

*Baseball Digest  
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**By James T. Farrell**

# Did Buck Weaver Get a Raw Deal?

**What do you think?**

**S**HORTLY AFTER NOON ON a day in January, 1956, a slender man of 64 years of age was walking along West 71st Street on the South Side of Chicago, on his way to see an income tax consultant. He began to crumble and clutched a picket fence. A passing motorist saw the stricken man, stopped his automobile and rushed to give what aid he could. But before he could be reached, the old man dropped to the sidewalk. A small crowd collected. The police were called. The body was taken to a hospital and there it was said that the man had died of natural causes.

The next day, the obituary page of *The New York Times* carried, over a seven paragraph story, the following head:

**Buck Weaver of 1919 'Black Sox' Dead;  
3rd Baseman One of 8 Barred  
from Game**

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## *About the Author*

**JAMES T. FARRELL** was a baseball fan — and a White Sox fan — long before his *Studs Lonigan*, now an American classic, propelled him to the forefront of American literature a quarter of a century ago.

Born near Comiskey Park, Farrell was starring for the St. Cyril's High School nine when Buck Weaver was starring for the Sox.

In *Studs Lonigan*, the *Face of Time* and the many other novels and short stories that have won him international renown, Farrell's one dominant characteristic has been his compassionate recording of real people, their frustrations, their convictions, their bewilderment.

In this, the first of two articles he has written for *Baseball Digest*, he has welded this unusual chronicling ability with his intense fandom.

Currently, Farrell is preparing a book, *Baseball Diary*, to be published by A. S. Barnes and Co. This article will be reprinted in it.

For years, Buck Weaver had been a baseball legend. Now and then, I would ask a baseball fan:

"Do you remember Buck Weaver?"

Generally, I would be answered:

"Do I remember Buck Weaver? He was one of the greatest third basemen who ever lived. He got a raw deal."

Fans in American League towns, and especially in Chicago where he played with the White Sox from 1912 to 1920, thought of him with sympathy and affection. As is well known, Weaver was one of the eight White Sox players suspended by the late Charles A. Comiskey, White Sox owner, late in the 1920 season on the grounds that they had allegedly thrown the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds.

The evidence against Weaver has always been vague and unclear. It was charged that he had been approached by Eddie Cicotte, pitcher, and one of the eight "Black Sox," and asked to participate in the Series fix. Also, it was alleged that he had been present when the conspiracy was discussed by the involved players, and, hence, he knew of the plot but did not talk.

Since Weaver's death, Chick Gandil, White Sox first baseman in the 1919 Series, granted an interview in which he declared that Weaver attended a meeting of the guilty players. Gandil further asserted that Weaver wanted to collect the money from the gamblers immediately. But

Weaver is dead now and cannot speak any more.

There were also other rumors and stories. One is that Buck refused to take a lie detector test. Another is that Weaver, after the 1919 Series, is supposed to have gone hunting with a teammate of previous years. Buck seemed troubled and not at all himself. Finally, he is rumored to have broken down and told the story of the "fix" but, also, to have insisted that he had done nothing himself to throw the games.

If this story is true, then Buck had what is termed "guilty knowledge." But his distress while hunting is easily understandable. His knowledge, then, could only have left him in a moral quandary, faced with the risk of being a squealer, and possibly, a goat. For had he told on his teammates, he could not have been certain that he would have been believed.

During Buck's playing days, it seems that there was considerable talk of thrown games among players and in baseball circles. In *McGraw of the Giants*, Frank Graham writes that Hal Chase's manager in Cincinnati, Christy Mathewson, charged Chase with not having given his best efforts to the club in 1918. Graham declares that Mathewson meant throwing games.

Chase was tried, but Mathewson was in France, and ignored cables requesting a deposition. The testimony of other players was inconclusive, and Chase was exonerated.

But there are other stories about the Mathewson-Chase incident which, to my mind, have not been printed. Mathewson is reported to have been advised by a baseball writer that if charges of crookedness were made against Chase and not proven, Chase could sue and collect heavy damages.

