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THE ORIGINAL CURSE

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New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Deveney, Sean.
The Original Curse: Did the Cubs throw the 1918 World Series to Babe Ruth's Red Sox and incite the Black Sox Scandal? / Sean Deveney.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-07-162997-3 (alk. paper)
1. Chicago Cubs (Baseball team)—History. 2. World Series (Baseball) (1918). 3. Baseball—Corrupt practices—United States—History. I. Title.
GV877.5. D48 2009
796.357'640977311—dc22 2009014090

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 DOC/DOC 0 9

ISBN 978-0-07-162997-3
MHID 0-07-162997-1

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For Robbie, who shaped and inspired my ideas for this book;
for Mom and Dad, who read eagerly and pushed me along;
and for Brice, who always kept the volume on the television low
when I was working

FOREWORD

Ken Rosenthal

I have known Sean Deveney for the better part of a decade, and I've always known him to be a thorough journalist and an entertaining storyteller. Of course, I've gotten accustomed to seeing that from Deveney in 2,000- or 3,000-word magazine features. Now he's written a book, and even in this much longer format my opinion hasn't changed. He's both thorough and entertaining.

In *The Original Curse*, Deveney artfully attacks one of baseball's most widely accepted notions—that the sport's gambling problem in the early part of the 20th century was restricted to the 1919 Black Sox, who conspired to fix the World Series.

Baseball, by banning eight members of the Black Sox, including Shoeless Joe Jackson, attempted to portray gambling as an isolated problem. History has generally accepted that view. Deveney does not, challenging that preconception with the drive and curiosity of a classic whistle-blower. The job of a great writer is to provoke thought, and here Deveney has created a veritable riot for the imagination.

Gambling in baseball was rampant in the early part of the 20th century, and the pages that follow make a convincing argument that the 1918 World Series also was fixed—maybe not the entire Series, but at least part of it. Whether Deveney's conclusion is accurate we will never know, because the game did such a thorough job of covering up its gambling problem. This notion of a cover-up should ring true for those who follow baseball now, because baseball's gambling culture

in that era was not unlike the steroid culture that infiltrated the sport eight decades later. Clandestine. Widespread. A charade worthy of deep and intense investigation.

The Red Sox met the Cubs in the 1918 Series, back when they were considered merely baseball teams, not the two most famously cursed voodoo dolls of sports. History shows that the Sox won the series, four games to two. But look closer. After Game 3, the players learned their share of the Series receipts—usually around $3,700 for the winners—would be about $1,200.

That fact alone would make a fix understandable, if not quite forgivable. But, by detailing the social and economic forces triggered by World War I, *The Original Curse* goes further and sympathetically examines the social forces that explain the players' motivations. Contrast that with today's scandalized players, the steroid users. They are not viewed sympathetically but were motivated by outside forces as well. Owners and players used their own rationales in reacting slowly to the excesses of the era. Baseball needed to recover from the players' strike of 1994–95. The players wanted to capitalize fully on that recovery and on their growing celebrity in an entertainment-driven society.

By the end of this book—after the players' haunting stories are detailed and fresh insight is given into an age marked by rampant inflation, domestic terrorism, and, above all, fear of Germans—the corruption of the 1918 World Series seems not only plausible but also probable. Deveney does not pretend to offer certainty. He is, after all, writing about events that took place 91 years ago. While he vividly portrays players such as the Cubs' shortstop prodigy Charley Hollocher and their future Hall of Fame pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander, Deveney obviously did not follow the Cubs and Red Sox in 1918 the way authors track professional sports franchises today.

