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## For the Black Sox, a New Wrinkle

### New Research Charges Baseball Executives Had Warning of Plot to Throw 1919 Series

By **STEFAN FATSI**

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In 1919, eight members of the Chicago White Sox conspired with gamblers to throw the World Series. And why not? Their team owner was a notorious cheapskate. The scandal was an isolated incident handled swiftly when the eight players were banned from baseball for life -- even though one of them didn't take a dime and another hit .375 and tried to give the money back.

That's the popular version of the Black Sox scandal, a combination of a fire-and-brimstone tale of crooked players cast out on their ears and the more-sympathetic portrayal that emerged from "Eight Men Out," the 1963 book by Eliot Asinof and 1988 movie of the same name directed by John Sayles.

With the White Sox reaching the World Series for the first time in 46 years -- the team [completed a four-game sweep](#) of the Houston Astros last night for its first championship since 1917 -- the story is getting a workout once again. The only problem: The black-and-white version of baseball's biggest scandal needs an update. The real story isn't the players. It's the conspiracy and cover-up of the scandal by the lords of baseball.

"There was an intense whitewashing by all parties in baseball because of a tradition of hiding these thing as long as you could," says Donald Gropman, author of a biography of "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, the team's star player. "That's how they did things."

That behavior is finally getting a full airing. New research shows that the baseball executives at the center of the scandal -- White Sox owner [Charles Comiskey](#) and American League president [Ban Johnson](#), two giants of early baseball now enshrined in its Hall of Fame -- had information about the fix before the 1919 World Series between Chicago and the Cincinnati Reds had even started. Other recently discovered documents show that the players involved were publicly named long before an investigation took place a year later.

First, a few undisputed facts. Some players on the 1919 White Sox took money from gamblers to throw the World Series. Those who did received at least \$5,000 apiece (though some were promised \$20,000) and the team did lose what was then a best-of-nine affair, five games to three. A grand-jury investigation began in September 1920, and eight players were indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit fraud. Some confessed to the scheme, but in 1921 a jury found all eight innocent; it wasn't illegal in Illinois to take money from gamblers or to throw baseball games. After the verdict, the eight were formally banished from the game by baseball's iron-fisted new commissioner, [Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis](#).

The blanket punishment ignored that the players had divergent roles in the scandal. Buck Weaver, the third baseman, attended meetings about the fix but didn't take any money. Mr. Jackson's hitting topped all players on both teams and he tried to return his \$5,000 cut. The outfielder's [grand-jury testimony](#) isn't totally damning, and he testified in a 1924 trial (after suing the White Sox for back pay) that he never played to lose.

While history, pop culture and the media have focused on the dramatic story of corrupt ballplayers, the people who could have done something about the fix, especially Messrs. Comiskey and Johnson, haven't received the same attention. Black Sox researcher Gene Carney compares the popular interpretation of the



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Black Sox to a scandal on a different playing field: Imagine, he says, if Watergate were dubbed "five burglars out." Centering the Black Sox affair on the players makes the same historical mistake, he says.

The Watergate analogy is a good one, because the right historical question to ask about the lords of Major League Baseball is: What did they know and when did they know it? Until now, the widespread belief has been that Mr. Comiskey was tipped off about rumors of a fix after the first or second game of the World Series. According to a diary kept by the owner's right-hand man, Harry Grabiner, the executives were shocked, shocked when they heard that gambling had infiltrated their game -- an entirely self-serving statement, given that gamblers consorted openly with team owners, players and reporters.

The cover story for Mr. Comiskey has been that Mr. Grabiner told the National League's president, John Heydler, who dismissed the rumors. Mr. Grabiner wrote that Mr. Heydler asked if he could raise the issue with Mr. Johnson, who was feuding with Mr. Comiskey at the time. According to Mr. Grabiner's diary (found decades later in a Comiskey Park storage room by a nephew of then-owner Bill Veeck), Mr. Heydler never brought the matter up with the White Sox executives again. After Chicago lost the first two games of the World Series, Mr. Johnson is said to have called Mr. Comiskey's information "the whelp of a beaten cur" (or something similar -- several versions of the quotation exist).

A forthcoming book by [Mr. Carney](#), "Burying the Black Sox: How Baseball's Cover-up of the 1919 World Series Almost Succeeded," cites documents that make the behavior of the lords of baseball look even dicier. The revelation that Messrs. Comiskey and Johnson and others knew of a possible fix before the World Series but neither tried to stop it nor postpone the games comes from a 1935 article in the *Sporting News* by a reporter at the center of the scandal, [Hugh Fullerton](#).

An early 20th-century cross between Bill James and Peter Gammons, Mr. Fullerton wrote a syndicated column the day after the 1919 Series declaring that seven players on the team wouldn't be back the next season. (He later revealed the information came from Mr. Comiskey.) In December 1919, he wrote stories in the *New York Evening World* calling on baseball to investigate and even offering a roster of gamblers, baseball executives, players and reporters (himself included) to be interviewed.

Mr. Fullerton's stories, while bold, didn't come right out and say the Series had been fixed. "It was a little like 19th-century Russia," says Steve Klein, a journalism professor at George Mason University, who wrote his master's thesis about Mr. Fullerton. "You had to write these things between the lines. No editor was going to go with it."

Mr. Fullerton's recommendations were ignored and he was personally assailed by baseball executives and publications loyal to them. It wasn't until years later -- after his close friend Mr. Comiskey had died -- that Mr. Fullerton told the rest of his story, this time in the *Sporting News*. The article was discovered recently in an online database by a baseball researcher, who passed it on to Mr. Carney.