For this reason, it is believed that Chase was exonerated. In 1919, Chase was first baseman for John McGraw's New York Giants, and Mathewson, returned from France, signed up as a coach. Frank Graham comments on this strange coincidence: "Chase grinned inscrutably when he heard" that Mathewson was to be a coach. Toward the end of the 1919 season, Chase dropped away from the Giants. So did Heinie Zimmerman, the third baseman. When the Black Sox scandal broke, Chase never denied allegations of crookedness made against him, but Heinie Zimmerman did. At all events, both players were let out of baseball in such a manner that they could not sue. And Mathewson did not press the charges against Hal Chase to the point where he was out on a limb.

Buck Weaver knew only baseball. The code by which he grew up cast scorn and opprobrium on a squealer. He must have heard tales and rumors of other thrown games prior to 1919. These, if there was such — as seems to have been the case — were not reported. What should a player like Weaver have done? And had he told of the "fix," could he have felt safe in his own career? There could have



"How did the Orioles do today?"

been the word of seven against one.

With Buck dead after having suffered for years because of his disbarment from organized baseball, I most certainly do not want to accuse him. But there was a cloud over him and the evidence suggests that he probably knew. Withal, his failure to report this "guilty knowledge" is more than understandable. And he well could not have known what to do.

Up to his death, Weaver consistently maintained his innocence. He and the other players were indicted by a Cook County Grand Jury in the early Twenties. As I have suggested, the legal evidence against Buck was so insubstantial that the Judge\* wanted to dismiss the indictment against him. Lawyers for the other indicted players

\* Judge Hugo Friend.

feared that if this were done, the defense of their clients would be damaged. Weaver agreed, therefore, to stand trial. The Judge consented to this, but also declared that, were Weaver to be found guilty by the jury, he would overrule the verdict. All of the defendants were acquitted. Weaver periodically applied for reinstatement in organized baseball, but his efforts all were in vain. Two baseball Commissioners, the late Judge Kenesaw Landis and Governor Happy Chandler, rejected his appeals for the clearing of his name and his reinstatement in organized baseball. He had wanted to do this before he died. Many fans supported him in this effort.

One Chicago sports writer remarked to me while Buck was still living:

"The two players I have sympathy for are Weaver and Joe Jackson. They were brought up in an environment where you were not supposed to squeal. What could they have done? Jackson once talked to me about it. He said: 'I was just a dope!' And Weaver — I'd like to see him clear himself. If baseball would clear him, it wouldn't hurt baseball."

And an old-time ball player and teammate of Buck's remarked:

"I'm in Buck's corner."

In the fall of 1954, I went to Chicago to interview Buck Weaver and to get him to tell his story in his own words. After some difficulty, I located him through his old and

loyal friend, Marty Blecker, a tavern keeper on the South Side of Chicago who is a familiar and popular figure among Chicago's baseball old-timers. Buck came to see me in my room at the Morrison Hotel.

He was a thin, pale, gray man in his sixties. He dressed on the sporty side, and there were small red blotches on his face. He smiled easily and readily. During his playing days, he was always smiling and kidding on the field. Buck's smile as well as his great playing ability made him one of the most popular White Sox players of his time at Comiskey Park.

In answer to the contention that he should have talked about the alleged conspiracy, he told me:

"Landis wanted me to tell him something that I didn't know. I can't accuse you and it comes back on you and I am . . . a goof. That makes sense to me. I didn't have any evidence."

He went on to say:

"All I did in that Series was fielded 1,000 and I hit something like .336. (EDITOR'S NOTE: *He hit .334, with five of his 11 hits in 34 times at bat being for extra bases, one triple and four doubles.*) I'd have hit .600 if I had any luck. There wasn't a game that they didn't spear one or two line drives. But that's the breaks. In the court session, it lasted a month . . . all I can say is the only thing we got left in the world is our judges and our jurors. I was acquitted in court."

He spoke of his visits to the office of the late Judge Landis.

"He was a funny man. I'd come in. He'd say, 'Sit down, sit down!' He had that big box on his desk full of tobacco. He knew I chewed tobacco, too. He'd give me a chew of tobacco. I appealed I don't know how many times, maybe a half a dozen times. But he never did tell me to my face. He said he'd send me a letter."

According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Landis, in his decision rejecting Weaver's appeal, wrote:

"I regret that it was not possible for me to arrive at any other conclusion than that set forth in the previous decision that your own admissions and actions in the circumstances forbid your reinstatement.

