent and instructive narrative fabric. While the scale of this effort is less sweeping than the multi-decade Barrow epic, *The Battle that Forged Modern Baseball: The Federal League Challenge and Its Legacy* shares the same capacity to tell an inherently complicated story in a direct and understandable manner without dumbing it down. Levitt makes this look far easier than it is.

One way he succeeds is by spiking the bland punch of balance-sheet and court-briefing facts and figures with a healthy shot of personalities and anecdotes. Indeed, for all the historical heavy lifting going on, for this reader the most enjoyable aspects of *The Battle that Forged Modern Baseball* are the digressions that hydrate the dry details of the business battle.

For example, in early March 1914, an aggregation of star players was

returning to New York from a world barnstorming tour (on board, interestingly enough, the R.M.S. *Lusitania*). Levitt devotes several pages to the tale of how Federal League and Organized Baseball owners feverishly competed to be the first to grab the attention of the ballplayers at the moment of arrival. The hilariously complicated efforts included elaborate plans, crosses, and double crosses, involving a customs ship meeting with the liner before it docked, “East Side gunmen,” and agents secretly passing notes to players coming down the gangplank. The derring-do is almost cinematic.

Another rollicking yarn revolves around the Federal League’s scheme to spirit star first baseman Hal Chase away from the Chicago White Sox in June 1914. The Feds signed Chase on a Sunday, so that, with the courts closed, the White Sox could not secure an injunction. Chase was then whisked away from Chicago before Monday morning, and a party led by White Sox owner Charles Comiskey boarded a train in hot pursuit. The effort to get Chase into a Federal League game in Buffalo before he could be served with papers required private detectives to hide him in Canada and then on an island in the Niagara River. Then, Chase was sped via motorboat to US mainland soil and disguised in “feminine clothes” while being snuck into the Buffalo ballpark’s toolshed, where he finally suited up and triumphantly appeared on the field in mid-game. The highly entertained reader can’t help but speculate about which Hollywood hunk would get the role of Chase.

In broad spans between the adventurous sidebars, Levitt proceeds with his primary thrust. Necessarily, that thrust mostly resides in meeting minutes and trial transcripts, and despite Levitt’s best effort, there are points at which this reader found his eyes glazing over at the recitations of dollar amounts and legal precedents. To be sure, *The Battle that Forged Modern Baseball* is not for the casual fan or the reader seeking only batting averages and no business valuations. This is a work of serious historical scholarship, and it may well be the case that it succeeds more strongly as an economic, legal, and social history than a baseball story *per se*.

But succeed in that hardheaded realm it surely does. Illuminating how the Federal League confrontation came to be and how its uneasy culmination had multiple and lasting effects, Levitt’s ultimate achievement is to place his particular characters, events, and details within resounding historical perspective, answering that nagging “Why should we care?” question in a number of insightful ways.

We’re smoothly guided to the central point: the multilateral disputes sparked by the Federal League led directly to the monumental 1922 United States Supreme Court ruling that upheld professional baseball’s claim of exemption from federal antitrust law, and therefore allowed continued appli-

cation of the infamous reserve clause in player contracts. Thus, the Federal League challenge stands as the final and pivotal event in the “developmental” phase of professional baseball history, the vital step to establishing a profoundly stable structural form. That form, in turn, served as the essential model followed by all other major professional team sports in the United States, and it remained firmly in place until the arrival of a genuinely forceful players’ union in the 1970s.

At the book’s conclusion, when considering how things might plausibly have turned out differently, Levitt puts the exhaustive details and diverting anecdotes into perspective and pulls his many-layered construction together. The case presented is highly persuasive that the Federal League challenge, though largely forgotten, was indeed not only a lively chapter in baseball’s history, but one with deep and lasting importance. For the serious student of the development of the organizational framework of baseball as a business, Levitt’s work should be required reading.



**Mitchell Conrad Stinson. *Deacon Bill McKechnie: A Baseball Biography*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 238 pp. Paper, \$29.95.**

*Cliff Hight*

Mitchell Conrad Stinson’s second book with McFarland, *Deacon Bill McKechnie: A Baseball Biography*, is a full-length biography of a man who spent nearly fifty years in professional baseball as a player, manager, and coach. Best known for his managerial success and kindly way, Bill McKechnie piloted five clubs in three major leagues, winning four pennants with three of them. The Hall of Famer and two-time World Series winner was the first manager to take three franchises to the Fall Classic. Despite occasional and brief tangents, Stinson’s informative profile is a foundational resource for understanding McKechnie’s baseball career.

An award-winning sportswriter in Evansville, Indiana, Stinson has followed up his 2010 profile of Edd Roush with a book that is what the subtitle suggests: a baseball biography. While interviews with and records from McKechnie’s only living child enhance Stinson’s brief recounting of family history and add insight to the Deacon’s early years and life off the field, the bulk of the text focuses on McKechnie’s life between the chalk lines and in the dugout. This new biography shows McKechnie in his best light: a sagacious manager