

THEY BEAT THE BLACK SOX: THE 1919 CINCINNATI REDS

By Steve Gietschier

Edd Roush loathed spring training until long after he retired from the diamond. “Why should I go down there and fuss around,” he used to grumble. “Twist an ankle, or break a leg. I did my *own* spring training, hunting quail and rabbits . . .” Roush didn’t catch all of spring training until long after 1931, his last year as a player. In his sixties, he and his wife would leave the Indiana cold for Bradenton, then the Florida home of the Milwaukee Braves. Each morning Roush would don a uniform, work out a bit, and prepare for the annual old-timers’ game. But in the afternoons, he would escape to the press box, purposely sitting with his back to the field to show his disdain for modern baseball. And occasionally, when asked, he would talk about the 1919 World Series.

In the summer of 1912, Roush, then 19, signed a professional contract with Evansville of the Kitty League. The following year he hit .317 in 89 games and gained the attention of Charles Comiskey, who purchased his contract for \$3,000. Comiskey kept Roush in Chicago awhile before sending him to Lincoln in the Western League. Over the following winter, Roush signed with the Indianapolis Hoosiers of the upstart Federal League and helped them win the pennant. In 1915, the Federal League’s final season, the Hoosiers became the Newark Peppers and finished fifth. Players from the disbanded league were put on the market, and the Giants purchased three Peppers: Benny Kauff, Bill McKechnie, and Roush, and in July 1916, John McGraw traded McKechnie, Roush, and Christy Mathewson to the Reds. Roush would play eleven seasons in Cincinnati but win the pennant only once, in 1919.

Since 1902, the Reds had been owned by a partnership that originally included political boss George B. Cox, Max and Julius Fleischmann of the gin and yeast family, and water commissioner August “Garry” Herrmann, who was elected club president. Herrmann took center stage each year at the World Series and at the National League’s annual meetings at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Setting up shop in the hotel bar, Herrmann invariably saw his party start with one or two tables and grow until the entire room was appropriated. “See what the boys will have,” was his only instruction to the waiters. Herrmann drew no salary as chairman of the National Commission, but his \$12,000 annual expense account bought an awful lot of the beer, pickles, sausage, sauerkraut, potato salad, and Liederkrantz cheese that were his dietary staples. He often stocked these delicacies aboard a private railroad car when traveling, and he was particularly proud when the Waldorf added fried pigs’ feet to its breakfast menu at his request.

By 1916, Herrmann had run through seven managers in his search for a winner. In July club treasurer Lou Widrig gave Buck Herzog a vote of confidence, but a week later he was gone, and Mathewson was the new skipper. He pitched only one game for the Reds, earning his 373rd victory, but after evaluating his team’s talent, he installed Roush in center field. This move set up a bit of a controversy between the youngster and right fielder Earle “Greasy” Neale. Roush would call for fly balls, but Neale refused to do so. “What I finally did,” said Roush, fearing a collision, “was watch both him and the ball.” On the close ones, “I’d just cut behind him and let him take it.” After about three weeks, Neale gave in. “You can go get a ball better than I ever could. From now on,” he said, “I’ll holler.”

“Greasy” Neale from Parkersburg, West Virginia, was one of the first two-sport stars. He played football and basketball in high school—and coached both teams—and played minor league baseball in the summer. At West Virginia Wesleyan, he played football, and even after joining the Reds continued on the gridiron using assumed names. He was a successful college coach and a successful pro coach in the NFL. In fact, when the Chicago Cardinals played in the NFL title game in 1947, it was Neale’s Eagles that defeated them, 7-0. Neale is not in the Baseball Hall of Fame, but he is in the College Football Hall of Fame and the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The 1917 Reds finished fourth, twenty games behind the Giants. The highlight of that season was the double no-hitter when Reds pitcher Fred Toney matched zeroes with the Cubs’ Hippo Vaughn for nine innings. In the tenth, Reds shortstop Larry Kopf lined a single to right, went to third on an error, and scored the game’s only run on a scratch single by Jim Thorpe. With Kopf at short and Heinie Groh at third, Cincinnati had a pretty solid left side of its infield. Groh, who had also come from the Giants, was known for using a “bottle” bat and an open stance. He hit for both power and average. After the United States entered the Great War, Kopf left the team to take a war-related job, sales manager for a tire and rubber company, and Mathewson took a commission in the army’s chemical warfare division (along with Ty Cobb and Branch Rickey). The manager’s reins passed to Pat Moran, a former catcher who had managed the Phillies to the pennant in 1915. His Reds finished third in 1918, but then with the end of the war, the Cincinnati roster, like that of other teams, had to be re-created.

