

LEISURE & ARTS

Amnesty for Black Sox Third Baseman?

By FREDERICK C. KLEIN

Chicago

"The sense of life's unfairness falls heavier on some people than on others, and George "Buck" Weaver felt its burden particularly. Banned from baseball by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis in 1921 as part of the "Black Sox" scandal, he declared his innocence and pleaded his case for reinstatement to all who asked, and to some who didn't.

The third baseman's quest did not end with the passing of the years in which he might have played the game. In 1954, at age 64, he bemoaned his fate to the writer James T. Farrell. "A murderer even serves his sentence and is let out," he said. "I got life."

In fact, Weaver got more than life; today, almost 36 years after his death in

He adds: "It's said that justice delayed is justice denied, and that's true. But I think that, in Buck's case, the saying 'better late than never' also applies."

In this he is supported by Elliot Asinof, whose book "Eight Men Out," later the basis for the movie of the same name, is the best-known historical treatment of the Black Sox affair. Mr. Asinof says he believes that Weaver was "definitely, absolutely" not part of the conspiracy to fix the Series, and that his good name should be restored.

"Buck was 29 years old at the time, but he really was a sort of eternal child—a man who cared very much about playing ball and very little about money. Everyone who knew him said he was the last guy who'd be involved in a fix," Mr. Asinof says. "The other seven players—including 'Shoelless' Joe Jackson—were greedy and deserved pretty much what they got. But Weaver was a victim all the way."

The tie to the Black Sox plot of the man Ty Cobb called "the greatest third baseman I ever saw" was his alleged attendance at meetings where the fix was discussed, but the Hegeman petition notes that the player's name arose only once in the criminal trial in which the eight were acquitted (Landis banned them all anyway). Bill Burns, a gambler who helped instigate the conspiracy, testified that Weaver and the others attended a meeting in a Chicago hotel, but his account was rebutted by witnesses who said the White Sox were holding a public practice at the time of the supposed confab.

Landis later told a newspaper interviewer that, at a meeting in his office after he'd rendered his decision, Weaver confessed he'd attended two sessions with the fixers. Mr. Hegeman replies that 1) there's no record of what was said at any private meetings between Weaver and Landis; 2) Landis might have invented the story to justify his intransigence; and 3) Weaver might have said what he thought Landis wanted to hear in hopes he'd be forgiven.

Indeed, with lawyerly agility, Mr. Hegeman further argues that even if Weaver had got wind of a plot, he shouldn't have been held culpable. "History tells us things about the fix that weren't apparent then," he says. "By all accounts, it wasn't a well-planned effort but a botched deal in which the gamblers didn't always know what the

ballplayers were doing, and the players had doubts about one another. To say anyone 'knew' anything would be an overstatement. It was like a Three Stooges movie.

"There's also the question of who Weaver could have gone to if he'd had anything to report," Mr. Hegeman continues. "Baseball had no commissioner then, and Charles Comiskey, who owned the White Sox, was disliked by his players and rarely available to them. After the Series, Joe Jackson wrote Comiskey offering to tell how the games had been played. Comiskey never answered him. He probably suspected what was coming, and didn't want to hear it."

Baseball has responded negatively to Mr. Hegeman's plea; Stephen Greenberg, the Major Leagues' deputy commissioner, wrote in a letter of Dec. 12 that he and Mr. Vincent believe that "matters such as this are best left to historical analysis and debate" and that no present-day hearing could re-create past events in sufficient depth and detail to permit the overturning of past decisions.

Nonsense, retorted Mr. Hegeman, et al., albeit more politely. Didn't Mr. Vincent just overturn the ruling of a previous commissioner (Ford Frick) in removing the 30-year-old asterisk from Roger Maris's single-season home-run record? And wouldn't that position preclude the present or a future commissioner from rehearing *les affaires* Pete Rose or George Steinbrenner?

So there the matter rests for now, but Mr. Hegeman professes to be confident of ultimate victory. "I am a lifelong White Sox fan, so I'm accustomed to persevering in the face of long odds," says he. "And I'm a lawyer, so I know how to bother people."



On Sports

Black Sox scandal

1956, he remains on baseball's blacklist, along with the seven Chicago White Sox teammates with whom he was lumped for the plot to fix the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds.

But now comes lawyer Louis Hegeman, Esq., with a petition calling for the current baseball commissioner, Fay Vincent, to consider returning Buck Weaver to the official good graces of the National Pastime. He is acting on behalf of the Chicago Lincoln American Inn of Court, a group of lawyers and jurists who meet periodically to discuss issues of import to their profession, and, one supposes, exchange business cards.

Mr. Hegeman, of the Chicago firm of Gould & Ratner, insists that, in pressing the Weaver matter at this late date, he and his conferees are not engaging in historical revisionism. "Buck Weaver never was guilty in the sense the other seven players were," he says. "It never was alleged that he took money from gamblers, or played less than his best during a Series in which he batted .324 and fielded flawlessly. The most he can be charged with is that he knew about the fix and failed to report it. But there's reason to doubt even that."

THIS MATERIAL IS SUBJECT
TO THE UNITED STATES
COPYRIGHT LAW; FURTHER
REPRODUCTION IN VIOLATION
OF THAT LAW IS PROHIBITED