The National Association

The impact the Red Stockings made in 1869 spawned imitation—that is, acknowledged professionalism—and the combined experience of 1869 and 1870 taught lessons that could not be ignored.

1. The public would pay, gladly, to watch top-flight players in action.
2. Only full-scale professionals could provide performance at that level.
3. Professionals playing amateurs, or lesser professionals, produced mismatches unable to sustain interest.
4. Therefore, top-flight professionals had to play more games with each other.
5. But the best professional teams, almost by definition and certainly as a practical matter, were based in different cities and outclassed local or nearby competition.
6. In order to play each other, these teams had to travel to each other's cities, sometimes far apart.
7. Travel cost money.

From the standpoint of most of the members of the National Association of Base Ball Players, club-based since its inception before the war, amateurism was a fundamental tenet, even if violated surreptitiously, since competition with fully staffed professional teams was not only unfair but no fun.
During 1870, the move to separate the pro’s from the rest became irreversible. As the Red Stockings continued their tour, their few equals had less reason to hide—if not yet publicly avowed—their professionalism. According to Al Spalding (whom we’ll meet in a moment), writing in 1911, at least a dozen teams were in reality manned by fully paid professionals, with season contracts not unlike Cincinnati’s. Among these, he said, were the Athletics of Philadelphia, the Atlantics of Brooklyn (who ended Cincinnati’s winning streak), the Mutuals of New York, the White Stockings of Chicago, and two teams in Washington, D.C., the Olympics and the Nationals. Smaller cities had them too: Fort Wayne, Indiana; Troy, New York; and, of special significance, Rockford, Illinois.

The Association, as it existed, had to face up to three choices: discipline the pros, expel them, or become impotent and irrelevant.

The pros saw no reason to deal with the amateur problem at all. Why couldn’t they form their own association?

They could. They did.

After much informal talk and correspondence (by letter and wire, since there were no telephones yet) during late 1870, they called a meeting on St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, 1870, in New York.

Harry Wright was the guiding force. After two glorious seasons, the Cincinnati Red Stockings had shown a profit of less than two dollars, and the backers decided to disband the team and return to less glorious, but less costly, amateurism. Travel and other expenses, as well salaries, had eaten up what had been considerable revenues. The risk of deficit overcame the satisfactions of fame.

All these lessons had been absorbed by Wright, along with a more subtle one. When the Red Stockings were no longer “undefeated,” as early as mid-June, their power as a gate attraction visibly diminished. The magic words “national champion,” mythical or not, had been attached to teams only after the event, by declaration at the conclusion of a season, when there were no more tickets to sell. What was needed was a method to let the public know how progress toward a championship was being made. If the pro’s played each other and counted only such games as official, a pennant race could be created.

Just how new and brilliant such a concept was can be appreciated only in light of the sports scene of that time.

The first game of what its participants called college football, an unrecognizable variety of rugby, had been played by Princeton and Rutgers students only a few months before, on November 6, 1869.

James Naismith, who would not invent basketball until 21 years later, was an eight-year-old boy living in Canada.

Also up in Canada, they were still 15 years away from adopting any uniform rules for various hockey games played on ice, and from the manufacture of flat-bladed hockey sticks.
What was called “lawn tennis,” the modern variety of long-existing racquet games, hadn’t been invented yet. That wouldn’t happen until 1874.

There wouldn’t be a golfing club founded in America until 1888.

Prize fights were bare knuckled, disreputable, and illegal.

The established sports—horse racing, rowing, track and field—were all structured around one-shot events; you won this or that race or title, with one result having no tangible effect on the next.

And baseball, like cricket, was seen as a succession of “test matches,” each competition standing on its own, until some championship pennant was awarded by decree at the end of a season.

To put all the new ideas into practice, Wright needed a compact core of teams, staffed by the best professionals. At that March 17th meeting, 10 clubs signed up and formed the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, taking pains to emphasize the word “professional.”

In almost every respect, they simply adopted the old National Association by-laws and procedures, especially the playing rules, except for the amateurism provisions. The whole idea was to exploit what was already popular and familiar, not to make revolution. They did, however, make the key provision that would define a pennant race: each team would play every other team at least five times, with the championship going to the team that accumulated the most victories. Only in case of a tie would the won-lost percentage determine the champion. Games against nonmembers simply wouldn’t count.

