FIXED GAMES, FIXED SYSTEMS: ‘SHOELESS’ JOE JACKSON, POWER IMBALANCE, AND THE 1919 BLACK SOX SCANDAL

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Abstract

The Black Sox Scandal of 1919 is one of the most infamous game-fixing scandals in sports history, yet the role played by its most well-known member, 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson, is contentious. Through careful analysis of Jackson's own 1920 testimony regarding his involvement in the fix, along with context from his life, baseball as a whole during the Progressive Era, broader American labor context from the same time period, and literature regarding the scandal itself, the true extent of Jackson's role and the operations of baseball ownership during the Progressive Era is revealed. It is realized that the Black Sox Scandal was the result of unfair labor conditions set by owners and was used to further the control ownership had over professional baseball, thus crafting the modern framework for professional baseball and narrative surrounding this scandal.

On August 3rd, 1921, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, recently appointed as the first commissioner of Major League Baseball, indefinitely suspended eight players from the Chicago White Sox from playing professional baseball. Contrarily, just one day prior, an Illinois jury had declared these eight players not guilty of defrauding the general public by throwing, or intentionally losing, the 1919 World Series. This decision would prove to be one of the most pivotal moments in professional baseball history. These eight players became forever a part of the Black Sox Scandal, which engrossed the minds of Americans following the 1919 World Series. One of these players in particular stands out as unique among the eight: Joseph Jefferson Jackson, known as Shoeless Joe to fans and players alike. Jackson, considered the most dominant hitter of his time and a beacon of sportsmanship, was suddenly stripped of his profession and had his legacy forever altered. Once a hero of his sport, Jackson was labeled as a traitor that disgraced the National Pastime.

However, Jackson's own account of the scandal paints the story in a different light. In his testimony regarding the scandal, he reveals not only his own interactions within the inner workings of the fix, but also how he navigated the underpinnings of the system of professional baseball ownership, and its relationship with the players. His testimony reveals a more sinister truth about the realities of playing professional baseball in the Progressive Era, and how little control the players truly held over their own work. Through the lens of Shoeless Joe Jackson's own testimony, the Black Sox Scandal is understood as a byproduct of labor exploitation and a stark power imbalance between owners and players in Major League Baseball during the Progressive Era, rather than explicit greed. Furthermore, Jackson's testimony demonstrates how Major League Baseball used the scandal to protect their institutional power. By comparing the scandal with economic and labor context from this era, the link between professional baseball

players and common workers is clarified and demonstrates how their struggles for unification and fair treatment within their workplaces were analogous. As a whole, when the Black Sox Scandal is put into this new frame of reference, it facilitates new discussions on labor relations throughout U.S. history, and highlights the extent of its struggles.

Economic Conditions in Baseball in the Progressive Era

To acknowledge the importance of Jackson's testimony, background regarding the economic conditions of baseball and the scandal itself must be understood. In the context of labor, the most paramount issue in the minds of professional baseball players during the Progressive Era was the reserve clause. The clause, instituted by National League owners in 1879, was stipulated in player contracts to virtually bind said player to the team to which they signed for life.[1] The main function of the reserve clause was to limit the free agency of players. In essence, it acted as a parity measure to ensure richer teams could not steal players.[2] The reserve clause quickly proved to be contentious, with numerous attempts to circumvent it being legally legitimate, but futile in toppling the regime of baseball ownership.[3] The two major leagues, the American and National League, along with its team owners, had effectively monopolized professional baseball, and were able to leverage the reserve clause against players with nowhere else to play.[4] Thus, the reserve clause became a fact of life for professional baseball players, and its issues became more prominent as team owners began to utilize its stipulations to maximize profits, especially into the 1910s.

[1] Stuart Banner, *The Baseball Trust: A History of Baseball's Antitrust Exemption* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.
[2] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 9.
[3] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 30.
[4] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 31.

Prominent among the miserly owners in professional baseball at this time was Chicago White Sox owner Charles Albert Comiskey. The affluent Comiskey was simultaneously a media darling and a polarizing figure among his players.[5] Notoriously parsimonious, Comiskey paid large sums of money for star players, such as Jackson, while limiting player meal budgets and attempting to charge his players for laundering their uniforms.[6] Furthermore, Comiskey greatly underpaid his players, especially those involved in the scandal. The eight Black Sox players, each a star on their own respectively, had a combined average salary of $4,300 in 1919, which equates to around $78,000 in 2025.[7] For reference, the average MLB salary in 1919, a statistical range mostly made up of comparably less talented players, was around $3,500.[8] Any renegotiation attempts by the players were squandered quickly.[9] While evidence suggests Comiskey was not exclusive in his penny-pinching,[10] his actions still harbored resentment in his players. This indignation would culminate at the 1919 World Series, forever altering professional baseball.