"You testify that preceding the World Series, Cicotte, your team's leading pitcher that season, asked you if you wanted 'to get in on something — fix the World Series,' and you replied: 'You are crazy; that can't be done.'"

When Weaver was disbarred, he had one more year to play on a three-year contract. He filed suit for breach of contract. The case was finally settled out of court.

"I sent a letter to Frick (present Commissioner Ford Frick). I says Mr. Comiskey settled for my 1921 contract. That shows that they're wrong and I'm right. But still they paid it and I can't do nothin' about it."

He was disappointed that he received no answer from Frick.

"I never threw a ball game in my life," he said with passion and a ring of sincerity. "All I knew was win. That's all I know."

And several times, he repeated: "I can't do nothin' about it."

Weaver believed that if he were to have had his name cleared, he might have become a scout, or else helped kids to learn the game. He prided himself on having discovered Nick Etten who played on one Yankee world's championship team. Following his disbarment, he played semipro ball with the Duffy Florals in Chicago and was rarely seen at social events where sports people gather. Almost every day, during the off-racing season, he went to a saloon near Sixty-third Street and Cottage Grove Avenue and in the back room he played pinochle with some cronies. He did not drink. He had no children of his own, but raised two children of relatives. In recent years, his wife was ailing and he took care of her and was usually home with her almost every evening. All he wanted from life was to support and care for Mrs. Weaver, see his cronies and clear his name. About the latter, he was pessimistic and at times, when he talked to me, bitterness came into his voice.

But about the game of baseball itself, he felt love, not bitterness. He talked of baseball enthusiastically and with a sharp and clear baseball intelligence. Baseball was a way of

life to him as well as a profession. He lived the game and thought of it on and off the field. And because of his feeling for the game, the mark against him hurt.

"A murderer," he said, "even serves his sentence and is let out. I got life."

Speaking of the game, he said:

"What are the qualifications you have got to have to be a ball player? You got to run. You got to throw. You got to hit. You got to field. You got to think. If you can't meet all of these qualifications you ain't a 100 per cent ball player."

He was not only a fans' player but he was also something of a ball player's player. And many who saw Weaver play between 1912 and 1920 would readily agree that he met all of these qualifications. In his last few years especially, he had developed into a highly polished big leaguer. Lean and of medium height, he almost invariably had the dirtiest uniform of any player on the team. When he broke in with the White Sox in 1912, he was an erratic short-stop. He would throw many balls away. Fans even spoke of his daily error and for a while, some of them nicknamed him "Error-a-Day Weaver." Buck said that he couldn't explain why this was so. Once he was shifted to third, he rarely made a wild throw. When he broke into the American League, he was a weak hitter. In his first year, he batted .224 in 147 games. But when he became a switch hitter, his av-

erage picked up and in his season, 1920, he hit .333 in games.

"I couldn't hit 'em high couldn't hit 'em low. I could hit," he said, speaking of his early years in the American League.

During one off-season he was visiting Oscar Vitt, the Detroit Tigers third baseman, at the latter's camp in California. Buck was chopping wood. He noticed that when chopped left-handed, he always the groove in the wood: when swung the axe right-handed, missed the groove. This led to decision to bat left-handed.

"But I didn't start swinging right away," Buck explained. "First I just stood up at the plate like this." He illustrated his stance with his feet close together. "I let them pitch me. Then, I practiced taking a step forward like this. Then I practiced my swing like this. I didn't try to hit the ball. I just wanted to get my swing and my confidence. Then, I practiced getting away from the runnin'. I got my confidence that way. And then I knew I could hit anything. I'd have the ball always comin' in to me. If a left-handed pitcher was pitching, I'd bat right-handed where my power was. The ball would still be comin' in to me. All of them pitches would be comin' in."

Fans may still remember how Buck often played a shorter third base than most of his contemporaries.

"I didn't know nothin' about th

National League. I didn't play in it. But I knew the American League. You take this situation. There's a man on first. There's a man on second. There's a man on third. I'm playing third, right on the line with the base. I know the speed of each of them runners. I know how fast the batter can run. I know the speed of the ball. So I get the ball. I know what to do just like that. If I played back a few feet, I'd be licked on a ~~dragging~~ bunt. And I could get the hard ones, too, where I played."