Hal Chase, the dazzling first baseman of uncertain integrity whom Mathewson had suspected of throwing games, was now a Giant. Roush, always reluctant to give up

hunting to begin a new season, and second baseman Lee Magee both refused to sign the contracts offered to them. Roush changed his mind, but Magee didn't. He was traded to Brooklyn, and Maurice Rath, a journeyman infielder, was drafted from Salt Lake City to replace him. To fill the hole at first, the Reds traded outfielder Tommy Griffith to Brooklyn for Jake Daubert. Kopf, repatriated from the war effort, and Groh completed a solid infield.

Mathewson had worked hard to build a pitching staff, and Moran reaped the benefits of his effort. During the 1917 season, Matty had acquired four pitchers who played key roles two years later. Twenty-four-year-old Walter "Dutch" Ruether was picked up on waivers from the Cubs, and another youngster, Jimmy Ring, was purchased from Buffalo. Rube Bressler, who had drifted to the minors after starting for the AL champion A's in 1914 and was Larry Kopf's brother-in-law, also joined the Reds. Horace "Hod" Eller, practitioner of the shine ball—he nicked the ball with a file kept on his belt—was drafted from Moline. Moran actually had too many good pitchers when this quartet was supplemented by three others: veterans Harry "Slim" Sallee and Ray Fisher and a young Cuban, Adolfo Luque. The manager decided to use five regular starters, spotting Luque here and there and sending Bressler, a good hitter, to the outfield to join Roush and Neale.

The seven straight wins that opened the Reds' 1919 season gave notice to league rivals that they would be contenders. On May 11, Eller no-hit the Cardinals, 6-0. Four days later he shut out the Dodgers for thirteen innings, gaining the win when Cincinnati scored ten runs in the top of the thirteenth. On June 1, the Reds were in second place, five games behind the favored Giants. New York was beginning a long home stand, but

Cincinnati cut into the lead by consistently beating the league's second-division clubs. By July 15, only percentage points separated the rivals.

The notion that the Reds had a chance kindled fan enthusiasm. Ticket sales increased dramatically, and the Cincinnati press scolded bleacherites for their excessively boisterous rooting. As they would in later decades, the Reds attracted a regional following in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Boosters in the hinterlands craved the latest scores: sales of newspapers jumped sharply, farmers inquired of scores from passers-by, and postings appeared in store windows and on village squares.

The Giants came to town on August 1, and the Reds took two of three games to seize first place. The climax of the race, however, came two weeks later when the contenders met in New York for three straight doubleheaders, a true test of pitching depth. Ruether and Sallee won the first twin bill, but the Giants rallied the next day. Former Red Fred Toney bested Ring, 2-1, and then Bressler, summoned from the outfield, lost, 9-3. In the series finale, the Reds swept New York again, Eller and Fisher winning. Cincinnati pressed its advantage, taking two of three in Brooklyn, three straight in Boston, and five in a row in Philadelphia. They clinched the pennant—Cincinnati's first in the NL—on September 16 by beating the Giants again, 4-3. Moran had managed his team to twenty-eight more wins than it had garnered the year before.