The Black Sox Scandal

Due to the conditions set by ownership, professional gamblers had no issue finding baseball players in search of a fair payout; the Black Sox Scandal itself was a prominent example, but not an aberration.[11] Regardless, perceived unfair treatment contributed to its

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[5] Gene Carney, *Burying the Black Sox: How Baseball's Cover-Up of the 1919 World Series Fix Almost Succeeded* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 35.
[6] Steven A. Reiss, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (University of Illinois Press, 1999), 93.
[7] "CPI Inflation Calculator," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed December 7, 2025. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
[8] "How Cheap was Charles Comiskey? Salaries and the Black Sox," Society for American Baseball Research, Michael Haupert, accessed December 7, 2025. https://sabr.org/research/article/how-cheap-was-charles-comiskey-salaries-and-the-black-sox/
[9] Reiss, *Touching Base*, 93.
[10] Carney, *Burying the Black Sox*, 195.
[11] "The Black Sox Trial: An Account," UMKC School of Law, Douglas O. Linder, accessed November 6, 2025. https://famous-trials.com/blacksox/943-home

occurrence. The fix was organized in September of 1919, likely by first baseman Charles "Chick" Gandil. He was joined by outfielder Oscar "Happy" Felsch, third baseman George "Buck" Weaver, ace pitcher Eddie Cicotte, shortstop Charles "Swede" Risberg, infielder Fred McMullin, and pitcher Claude "Lefty" Williams.[12] As will be shown, Jackson, the eighth and final player, lacked the same extent of involvement as the others. Cooperating with numerous gambling syndicates, the White Sox faced the underdog Cincinnati Reds in the 1919 World Series, with numerous suspicious plays by those involved in the scandal.[13] Rumors of the presence of gamblers and an overarching fix swirled during and after the series concluded, with the Reds ultimately winning the series five games to three.[14] However, the true extent of the scandal would not be revealed until September of 1920, when a convening Cook County Grand Jury learned of the plot through a case regarding an unrelated fix during a game earlier in the 1920 season.[15] On September 28th, 1920, Cicotte became the first to confess, and Comiskey notified the eight players of their indefinite suspension from the White Sox.[16] However, earlier that afternoon, Jackson gave his testimony, which would become perhaps the most important piece of the Black Sox Scandal.

Say It Ain't So, Joe

Jackson gave his testimony before Assistant State Attorney Hartley Replogle, who prodded Jackson about his knowledge of the fix. However, Jackson quickly complicated assumptions about his involvement. Jackson stated that while he had agreed to take money from Gandil, he only received a quarter of his promised payout of $20,000, and was not present at a

[12] Linder, "The Black Sox Trial."
[13] Carney, *Burying the Black Sox*, 20-21.
[14] Carney, *Burying the Black Sox*, 21-22.
[15] Linder, "The Black Sox Trial."
[16] Linder, "The Black Sox Trial."

meeting between players and gamblers at the Ansonia Hotel in New York before the World Series.[17] In fact, he describes nearly a complete lack of communication with many involved in the fix. He insisted that he was not a part of an "inner circle" of those in on the fix.[18] Jackson's main source of communication came from Gandil, whom Jackson approached regarding his payout, which had been reduced to $5,000 from the promised $20,000.[19] Gandil refused to explain his lack of communication, even insinuating that Jackson should fear exposing the fix to Comiskey.[20] Furthermore, following the series, Jackson never spoke to Gandil again; Jackson believed Gandil had double-crossed him, evidenced by tales of Gandil's new summer home and large automobile, all without working, which Jackson claimed he was unable to achieve with the money he made, both from his salary and the money received from Gandil.[21]

Jackson's testimony demonstrates a lack of agency in maneuvering the fix itself. Before the series had begun, Jackson was recruited to the fix because the other players believed he was a big enough name to give their plot credibility with the gamblers.[22] Despite this, Jackson himself claimed to have played to win throughout the entire series, and did not commit any intentional errors like his teammates.[23] As shown, he had attempted to report the fix, yet was pressured with threats by Gandil. This influence by Gandil was not exclusive to this moment, however. Before the series, Jackson had repeatedly denied Gandil's recruitment attempts. Originally, Gandil offered $10,000 to Jackson, then $20,000, before providing Jackson with an ultimatum that he "might as well say yes" to his offer, to which Jackson responded he would "take their word."[24]