Buck stood up and showed me how he could pick up a bunt with both hands and without bending his knees.

Following his death, the *Associated Press* reported comments of Ty Cobb on Weaver as a third baseman. Calling him "the greatest third baseman I ever saw," Cobb also remarked:

"Weaver was one third baseman I didn't try to bunt against. I was supposed to be a fast man getting to first base but I knew better than to lay one down in Weaver's direction. There was no chance of beating out a bunt to him. He'd throw you out every time.

"Buck just wasn't the type to be in a crooked deal like that and certainly there wasn't anything wrong with the way he played in the 1919 Series."

"One year," Buck also said in our interview, "a baseball writer asked me why I played shortstop in 15

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feet closer than he thought I ought to. I explained it to him this way. 'I'll play where I stand. You play 15 feet behind me. I won't make more than one or two errors than you make. And I'll have a chance to get runners out. You see it in the assists.'"

Speaking of players of the past and the present, he asked:

"Who's a shortstop today?"

"Phil Rizzuto was."

"I'll give you that. But in our day, who was the shortstop for the Red Sox? Everett Scott. And who did the Yankees have? Roger Peckinpaugh. And the Tigers had Donie Bush. Who did Cleveland have? Ray Chapman. Who did the Athletics have? Jack Barry. Do you have shortstops like that now?"

He spoke of the salaries today as compared with salaries in his day. Perhaps there was a touch of bitterness here. He began with the White Sox for \$1,800 and in 1920, his salary was \$7,200.

He recalled some of his rival stars. "I was playing in a game in St. Louis in 1917. George Sisler hit one

along the ground. I run in and scoop it up. But I don't throw this ball. I hold it. There were ten perforations in it, one, two, three, four, ten perforations. I ran to the umpire and said he had better look at Sisler's bat. He had driven nails in it and filed them down."

And Ty Cobb.

"That was a fellow, that Cobb. And they say he was a dirty player. That base line belongs to the runner. Take Baker. He was a little bit slow. A man is coming in. He jumps high for the ball and comes down on that line and it belongs to the runner. So what happens? He gets spiked. When I went up for one and came down, I spread my legs and I didn't get spiked. To me Cobb was not dirty.

"And I used to hit the ball with nothin' and two on me. Some batters need three strikes to hit. I could hit with one. Here's why I do it. When the pitcher has nothing and two on you, you know he's going to waste one. The infielders know it. So what do they do? They relax. So I have nothin' and two on me and the infielders are relaxed. They throw it outside or inside, but what difference does it make? I'd hit it and be off and the infielders were relaxed. They'd ask me how come I done a thing like that. I'd say, 'I don't know why I done it. I must have been a goof.'"

Weaver was born in Pennsylvania in 1890. His father was a laborer in the iron works. Back in 1909, he

was playing semipro ball. A team of barnstorming major leaguers, managed by Charlie Dooin, then manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, played against Buck's team. And a scout named Kennedy came to watch the games.

"I didn't know nothin' from nothin'. Kennedy, the scout from Philadelphia, saw me and he asked me to sign a contract for \$125 a month. *\$125 a month!* Why I never seen that much money."

During the winter, Kennedy shifted from Philadelphia to Cleveland and hence Weaver signed a Cleveland contract. But he heard nothing about his contract and the 1910 season opened. Two or three weeks went by and he had not received word. He wrote a letter to the National Commission and was mailed a check for \$62.50.

"Boy was that money!"

He was sent to play at Northampton, Mass. Suddenly he discovered that when a batted ball was two feet away from him, he would lose sight of it. He told his manager about this, and he was never able to understand how this happened to him. His manager told him he was through. He thought that he was through. He was released and went to Philadelphia to see Dooin. He saw a game on a Saturday afternoon, the first big league game he ever saw.

"When I seen them fellows hit and run, I said, 'Hell, I can't play.'"

He spoke with Dooin and then



was offered a contract to play with Park, Pa., for \$175 a month. He played in the outfield and ran in on line drives. The fans hollered for him to be put in the infield. Doo-in had the choice of taking Weaver or a pitcher and he passed up Buck. But Ted Sullivan, White Sox scout, bought Weaver for \$750. In 1911, he was sent to play with San Francisco in the Pacific Coast League.

