Soon after the heavily favored Chicago White Sox lost the first game of the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds, baseball writer Ring Lardner drafted a new lyric to a then-popular song:

“I’m forever blowing ball games/
Pretty games in the air/
I come from Chi, I hardly try/
Just go to bat And fade and die/
Fortune’s coming my way/
That’s why I don’t care/
I’m forever blowing ball games,/
And the gamblers treat us fair.”

A year later, an investigation revealed (though not with absolute certainty) that eight players, including the legendary “Shoeless” Joe Jackson had conspired with gamblers to “fix” the World Series. Team owners appointed an all-powerful commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who banned the “Black Sox” for life. With the help of Babe Ruth, the sport’s first transcendent player, baseball became America’s national pastime.

In “Betrayal,” Charles Fountain, who teaches journalism at Northeastern University, brings new information, new insights and marvelous story-telling skills to the oft-told tale of the Black Sox scandal. Fountain dates game-fixing schemes in baseball back to the Civil War and reveals that, in 1919, Ty Cobb and Tris Speaker colluded to throw a Tigers-Indians game and made money betting on Detroit. He indicates that team owners, including Charles Comiskey of the White Sox, adopted a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil approach because they feared that any revelations about gambling would besmirch the good name of the sport and suppress attendance.
Fountain reminds us that the case against the Black Sox was weak: Because there were no statutes against game-fixing, they were tried on vague charges of intent to injure business, better suited to civil courts. And he demonstrates that the appointment of Landis was the culmination of a rift between Comiskey and American League president Ban Johnson, “which grew into a hatred that might have consumed the game.”

Acknowledging that the evidence surrounding the Black Sox scandal has so many holes “and so many tantalizing ways to fill them,” Fountain also sets the record straight when he can. As Joe Jackson emerged from the courthouse, according to Fountain, he probably was not asked by a little boy to “Say it ain’t so, Joe,” the phrase “that has passed into the canon, overwhelming any debate over its right to be there.”

Ironically, Fountain concludes, the Black Sox scandal “made Joe Jackson a folk hero in a way, a quiet conclusion to his career never would have.” Many Americans seem to sympathize with Jackson: a gifted athlete whose virtues and flaws existed side by side, brought low by his own ignorance, impulsiveness and greed, who accepted the gamblers’ money but may well have decided to do his best during the World Series.

Since this cautionary tale seems to reveal the capriciousness of our system of justice and the judgment of history, Fountain adds, we should not be surprised that the debate about whether he should have been banished forever from baseball — and should be excluded from the Hall of Fame — continues.

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