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[17] "'Shoeless' Joe Jackson's Statement Before the Grand Jury," 28 Sept. 1920, In *Primary Sources on the 1919 World Series Scandal*, Page 5, Norwich University Research Guides, https://guides.norwich.edu/baseball/blacksox.
[18] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 20.
[19] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 5.
[20] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 10-12.
[21] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 15, 22.
[22] "The Black Sox Scandal," Society for American Baseball Research, Bill Lamb, accessed November 7, 2025.
[23] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 12, 14, 15.
[24] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 20.

Jackson's submission to Gandil's influence is suspicious on its own, but when it is contextualized with the economic conditions faced by Jackson, a bigger picture can be understood. In his testimony, Jackson detailed his contract under Comiskey. He stated that his contract with the White Sox was $8,000 a year, and that he only received $6,000 in 1919.[25] Furthermore, when asked if he was satisfied with his contract, he stated "they wouldn't give you any more, that's all you could get… I was pretty lucky to get a contract like that with [Comiskey] when I came over here."[26] Furthermore, Jackson stated he only received $1,000 from the sale of his contract from Cleveland to Chicago in 1915, of which he did not know the price.[27] For reference, Comiskey paid $31,500 as well as trading three more players in exchange for Jackson in 1915.[28]

More broadly, economic factors had always played a role in Jackson's life up to this point. Jackson was born to a poor, sharecropping family in rural South Carolina and moved to the company town of Brandon Mill at a young age, working in the local textile mill to provide for his family.[29] Jackson, the oldest of eight children, never attended school, and thus never learned to read or write, which included the ability to write his own name.[30] Importantly, this included the ability to understand and sign contracts. While Jackson's wife, Katie, eventually taught him to sign his name, he still required her to attend to his other needs, such as managing his money and interpreting his contracts.[31] Due to this, it can be inferred that Jackson's lack of education left him vulnerable and not fully aware of the legal consequences of his acceptance of Gandil's offer. Despite his wife having some education, the overall economic conditions of

[25] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 27.
[26] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 27.
[27] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 26.
[28] "Joe Jackson Trades and Transactions," Baseball Almanac, accessed November 7, 2025.
[29] David L. Fleitz, *Shoeless: The Life and Times of Joe Jackson*, (McFarland & Co., 2001) 6-7.
[30] Fleitz, *Shoeless*, 14.
[31] Fleitz, *Shoeless*, 17-18.

Brandon Mill meant that few families could afford education for their children, much less secondary education, which itself was not mandated in South Carolina until 1907.[32] Katie Jackson was no exception to this, and likely did not fully understand these consequences either, especially during a time in which a lack of an overarching governing body for professional baseball left the enforcement of rules up to ownership. Furthermore, the lack of communication provided to Jackson regarding the scandal supports the notion that Jackson's fame and ignorance were exploited, evidenced by his involvement being used as a tool and his reduced payout.

Subsequently, Jackson's poor upbringing and the constricting nature of baseball contracts at this time indicate a desire to earn more than what ownership determined he was worth, or more precisely, more than ownership had determined to pay him in order to capitalize on his labor. This is evidenced by Jackson's statements regarding his contract under Comiskey, and again by the economic conditions in his hometown. Brandon Mill's textile factories relied on hydroelectric power in a river that receded during summer, which would force laborers out of work, therefore eliminating pay.[33] Furthermore, these factories mandated 60-70 hour work weeks, while paying its employees so little that it struggled to maintain a stable workforce.[34] Nevertheless, Jackson stated that after he had received the money, he was ashamed of himself, presumably understanding that the money he had earned was illegitimate.[35] Regardless, the desire to earn what one was worth was not exclusive to Jackson. It is noted that the other seven Black Sox players were also relatively uneducated and "less urbane" than the other members of the team, which left them particularly susceptible to exploitation from powerful owners.[36] However, this sentiment is similar to a much broader idea of American labor. In fact, many

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[32] Fleitz, *Shoeless*, 7, 14.
[33] Fleitz, *Shoeless*, 8.
[34] Fleitz, *Shoeless*, 7-8.
[35] Jackson, Grand Jury Statement, 15.
[36] Reiss, *Touching Base*, 93.

parallels can be drawn between the cause, and most notably the effect, of the Black Sox Scandal, and the fight for fair economic and working conditions in America during this time period.

