The two essays in this section examine how two professional sports initially became organized. The first essay was written by the late Harold Seymour, a pioneer sport historian. One of the major themes in his classic *Baseball: The Early Years* (1960), the first of a trilogy on baseball history, was that the baseball business was run in the same ruthless and highly integrated manner as other contemporary big businesses. In the selection that follows, Seymour examines in depth the organization of the National League in 1876 and focuses on the leadership role of Chicago White Stockings President William Hulbert. In the second essay, John L. Sullivan's biographer, Michael Isenberg of the U.S. Naval Academy, examines how boxing clubs got into the business of promoting prize fights. Until the early 1890s matches were made directly by managers meeting in a bar or through the good offices of Richard K. Fox, editor of the *National Police Gazette*. How did the Olympic Club of New Orleans change this system? For years thereafter, politically connected boxing clubs arranged most professional bouts. Few independent entrepreneurs were able to break in until the advent of Tex Rickard, best known for his promotion of the Jack Johnson–Jim Jeffries heavyweight championship fight in 1910.

The Creation of the National League in 1876

HAROLD SEYMOUR

Baseball entered... [a new] period in 1876. The time was opportune for change. The National Association of Professional Baseball Players was reeling. Its weak organization could not cope successfully with the cancerous evils of gambling, revolting, and hippodroming. As these became more flagrant, spectators began to stay away, and the clamor for reform grew louder.

While it is true that the Association made some effort to correct the situation by fining some players and reportedly pressuring others to resign, results were negligible. Critics insisted that unless crooked players were expelled, they were not really being punished at all, and the press continued to fire questions at the Association: What are you going to do about it? Do you really intend to act? How can the public have faith?

The heavy mortality among Association clubs has already been mentioned. Some clubs caused their own downfall by assuming heavier salary obligations than their resources warranted—like the Forest Citys of Cleveland, who upped salaries in 1872 to hold their players, only to go into receivership in mid-season after losing 15 out of 21 games. Rich clubs raided weaker rivals for players, thus adding to the number of club casualties. This short-sighted policy was detrimental to those

who indulged in it as well, because as a result clubs often had trouble finding teams strong enough to give them a battle and bring in the fans.

Gravitation of the best players toward one team meant one-sided competition. For example, the Boston Red Sox, four-time pennant winners, won 71 and lost only 8 games in 1875. Their closest rivals, the Athletics, might just as well have been in another league for all the threat they offered, because they won only 53 and lost 20. The Atlantics, who finished last, were hopelessly outclassed, losing 42 games out of 44. The gap between winner and also-rans was even greater in other years. This disparity in playing strength cooled spectator interest, with the result that even the winners could lose money, as the Red Sox did in 1872. As long as these uncertain and unstable conditions obtained, it was highly unlikely that backers would risk money in baseball ventures.

At the same time these weaknesses of the Association were becoming acute, profound economic and social changes were taking place in America, changes which created an environment congenial to the new direction in which baseball was to move. In just the brief span of time from the close of the war to 1878, America’s modest railroad system became the finest in the world. Her industrial investment practically doubled, and except for periodic depressions, each decade saw the pace accelerated so furiously that “a new vocabulary and almost a new arithmetic” were required to describe it. The transformation of America from a rural to an urban society was accomplished as native and immigrant alike crowded into the urban industrial centers, particularly in the Northeast. The twin forces of industrialism and urbanism were, as one scholar said, “more fundamentally responsible for the changes and developments in sport during the next generation than any other.”

Long hours of drudgery at factory machines understandably created a craving among the city masses for diversion and excitement. Their traditional pattern of recreation was broken because they necessarily had to forsake the yeoman sports of an earlier period. On the other hand, cities had not yet assumed any responsibility for the leisure-time activities of citizens, and the recreation movement aimed at supplying these needs was still to come. People therefore turned to the cheap, the passive, the commercial, and the sensational. Typical attractions were the saloon, dance hall, and minstrel show. People also turned to the excitement of spectator sports, where they could experience vicariously the thrills and satisfactions heretofore enjoyed at first hand. Sitting in ball parks passively watching others perform was perhaps not the best form of recreation—there is a whole literature criticizing “spectatoritis”—but at least it was much better than some far less wholesome activities that might have been pursued.