But, like any good journalist, he challenges conventional wisdom, especially that stemming from the self-righteous judgment of Kenesaw Mountain Landis, baseball's first-ever commissioner. Landis banned the Black Sox's eight alleged fixers, tainting them forever, though they were acquitted by a grand jury. At the time, baseball wanted the public to believe that Landis's ruling was the final say on the matter, that the sport had addressed the threat of gambling once and for all. Sound familiar? In 2007, baseball issued a report by former senator George Mitchell detailing the excesses

of the Steroid Era. The report, combined with the toughest steroid testing in professional sports, was intended to be the final word on the issue of performance-enhancing drugs (PED) in baseball. But check the headlines. Neither the report nor the testing has achieved its desired effect.

As prevalent as steroids were in the baseball culture from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, gambling might have been just as ubiquitous in 1918; gamblers shadowed players as diligently as drug pushers did decades later. Not every player back then gambled. Not every player today uses performance-enhancing drugs. But enough engaged in illicit activity to shape the perceptions of their respective eras.

The beauty of *The Original Curse* is the empathy displayed toward players who are effectively being accused of dishonesty. Few men are born cheaters, but many find temptation difficult to resist, particularly when desperate. If you were outfielder Max Flack, say, with a young wife and a newborn son, or Phil Douglas, with money problems that went hand in hand with a drinking problem, surely you would have been tempted to accept gambling money. And surely anyone facing the prospect of a tour in World War I's trenches also would have been tempted.

The cheaters of today—the wealthier ones anyway—are less forgivable. Alex Rodriguez said he used steroids because he felt pressure to justify a new $252 million contract. Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens, if the allegations against them are true, seemingly wanted only to achieve a higher level of immortality. Such rationales elicit little sympathy from disgusted fans. Players with more to lose, though, warrant a different view. When two pitchers, one a PED user, one not, vie to be the 5th starter or 12th man on the staff, the nonuser no doubt experiences tremendous pressure to cheat, knowing his career otherwise might be in jeopardy. The same goes for two shortstops or two outfielders of similar ability—any players in competition, really.

Context is critical, and Deveney provides just the right perspective. *The Original Curse* is not just about baseball. It is a sweeping portrait of America at war in 1918, one that examines baseball's place in that unsettled society. The revelation of this book is not simply what might have happened but why. In the end, the proper question is not "How could a player from that era fix the World Series?" It's "How could he not?"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

So that readers can truly see things from the perspective of the players, officials, and citizens of 1918, many of the chapters that follow begin with words and thoughts attributed to the various characters involved. Though the bulk of the book is strictly historical, these opening interludes are, of course, not verifiable. They are based on the facts of the actual life histories of the characters, though, and in many cases their language and attitudes are borrowed directly from newspaper, magazine, and other accounts. The reader simply seeking entertainment may take the interludes on their face. The reader interested in the historical background and the research on which these interludes are based, however, is encouraged to find that information in the end notes.

Special thanks to Peter Alter of the Chicago History Museum and the staff of the research library at the Baseball Hall of Fame.

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ONE

Fixes and Curses: Aboard a Train with the White Sox

Summer 1919

Picture it. A bunch of ballplayers, lounging in a Pullman car in the summer of 1919, speeding past Midwestern greenery, jackets unbuttoned, sleeves rolled, games of poker and whist in high pitch. These are members of the White Sox, and they're talking, increasingly hushed, squint-eyed, smiling slyly, as if not quite sure about the nature of the conversation, not sure if this is for real. Because if this is serious, it's the beginning of something very big. A conspiracy. A conspiracy to throw—take a dive, lose intentionally—the biggest event of the season, the game's crown jewel: the World Series.

Who would have to be involved? How much money could be made? And, most important, could an entire World Series really be fixed?

These players were not dumb. Game-fixing talk on team trains was nothing new. Sometimes it was idle chatter. Sometimes not. Gambling and baseball were already intricately linked, the sport being one of the nation's most popular outlets for both casual and serious bettors. Small-timers could get in on widely circulated pools for dimes and quarters, bets could be made easily in the stands of any ballpark—where gamblers would haggle and shout like traders in a Casablanca market—and for those who preferred higher stakes, there were backroom bookies who made their livings out of pool halls and cigar stores.