Baseball and Labor in the Progressive Era

In 1919, numerous labor struggles swept the nation's major cities and national headlines. Notable among them was the Boston Police Strike that occurred in September of 1919. Spurred by unfair labor practices, unhealthy working conditions, and low wages, police in Boston affiliated with the American Federation of Labor in August, which went against the orders of the Boston Police Commissioner, which mandated that officers were only allowed to join the internal and inherently weaker Boston Police Union.[37] The subsequent strike, however, was an unmitigated disaster. Within two days, crime and violence skyrocketed throughout the city, eight people were killed, and the Boston police officers became enemies of the press as well as local governments across the United States.[38] The strike's failure subsequently led to the setback of public sector unions for decades.[39] Elected officials in major cities, including Congress, used the failure of the strike as justification to entrench control and prevent unionism within their own public sector services.[40]

The Black Sox Scandal and its causes are synonymous with grievances that caused the Boston Police Strike and other labor struggles. However, the similarities go beyond just the basic foundations of fair labor. The principal cause of the strengthening of control over public sector unions came about due to the attempt and failure of the police in Boston to defy the jurisdiction of their Police Commissioner. A similar cause can be seen in the aftermath of the Black Sox

[37] Joseph Slater, "Public Workers: Labor and the Boston Police Strike of 1919," *Labor History* 38, no. 1 (1996): 15.
[38] Slater, "Public Workers," 16.
[39] Slater, "Public Workers," 24-25.
[40] Slater, "Public Workers," 25.

Scandal. From the start of the Black Sox court proceedings, American and National League owners understood the need for a stronger, more powerful governing body. On November 12th, 1920, in the midst of the trial, the owners appointed Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis to be the first commissioner of Major League Baseball, the top authority for all of professional baseball, and the chief representative for ownership.[41] Notably, Landis, a known baseball fan, had previously heard a case regarding the legality of the two major leagues' monopoly on baseball.[42] Landis never decided this case, later claiming that abiding by his trust-busting ways would have been "destructive" to the sport.[43] Baseball ownership leveraged his adoration for baseball against the Black Sox players. Despite the jury declaring all players not guilty, on August 3rd, 1921, Landis exiled all eight players from professional baseball for life.[44] While Landis' decision preemptively saved baseball as a righteous pillar of American culture, its long lasting consequences paralleled those of the Boston strike. Landis' decision set forth precedent that would essentially eliminate any ability of the players to defy ownership in a way that was deemed to be detrimental to the institution of baseball. The Black Sox Scandal had the ability to bring to light some of the unfair practices employed by baseball owners. Instead, those unfair practices were reinforced in order to maintain legitimacy and, ultimately, start the path for which modern professional baseball has evolved from ever since. It would be over fifty years until the reserve clause was finally abolished in Major League Baseball.[45] Jackson and the Black Sox became the enemies of the establishment, leaving an infamous mark on professional baseball forever.

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[41] Carney, *Burying the Black Sox*, 133.
[42] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 53.
[43] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 61.
[44] Carney, *Burying the Black Sox*, 147-149.
[45] Banner, *The Baseball Trust*, 230.

Conclusion

The Black Sox Scandal has lived on in the memories of baseball fans long after Landis' edict. Debates continue today about the level of guilt held by each player, the harshness of Landis' decision, and the legacy of 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson, among others. The scandal itself has been immortalized in book and film, serving as a nostalgic reminder of baseball and its place in American culture. Sentimentality aside, with evidence provided by Jackson's testimony, along with relevant context regarding Jackson's life, professional baseball during the Progressive era, and broader labor context from the Progressive Era, it is clear that the Black Sox Scandal is the result of the continued exploitation of economic and labor conditions faced by players, as well as being used to further entrench owner control. This is shown through practices such as the reserve clause, and the stingy ownership practices that resulted from it, and how even though Jackson's testimony indicates a lack of clear involvement in the scandal, it was still used as a catalyst for further empowering ownership and its unfair practices. When the scandal is understood this way, the burden of guilt in the scandal turns to the ownership establishment in baseball at this time, and represents a new way of understanding professional baseball prior to its golden age. In a broader sense, when considering the place that professional baseball holds in modern American culture, it is important to look back upon the major turning points in its history with a new perspective.

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