But they also made two mistakes, sowing the seeds of failure. They left the matter of scheduling to the two teams involved, as it always had been. And they set the entry fee at $10 a club.

Self-scheduling meant that the promise to play each opponent five times could not be enforced if, for any reason, two teams failed to keep it. And with only $10 to be forfeited, a club had no reason not to drop out during an unsuccessful season, or if it was not meeting expenses. There were still lessons to be learned.

Nevertheless, the professional association was a tremendous advance and marked the birth of what would come to be known as “major league baseball.”

The 10 charter members of the professional National Association (as we shall refer to it from now on, since the amateur association continued its existence until it withered away) were

The Philadelphia Athletics
The Washington Olympics
The Washington Nationals
The New York Mutuals
The Chicago White Stockings
The Cleveland Forest Citys
The Fort Wayne Kekiongas
The Troy Haymakers
The Rockford Forest Citys
The Boston Red Stockings

Wait. The *Boston* Red Stockings?
Right. When Cincinnati folded, Wright accepted the offer of backers in Boston to put together a team for them. He took along the now famous name, if not the actual socks, and it was from this base that he pushed for the formation of the first pro league.

He also brought with him to Boston a younger brother, George, who had been considered the best all-around player on the Red Stockings as the short fielder, and three other Cincinnati veterans. Harry had unparalleled knowledge of all the best players in the country, since he had spent two years criss-crossing the continent, observing them as opponents and hearing in detail about anyone he didn’t see.

Since Asa Brainard, his Cincinnati pitcher, had decided to join Washington Olympic, he needed a pitcher for Boston.
And he knew where to get one.
Enter Mr. Spalding, who will dominate baseball’s next 40 years.

Albert Goodwill Spalding came from a prosperous Illinois farm family that settled, when he was a child, in Rockford, about 100 miles west and slightly north of Chicago. By the time he was 16, he was a good enough player to pitch for the adult Rockford team, which the town leaders backed eagerly.

In 1867, the already professional (unofficially) Washington Nationals were considered the national champions. (George Wright was their star player.) On a western tour that July, they were to play the highly regarded Chicago Excelsiors, the strongest team of that area, in a much publicized confrontation. On the way, they had beaten Columbus 90–10 and Indianapolis 106–21. The day before they were to play the Excelsiors, they accepted a warm-up game against the humble Rockford team, whose players were thrilled and honored simply to be on the same field.

Spalding, not yet 17, pitched.

Rockford won, 29–23.
The next day, the Nationals whipped Chicago 49–4.

Spalding was noticed.

The Excelsiors promptly offered him a place on their team, arranging for a grocery firm in Chicago to give him a job that would not interfere with baseball activity, at $40 a week—about eight times the going wage for an inexperienced employee. Spalding, who had a year of high school left, accepted after some soul-searching. But he played only one game in September before the grocery firm went bankrupt (not so surprising, is it?) and he went home to Rockford.

Pitching there in 1868, 1869, and 1870, he acquired a national reputation. With
The National Association

Spalding and Ross Barnes, Rockford also had two outstanding hitters. They consistently defeated all the top teams in the midwest and lost 14–13 to the 1869 Red Stockings only when Cincinnati scored three runs in the ninth.

So Wright knew firsthand what Spalding could do. He persuaded the pitcher to come to Boston, paying him $1,500 a year. Wright’s own salary, as boss, was only $2,500, so this was high pay at a time when the average income nationally was less than $500 a year.

Wright also signed Barnes, so with four of his former Cincinnati players his Boston team was a powerhouse, expected to win the championship right from the start.

It didn’t, but before we go into what happened, let’s take a snapshot of the game on the field in 1871.

The pitching distance is 45 feet. The pitcher must have both feet within the box, six feet wide and four feet deep, behind the 45-foot line, and must use a straight-armed delivery (no bent elbow) with the arm parallel to the ground and no higher than the hip. He can, however, snap his wrist to produce spin.

The batter can order a high or low delivery. High means shoulder to waist; low means waist to knees. Unless the pitch is both over the plate and in the specified area, it is not a called strike. It takes nine “unfair” balls (out of the strike zone) to get a walk.

The other rules are essentially the ones we are familiar with. But fielders don’t yet have gloves, and catchers stand well back from the batter.