For the public, that's where the association between gambling and baseball ended. Players played. Gamblers gambled. Ne'er the twain did meet.

This was what the game's overlords wanted the public to think. In truth, ballplayers were never far from gamblers, but the perception of the game as pure and honest was well crafted and managed. In 1914, American League president Ban Johnson wrote an article called "The Greatest Game in the World" that typified this see-no-evil posture. "There is no place in baseball for the gambler; no room in the ball park for his evil presence," Johnson wrote. "The game, notwithstanding loose occasional charges, stands solely and honestly on its merits. In the heat of an exciting race for the pennant, with clockwork organizations in rivalry, imagination sometimes runs riot and assertions are made, under stress of excitement, that games are not played on the level. As a matter of fact, to fix a ball game, that is, to arrange in advance a scheme by which one team would be sure to win, would be harder than drawing water out of an empty well."[1]

This was tripe. Gamblers were all over baseball. They knew players intimately, and fixing a game was not difficult. While the 1919 White Sox held hushed conversations about the World Series, it may have been that members of the New York Giants were simultaneously conspiring to throw the entire *season* to the Cincinnati Reds.[2] Approach a player of the era with a notion of fixing a game or two, and you'd likely get a range of reactions. Some reveled in it, because the extra money was handy and over a 154-game season no one would notice if a few games were not played on the level. Other players might pucker their lips in disapproval and say, "No, thanks." Some might even tell the team's manager about their crooked teammates. Still others might answer a fix proposal with a punch to the jaw. Whichever reaction came forth, though, there would be no long-term consequences—few players squealed on teammates, and when they did, their complaints were ignored. Gambling was simply tolerated, and gamblers were just part of the bawdy off-field scenery that accompanied baseball teams, like high-stakes card games, hotel bars, and women who did not answer to "Mrs."

In a 1956 *Sports Illustrated* article, Chick Gandil—one of those members of the '19 White Sox—remembered the attitude toward gamblers at the time: "Where a baseball player would run a mile these days to avoid a gambler, we mixed freely. Players often bet. After

the games, they would sit in lobbies and bars with gamblers, gabbing away. Most of the gamblers we knew were honorable Joes who would never think of fixing a game. They were happy just to be booking and betting."[3] Another player of that era, catcher Eddie Ainsmith, later told an interviewer, "Everybody bet in those days, because it was a way of making up for the little we were paid."[4]

So it wasn't unusual for the White Sox to be talking this way, about taking a fall for a cut of the gambling loot. Not just any loot—World Series loot. The 1919 White Sox were the best team in baseball, spending most of the season in first place. As likely American League champions, their spot in the World Series was almost assured. No matter who won the National League pennant, the White Sox would be favored to win the championship. Even modest bets made on the NL underdog would yield big payoffs. Which was why the White Sox's discussion of throwing that Series was so intriguing. It had the potential to be very big indeed.

Now picture this: While considering the World Series fix, one of the White Sox says, "Hey, why not? The Cubs did it last year."

Whoa.

We know what happened to the '19 White Sox. They did throw that year's World Series, to the Reds. A year later, in 1920, they got caught and forever became known as the Black Sox. Eight members of the team were indicted in a Chicago court, acquitted by a sympathetic jury, but then famously banned from baseball for life by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis despite the acquittal. Their story was retold in a popular book and movie, *Eight Men Out*, though the facts of the Black Sox case are still debated. The trial was poorly run, documents disappeared, and interference from baseball officials and gamblers left the truth forever obscured. What cannot be debated is that the Black Sox attempted the loosest, clumsiest, and most audacious gambling fix in American sports history. What also cannot be debated is that they were hardly the first, or the last, crooked players of their era. They're just the ones that history remembers best.