The Reds' euphoria was tempered by the specter of the White Sox, who had bounced back from a poor 1918 to win their second AL pennant in three years. The prewar lineup that had won the Series in 1917 was back intact and included a formidable pitching rotation led by twenty-nine game winner Eddie Cicotte, twenty-three-game winner Claude "Lefty" Williams, and rookie lefthander Dickie Kerr (later minor league

manager of Stan Musial). Leading Chicago were second baseman Eddie Collins and outfielder Joe Jackson. Chick Gandil played first, Swede Risberg shortstop and Buck Weaver third. The catcher was future Hall of Famer Ray Schalk. Jackson was joined in the outfield by Nemo Leibold and Oscar "Hap" Felsch. Going into the Series, the White Sox were heavily favored.

In a departure from prewar practice, the 1919 Series was set as a best-of-nine affair. It opened on a bright, sunny, and unusually warm October 1 in Cincinnati. Chicago manager Kid Gleason sent Cicotte to the mound, and Moran countered with Ruether. The White Sox failed to score in the first, and then Cicotte plunked Morrie Rath squarely in the back, a misplay later interpreted as a signal that the fix was indeed on. Cincinnati scored once in the first, but it was the fourth inning that has since been deemed controversial. After Roush flied out, left fielder Pat Duncan singled cleanly to right. Cicotte snagged Kopf's smash back to the mound and whirled to force Duncan at second, but Risberg's slow relay to Gandil failed to double the batter. Neale then lofted a little pop fly beyond short that Risberg did not hold. Catcher Ivy Wingo singled Kopf home, Ruether's triple scored two more, Rath's double scored Ruether, and Daubert's single drove in Rath. It was 6-0, and Gleason disgustedly yanked Cicotte. The final score was 9-1, and Cincinnati went wild, oblivious to the sportswriters' view that the game was one of the singular upsets in World Series history.

Game Two unfolded in much the same way, scoreless until the fourth when the Reds counted three times against Lefty Williams. He walked Rath and Groh, and then Roush's first hit of the Series drove in the first run. Duncan walked, and Kopf tripled both runners home. It was all Cincinnati needed as they won again, 4-1.

Rumors of a fix flew, and careful observers, including Mathewson, finally back from France, wondered about certain plays. Whatever the suspicions, as the Series shifted to Chicago, Dickie Kerr rallied the Sox with a masterful three-hitter. Cicotte pitched almost equally well the next day, but he made two errors in the same inning to give the Reds a 2-0 win and a 3-1 lead in games. After a day of rest, Cincinnati won again, Eller shutting out Williams, 5-0. Aided by two Hap Felsch miscues, only one of which went into the scorer's book as an error, the Reds again scored all of their runs in a single inning.

The teams returned to Cincinnati for Game Six, and again Kerr emerged victorious. Chicago eked out a 5-4 win in ten innings. Risberg made two errors and Felsch one, but in the tenth Gandil drove Weaver home with the deciding run. Cicotte further narrowed the gap the next day with a 4-1 win over Sallee, but then, in Game Eight, the roof fell in on the White Sox. Williams lost his third game in as many starts, lasting only one-third of an inning while giving up four runs. The Reds won, 10-5, with four Chicago tallies coming in the eighth inning, too little too late.

The Cincinnati team had played hard and earned its laurels. While the White Sox had made twelve errors, so, too, had the Reds. Perhaps their incredulity in the face of the accusations and revelations that came later can be explained by how difficult their triumph was to achieve. Chicago did win three games, after all, and only Greasy Neale among the Reds had an outstanding Series at the plate. Groh hit .172, Daubert .241, and Roush only .214. That these statistics had been compiled against opponents who might not have given their all must have been bitter to contemplate.

Discovery of the conspiracy took almost a year, and nearly another year passed before judgment came down. Had the Reds been asked, they might well have asserted the innocence of their foes. "Jackson and Gandil and Felsch and Cicotte played great ball," said Neale. "They didn't have to throw that Series. We had a pitching staff that would lick anybody." Heinie Groh concurred. "I didn't see anything that looked suspicious," he said. "But I think we'd have beaten them either way." The proud Roush was most insistent. "I don't care how good Chicago was. We were a very underrated ball club."