As the 1871 season unfolded, it became clear that the requirement of five games against each opponent wouldn’t be met. It called for a minimum of 45 games for each team. None actually played more than 33. (They played many more games than that against non-Association opponents; in fact, unofficial games were too convenient and profitable to pass up.) Still, a close race developed involving Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago.

The teams had until November 1 to complete their schedules. Chicago was ahead, and in a position to win, when the Great Fire of October 17, 1871, destroyed its ball park. The White Stockings had to play their remaining few games on the road, and lost them. Then they dropped out of the league for two years.

When the season was over, Philadelphia’s record was 21–7, Boston’s 20–10 and Chicago’s 19–9. Philadelphia was declared champion: it had the largest number of victories. When Wright tried to argue that his team deserved the title because it had played a greater number of the required games, he got nowhere.

However, he never had to argue again. His Red Stockings won the next four championships, more and more impressively.

In 1872, they were 39–8 to Baltimore’s 35–19.
In 1873, they were 43–16 to Philadelphia’s 38–17.
In 1874, they were 52–18 to New York’s 42–23.
In 1875, they were 71–8 to Hartford’s 54–28.
In those five years, Spalding won 205 of Boston’s 225 victories. He was a .325 hitter. He was young, tall, handsome, well-spoken, respectable, sociable, and vigorous. He was baseball’s first true star, known and admired nationwide.

And at that point, the league died.

But not just because of Boston.

The two central flaws, unsupervised scheduling and cheap entry fee, had done their work. Of 11 teams that started the 1872 season, only four played as many as 30 official games. In 1873, only nine began and six finished. In 1874, only eight started, and all but one stuck it out. In 1875, with the glamour of major league baseball established, 13 teams tried it, including Keokuk, Iowa, and New Haven, Connecticut. But six were gone by midseason. It was too hard to stay competitive, too easy to drop out.

Through the five seasons, only Boston, Philadelphia, and New York played every year, although Chicago would have if not for the fire.

And that wasn’t all. There was no mechanism for central discipline in other matters. Clubs argued about gate receipts and how they should be divided (or honestly reported). Players found to be involved in gambling or drunkenness or rowdy behavior could not be controlled—if they could play well—because they’d be hired by another team if fired. Any player could go to another team for a better deal anytime he wanted to when his contract expired, and the contract did not have to cover a full season.

Such conditions not only prevented others from matching Wright’s superior organization and prestige, but confused and displeased the public.

Why was organization so loose? Because the original concept of an association of “players” had never been questioned. It was players, after all, who had formed amateur clubs. The National Association had merely accepted professionalism, not abandoned the “club” idea. The activity had evolved into a business—the business of staging baseball games—but proficiency in performance does not guarantee proficiency in business. An enormously efficient self-selection process in terms of playing ability had produced the professional performers; but those individuals could not be expected to also be skilled in running a business, or managing capital, or administering an organization. Yet all decision-making power was in player hands, and players made decisions based on what seemed good for themselves, not on what objective judgement might dictate would be good for the enterprise.

A different approach was required, and there were people who understood what that was. Even in five short years, U.S. society had undergone significant change. The war was receding, the frontier was being settled, the railroads and banks were revealing their power; immigration was gaining momentum again, technological advance was accelerating. The entrepreneur (and would-be entrepreneur) was king.

Businessmen had to take charge of the business.

It was that simple.

But how?
A fellow in Chicago had an idea.

A "national association of players" amounted to letting the inmates run the asylum. What was needed was "a national league of clubs" with authority vested in the club as an ongoing business firm, not in transient athletes.

Sound businessmen had to be in charge. The players had to be simply employees.

This was, after all, the year 1876: the Centennial of the United States of America, whose celebration in Philadelphia that summer would feature the world's latest technological progress; the era of men who would come to be called The Robber Barons; an age of explosive growth, opportunity, expansion, innovation. The gentleman's club idea of a generation ago was ancient history. Its vestiges could only get in the way of the new religion—honest effort to make a lot of money wherever and however it was to be made.

The Chicagoan ready to pursue his idea was William Ambrose Hulbert. The man he needed to make it work was Albert Goodwill Spalding. When they got together, "baseball as we know it" began.

And their first order of business, as it had been for Harry Wright only five years before, was to carry out a preemptive strike against the existing order.