It was no accident that professional baseball reached its highest development in the urban centers which offered a permanent stage and an ever-ready audience. There were entrepreneurs quick to capitalize on the situation. In this buoyant era of confidence and opportunity, men with drive, organizing ability, and an eye for the main chance could climb to the top. Oil had its Rockefeller, flour its Pillsbury, meat its Armour and Swift, railroads their Vanderbilt and Gould. . . . Baseball, too, was to have its business leaders, although they performed on a smaller scale. Men like Cammeyer and Wright had already sensed the possibilities of converting baseball into a paying entertainment business. Others now emerged with the ability and
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vision to benefit by the Association’s experience and to organize professional ball on a real business basis.

Foremost among them was William A. Hulbert. He was born in a small town in Otsego County, New York, not far from Cooperstown, but grew up in Chicago. After attending Beloit College, he entered business and was for fifteen years a member of the Chicago Board of Trade. In 1875 he became an officer of the Chicago Baseball Club. Hulbert was a strong leader who applied his business experience to professional baseball. He was one of those convinced that it could be made a paying business if properly managed. He was largely responsible for bringing about a new regime in baseball, and it was under his guidance that the present National League survived during its first crucial years. Unfortunately, Hulbert died prematurely in 1882 before he could realize the full fruits of his efforts.

Hulbert quickly saw the disastrous financial effects of inflated salaries, caused by the scramble for players, and he understood the National Association’s need for a “new and better rule” to curb this competition for men. In October 1875, the Chicago Tribune printed a lengthy article analyzing baseball’s difficulties under the Association and offering a set of proposals to remedy them. According to the Tribune, too many good clubs were losing money playing second-raters that could not draw well at the gate—“fun for the little fellows” but “death” for the leading clubs, as it was called. For the Chicago Club to cover costs, pay good salaries, and maybe realize a “modest” dividend, it would have to limit its schedule to games with the more solid teams. The Chicago management was afraid, therefore, that if the “whole gang be let in” the Association again in 1876, half the clubs would not make expenses. The Tribune called upon the Association to institute reforms; otherwise it would be the “plain duty” of its leading clubs to withdraw from the Association and form an organization of their own—“a closed corporation, too.”

Significantly, the reforms advocated by the Tribune were among those soon adopted by Hulbert for the new National League. Because of this, Lewis Meacham, sports editor of the Tribune and writer of the article, has been credited with originating the organizational plan of the National League. However, it is more likely that he was acting as Hulbert’s mouthpiece. The wording of the article sounded suspiciously like Hulbert, who was probably launching a trial balloon to test the scheme he had in mind.

Hulbert’s first overt act was to strengthen his own club by the bald expedient of raiding the Boston Red Sox, the standout club of the Association. Much as he might deplore the practice in principle, he did not shrink from pirating players of other clubs when it suited his purpose. While the season of 1875 was in progress, he approached Al Spalding, still under contract to the Red Sox, and induced him to join Chicago for the following season. Then, with Spalding’s help, he signed three more Boston stars, Cal McVey, James “Deacon” White, and Ross Barnes. He also enticed Adrian C. “Cap” Anson of the Philadelphia Athletics, destined to be one of the greatest players of the era, and Ezra B. Sutton, although the latter changed his mind and remained in Philadelphia.

This buccaneering was, of course, in bold defiance of the Association’s rule that, if a player signed with any club other than the one he was with before the season was over, he was liable to expulsion. Spalding and his fellow contract-jumpers took the gamble on Hulbert’s assurance that “you boys are bigger than the
Association," backed by his promise to pay their salaries even if they were expelled. The Hulbert-Spalding deal becomes all the more telling in view of their later repeated castigations of players who broke their agreements.

Hulbert was now ready for his next move, a mixture of idealism and materialism. He had already shown his lack of respect for the Association and felt quite sure he could flout it; but what if the Eastern clubs, angry over his player raids, ganged up and had him expelled? After all, he must have realized that the Eastern clubs held the balance of power in the Association. Better to anticipate such a reprisal and move first. Another motive may have been Hulbert's wish to retaliate against the Association, which he "never forgave" for awarding a disputed player, Davy Force, to the Philadelphia Athletics instead of his own Chicago club.