"I didn't get nowhere in spring practice. They had Oscar Vitt playing third base. I'm a goof. I didn't know nothin' from nothin'. Oscar was sick. He would field a few balls and call it a day. So I practiced. I didn't know they considered Vitt the best third baseman in the league. I said to myself, 'Brother, I can take your job.'

"I sat on the bench for about three weeks. One day the center fielder got hurt. The manager says to me, 'Georgie, can you play the outfield?' I told him, 'I can play any place.'

"A ball was hit just over the infield. I run. I keep running and make the catch right here off the ground." Buck stood up and illustrated. "And then I come to bat and swing. The ball sails and hits the fence. I make a two-base hit. The next time I bat, I hit the fence again. See, I got the breaks. But after that, I told myself, 'Georgie, my boy, now you're in.'"

He reported to the White Sox at Waco the next spring.

"When I joined the Sox, I didn't

know Kid Gleason from the man in the moon. That's how green I was."

Gleason hit grounders to him. He missed one and chased it and called to Gleason to hit them harder. Gleason slammed the ball at him and every time he missed, he called for Gleason to hit the grounders still harder. In later years, he and Gleason laughed over this incident.

He spoke warmly and admiringly of Gleason as a man who was for the ball players. He remembered other players of his day with affection and friendliness.

"We had a kid on our team," he also said, "a third baseman named Fred McMullin. He comes to me one day and says to me, 'Buck, can't you get sick for a couple of days?' He was dying to get into a ball game. So I made myself indisposed for a couple of days to let him play. Then I went back in there myself."

At the end of a long interview, he flashed at me his own winning smile. But there was something wounded and sad in Buck's smile. Buck wanted his reinstatement but he felt that nothing could be done about it.

When we rode down in the hotel elevator, I suggested seeing him again for dinner, but he refused, saying that he always spent the evening with his wife.

"You know," he added, "she was a good hair pin."

Ironically, there was an Old-Timers' dinner held in Chicago on

the evening of that same day when Weaver died in the street.

Two of his old White Sox teammates, Red Faber and Ray Schalk, were present. According to David Condon, Chicago sports writer, both were visibly shaken. Faber said:

"I played baseball with Weaver, and I played cards with him, and I found him as honest as could be. No one can ever be certain about 1919, I guess. Weaver was a wonderful competitor, a fellow who played baseball because he loved it. Buck Weaver and Lena Blackburne were two I knew who never wanted to leave the field, not even in practice."

And Ray Schalk, who generally refuses to talk about the thrown World Series, remarked, as he often has done on other occasions:

"That incident caused Weaver the tortures of hell."

And an old-time baseball fan, who, like myself, used to see Buck play when we were boys, wrote me a few days later:

"Last Thursday evening on my way home from work I stopped at 79th Street and Emerald Avenue at the undertaker's chapel where Buck Weaver was laid out. It was about 6:00 P.M. No one was there at the time except the undertaker's assistant. Though Buck was not a Catholic and the chapel is used mostly by non-Catholics, nevertheless they had kneelers by the coffin. I knelt down and said a few prayers for him. Contrary to some places it did not seem cold to me. He looked,

outside of thinning gray hair and that is all, like he could get right up and don a uniform and play third base for the Sox again. I don't think he was more than five pounds heavier than when he was playing ball. It sure was a shame to see him go from this world without getting his name cleared."

Many baseball fans had similar feelings when he passed away.

Like many others who saw him spear hot ones at third with graceful ease, who cheered and watched him, this writer also considers himself as one of those who was in Buck Weaver's corner. And now, on reflection, I have a hunch that when Buck said to me, "Landis wanted me to tell him something that I didn't know. I can't accuse you and it comes back on you and I am . . . a goof. That makes sense to me. I didn't have any evidence," he was telling his real story. I suspect that he did not know what to do. And because of a moral dilemma he suffered a life-long torment. Could he have accused? And had he, would he have been a "goof"?

Now, it is all over and long ago. But Buck Weaver was a great ball player and very likeable. He was caught in a net of circumstances as are many characters in tragic novels. For to him, baseball was a way of life, and his disbarment was a supreme defeat.

"Those fellows suffered hell," Ray Schalk often says.

Buck did.