Mr. Fullerton wrote that the day before Game 1 of the World Series in Cincinnati, he and a Detroit sportswriter named Joe Jackson "went to a speak-easy to get an eye-opener." There, Mr. Fullerton ran into a Chicago gambler, who mistook the Detroit writer for the White Sox star with the same name. The gambler asked about "the fix" and whether the Reds would win in five straight games.

Mr. Fullerton recalled that he and Mr. Jackson thought the gambler was joking, but an hour later "the boys from New York" -- other sportswriters and/or gamblers -- arrived and also said the World Series was fixed. Rumors flew that day and night; the following morning, Mr. Fullerton wrote, two "big-shot Chicago gamblers" told him "flat-footedly" that "the series was fixed for Cincinnati to win."

Here's where the story gets really juicy. Mr. Fullerton wrote that he went to Mr. Comiskey and urged him to take action. But the White Sox owner told him he already knew about the fix and that Mr. Johnson wouldn't do anything about it. Mr. Fullerton then went to Mr. Johnson, who dismissed the information as "Comiskey squealing."

Mr. Fullerton's next stop was Barney Dreyfuss, the influential owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates. "Barney was enraged that anyone should accuse players of framing a series," he wrote. "I lost my temper with him and with the entire baseball set-up, calling them a bunch of whitewashing bastards who were letting a bunch of crooks get away with it because they were afraid of losing money."

#### DEFENDING THE BLACK SOX

The night before the World Series, Mr. Fullerton wired a note to the 40 newspapers that took his column: ADVISE ALL NOT TO BET ON THIS SERIES. UGLY

Buck Weaver's defenders have set up a site for him, [www.clearbuck.com](http://www.clearbuck.com), including a wealth of photos and an electronic petition. Shoeless Joe Jackson's Virtual Hall of Fame is at [www.blackbetsy.com](http://www.blackbetsy.com). ("Black Betsy" was the name of Jackson's bat.) The sites [1919 Black Sox](#) and [The Black Sox Trial](#) offer good overviews of the scandal.

RUMORS AFLOAT. He said only two published it. After the World Series ended, Mr. Fullerton worried he had wrecked "a life friendship" with Mr. Comiskey. But Mr. Comiskey told him, "Keep after them, Hughie. They were crooked. Some day you and I will prove it."

Note the pronoun: *They* were crooked. Mr. Fullerton gave no indication that the White Sox owner had considered independent action, such as talking to his players, going public with the rumors or halting the Series. His fear was certainly justified: losing not only World Series revenue but potentially his ownership of the team and the credibility of the business -- professional baseball -- that he had helped to build.

While those conversations occurred in private, it turns out that public information was available shortly after the World Series ended -- information upon which baseball's lords could have acted. The most remarkable appeared in a Chicago gambling newspaper called Collyer's Eye, issues of which were discovered last year by Black Sox sleuths in a basement of a library at the University of Illinois. (A PDF of the paper [is available](#).)

In articles beginning a week after the final game, Collyer's Eye said the Series had been fixed, correctly named some of the gamblers who were behind it and correctly named most of the players later indicted. In other words, Mr. Carney says, "the names were available. If baseball wanted to investigate, it could have called these gamblers and players in and found out a whole lot more."

Ironically, the gambling paper was more interested in cleaning up baseball than baseball was. Its vested interest was clear: Gambling would thrive only if sports were on the up and up.

Baseball, though, would suffer if it was shown to be crooked. And it was -- far more than the popular view of the Black Sox scandal as baseball's original sin would allow. "It was not an isolated event," says Richard Lindberg, who has written four books about the White Sox. "It was the culmination of 40 years of warm relations between gambling syndicates and professional athletes."

In fact, the Black Sox scandal was investigated only after a grand jury was convened in 1920 to look into allegations of game-fixing -- allegations involving the crosstown Chicago Cubs. Earlier that year, National League executives had hushed up a hearing on game-fixing at which the scandal was mentioned by players.

Other myths deserve to be busted. In the revisionist interpretation of the scandal, Mr. Comiskey's inaction certainly makes him a villain. But he probably doesn't deserve the reputation as a tightwad whose parsimony drove his players to cheat. *All* players in those days were exploited by owners; Mr. Carney says the White Sox payroll might have been among baseball's highest, while Mr. Lindberg says the team owner was generous with many players. Rather than trying to get back at Mr. Comiskey, the Black Sox were probably just trying to score easy money.

Then there's Joe Jackson. Did a young fan actually confront him outside a courthouse with "Say it ain't so, Joe?" Probably not. Did he sign his name with an X? "He signed his name on court transcripts," Mr. Lindberg says, "in his own hand."

Does this all matter? Major League Baseball's current leaders have their own set of player-behavior issues for which they could stand to take more responsibility, and the sport has always been reluctant to tamper with its historical record. In the Black Sox case, commissioner after commissioner has refused to act on clemency pleas by defenders of Mr. Jackson and Mr. Weaver.

So don't expect baseball, or the mainstream sports media, to set the record straight. Historians will do their part and hope that public perception someday catches up with the evidence. But myths don't die easily. As a matter of popular culture, "We want to know, 'Say it ain't so, Joe,'" says Mr. Klein, the Hugh Fullerton scholar. "We don't want to know, 'Joe, you poor, stupid sucker. You're taking a bullet for Charles Comiskey.'" "

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