Hulbert's aim was nothing less than the displacement of the Association with a strong new organization, composed of selected clubs only, East and West, with all others arbitrarily excluded. He hoped that such an organization would check the evils that were reducing attendance, and that better gate receipts would come from exploiting intersectional rivalry with a better balance between Eastern and Western clubs. First, he traveled to St. Louis in the fall of 1875 to confer with Charles Fowle, owner of the local Association club, and Campbell Orrick Bishop, an attorney who had played with the St. Louis Unions in the 1860's and then became Vice President of the Association and a member of its Judiciary Committee. Bishop drew up a constitution for a new league based upon a draft submitted to him by Hulbert. Next Hulbert and Fowle met secretly in Louisville on December 17, 1875, with representatives of the Cincinnati and Louisville clubs, strong independent teams.

At Louisville, Hulbert and Fowle were appointed a committee with full power to act for the four Western clubs and given the job of going east to negotiate with the Eastern teams they wanted to include. Louisville, therefore, was the real birthplace of the National League, not New York City. Four Eastern clubs—Hartford, Boston, New York, and the Philadelphia Athletics, all Association members—were invited to send representatives armed with authority to act for their clubs to a meeting on "matters of interest to the game at large," especially "reforms of existing abuses" and the formation of a "new association." Boston and Philadelphia of course were victims of Hulbert's recent player raids. . . .

The Eastern clubs accepted, and the delegates met February 2, 1876, at the Central Hotel, New York City. Results were massive for baseball history. This small group proceeded to spring a coup d'etat, by-passing the Association and setting up a new organization vastly different in character. . . .

The name chosen by the group for the new organization—the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs—was highly significant. Up until then, all baseball organizations, amateur or professional, were player associations. Now the players were relegated to a secondary position. The clubs would be dominant. The specialization increasingly characteristic of American life, and especially of American industry, was becoming ever more noticeable in the baseball business. The managing end of the game was to be separate and distinct from the playing end, thus allowing the players to concentrate on performance and leave business affairs and promotion to the owners. . . .
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The rest of the proceedings at the meeting were faithfully recorded by Harry Wright, secretary pro tem. The constitution readied in advance by Hulbert and Bishop was adopted after a session which lasted all day and throughout the evening, except for a recess for supper. The new document listed as its broad objectives a desire to elevate baseball and make ball playing “respectable and honorable” by enacting and enforcing “proper rules” for the conduct of the game. The founders also expressed the desire to protect and promote the “mutual interests” of clubs and players and to establish and regulate the baseball championship of the United States. They were aware of the need for improving the operation of the business, and there is no doubt that in the years to come the National League did much to put the game on a more respectable plane. However, as time passed and the League became more institutionalized, the idealistic objectives of its founders were emphasized and their other motives subordinated or forgotten. . . . The men of the National League, particularly when under attack by rival organizations or their own dissatisfied players, conveniently forgot their less worthy motives, such as establishing a monopoly and improving their financial position by dropping the weaker clubs. Instead they preferred to recite the lofty objectives voiced in 1876. The constant refrain was, “The National League was organized in 1876 as a necessity, to rescue the game from its slough of corruption and disgrace.” As for the League organizers’ statement about “the mutual interests” of players and clubs, it should be remembered that before this, the two were essentially one and the same. Now Hulbert and the others first made a distinction between them and then paid their respects to “mutual interests.”

The provisions of the constitution concerning regulation of member clubs made plain the monopolistic intent of the League. Like so many tycoons of the time, they gave lip service to competition while working overtime to eliminate it. Restrictive measures controlling consumer markets were introduced immediately. These so-called “territorial rights” have been maintained by the baseball business ever since. Each League club was given exclusive control of its own city and the surrounding area within a radius of five miles. No League club could play an outside team in another League city, even if the local League club consented. The boon of territorial rights was particularly apparent in the case of the Philadelphia Athletics, still smarting under the loss of Anson to Chicago. The A’s had been competing with two other clubs in Philadelphia, to the financial detriment of all three. Now they were to have the field to themselves.

Theoretically, other clubs could join the League. Practically, they had little chance of doing so. Since the constitution allowed but one club to a city, and the owners had no intention of having more than eight clubs in the circuit, a member club had to leave before a new one could enter. To ensure gate receipts, a new club must represent a city of not less than 75,000 unless given special exemption by unanimous vote of the incumbent members. Two blackballs were enough to block admission of a new club. Members were required to pay $100 annual dues—ten times those of the Association.

Each club was to play ten games with every other club between March 15 and November 15. Five of the ten games might be played on the club’s home grounds. The team finishing with the greatest number of victories was to be proclaimed champion and awarded an appropriate pennant costing not less than $100. In the