

GROUP OF CLUBS: IT'S TIME TO PAY ALL PLAYERS

AUTUMN MEETINGS ROCKED BY LARGEST CLUBS SAYING TIME HAS COME FOR FULL PROFESSIONALISM

NEW YORK CITY (Nov. 11-14, 1869) – One year after the National Base Ball Organization decreed that clubs could finally start paying select players “above the table”, the Autumn Meetings began at the St. Nicholas Hotel under the assumption that club & league executives would spend the next four days discussing ways to improve the new payment system. Then, it happened...

After spending the opening day allowing discussion of the payment system to settle in, a group consisting of the five largest & most successful clubs in the sport shattered the relative calm with a demand: the time has come for clubs that can afford to do so to pay every player in their senior roster.

The clubs involved:

- Alleghany: 8x Inland champions (1857, 59, 61, 62, 65-67, 69), 1x TWC champions (1869)
- Kings County: 8x Brooklyn champions (1858-62, 64, 68, 69), 2x TWC champions (1860, 61)
- Knickerbocker: 5x New York City champions (1858, 65-67, 69), 2x TWC champions (1865, 67)
- Shamrock: 8x Coastal champions (1857, 59, 60, 62, 65-67, 69), 2x TWC champions (1862, 66)
- St. John's: 12x New England champions (1857-64, 66-69), 4x TWC champions (1857, 58, 63, 64)

Apparently, K.C., Knickerbocker, Shamrock, & St. John's felt emboldened after Alleghany finally joined the “Champions Club” with their recent triumph in the TWC, and they asked the Pittsburgh outfit to join them in going to the Autumn Meetings to demand a drastic change to the sport of base ball.

The five clubs making the demands all had the same things in common:

- They were the most successful clubs in the sport on the field.
- They had first-class facilities, both in terms of playing venues and practice venues.
- They had large stadiums ranging in capacity from 6,000+ (STJ) to over 17,000 (ALL).

- They were very profitable. Ex: Kings Co. made over \$8,000 in profit on \$15,000+ in revenue in 1869.

Depending on the views of who one was talking to, this five-sided group was referred to either as the “Pentagon” or the “Pentagram”, with the latter obviously used to conjure up the imagery associated with such a symbol.

Those who were not immediately rankled by the demands of the “Pentagon” were clubs that, themselves, were in good financial standing. Clubs like Atlantic, Continental, Flour City, Gotham, Mass. Bay, Niagara, Orange, & Quaker St. were ones that typically turned a healthy profit each season regardless of standing in their regional championship. If needed, they could afford to pay their eighteen senior players a minimum-level salary, at the very least, while raising ticket prices slightly to accommodate the change.

It was the smaller clubs who saw the five as the “Pentagram”. A club like Eagle, whose venue only held just under 1,100 people in Elmira, New York broke even in 1869 even though they only paid two players via the new payment system, not the norm of five, and, even then, those men were given less than 100 extra dollars. Other clubs like Lake Erie, Reading, & Sons of the Ocean relied on rich patrons and their donations for financial success and the ability to recruit quality players. Asking those people to fund a professional squad was simply a non-starter, as the general public still saw base ball as a game to play and enjoy – not something that could be a man’s chosen profession.

The argument of the five clubs broke down like this:

- Selecting who is and is not allowed to be directly paid is unfair to quality players that might be overlooked.
- Clubs that bring in enough money should be allowed to pay as many players as much as they want.
- Clubs that choose to do so should be allowed to guarantee a minimum salary to every player on their senior roster.
- Clubs should be allowed to give senior players monetary bonuses based on their performance during the season.
- Profitable clubs should simply be allowed to spend their money how they see fit.

While those arguments seemed logical on paper, enacting them would quickly produce a two-tiered NBBO, one which would occasionally see big clubs stocked with full-time, catered-to professional players take on small clubs full of amateurs still getting by on housing allowances for meager spaces and meal per diems.

The demands made for an incredibly tense four days at the Autumn Meetings. Any further discussion on the professionalism issue was tabled in an attempt to keep the peace, but one would have to imagine that it would be brought back in force at the Spring "Rules & Regulations" meetings of the Executive Committee.

The sport was about to have a very interesting winter.