The conversation on the train, though, indicates that members of the Black Sox had heard rumors about another fix before plotting their own. At least that's how pitcher Eddie Cicotte remembered it. Cicotte was one of the chief conspirators in the Black Sox plan and the first to confess. He mentioned rumors about the Cubs matter-of-factly in a deposition, saying: "The way it started, we were going east

on the train. The ballplayers were talking about somebody trying to fix the National League ball players or something like that in the World's Series of 1918. Well anyway there was some talk about them offering $10,000 or something to throw the Cubs in the Boston Series. There was talk that somebody offered this player $10,000 or anyway the bunch of players were offered $10,000. This was on the train going over. Somebody made a crack about getting money, if we got into the Series."

This should have perked up the ears of investigators. But, though the investigation originally promised to tackle widespread aspects of baseball gambling, political struggles among the game's leaders (chiefly, White Sox owner Charles Comiskey and Ban Johnson) tightened the focus on the Black Sox. Cicotte's Cubs rumor—as well as significant other rumors about the Cubs—was discarded, and only the 1919 World Series fix was bared by the legal system. Still, if Cicotte is to be believed, there's reason to wonder whether, in putting together their series-fixing scheme, the 1919 Black Sox had immediate inspiration from their Cubs friends on the North Side, who had lost a chaotic 1918 World Series in six games to the American League's Red Sox.

There's virtually no chance that the Black Sox were the first team to play a crooked World Series. In the *SI* article, Gandil discusses the World Series proposal Boston gambler Sport Sullivan made to him in 1919. "I said to Sullivan it wouldn't work," Gandil said. "He answered, 'Don't be silly. It's been pulled before and it can be again.'"[5] But other than 1919, there's little hard evidence of fixed championship games. There is, however, a long list of World Series whose honesty remains dubious:

- As far back as 1903, when the Boston Americans (later the Red Sox) played the Pirates in the first World Series, catcher Lou Criger claimed he was offered $12,000 by gamblers to call bad pitches. Criger turned them down and caught the entire series.
- Ahead by a count of 3–1 (with one tie) over the Giants in the 1912 World Series, Red Sox manager Jake Stahl was ordered by owner Jimmy McAleer to start pitcher Buck O'Brien instead of ace Joe Wood, who had gone 34–5 and already had two wins in the series. Stahl and Red Sox players knew McAleer's motives—

he wanted a seventh game, because it would take place at Fenway Park, allowing McAleer to collect more gate-receipt money. Stahl begrudgingly started O'Brien, and the Red Sox lost. In the next game, Wood and his teammates probably laid down. Wood had an impossibly bad outing, allowing seven hits and six runs in the first inning, and Boston lost, 11–4. In *Red Sox Century*, Glenn Stout and Richard A. Johnson write, "It is not inconceivable that the Red Sox, already upset with management, threw the game in order to recoup their losses by laying money on the Giants in game seven at favorable odds. In the days that followed, Boston newspapers intimated precisely that."[6] The Red Sox did go on to win the series.

- When Sullivan told Gandil that the World Series had been fixed before, he may have been talking about the greatest upset in series history to date, the sweep of Connie Mack's mighty, 99-win Athletics by the 1914 "Miracle" Braves. Rumors held that Sullivan had been involved in the fixing of that series. Songwriter George M. Cohan supposedly cleaned up on the Braves—and Sullivan was Cohan's betting broker.[7] Mack never accused his team of throwing the series, but after the series he dumped half his regulars and half his starting pitchers. The A's sank to 44–108 the next season.
- In the 1917 World Series, in which the White Sox beat the Giants, New York manager John McGraw suspected something was off about his second baseman, Buck Herzog. McGraw later told writer Fred Lieb that Herzog had played out of position throughout the series and that Herzog had "sold him out."[8] Herzog would later be accused of fixing games with the 1919 Giants—and the 1920 Cubs.
- Before the 1920 World Series between Brooklyn and Cleveland—while the Black Sox investigation was barreling through baseball—Illinois State's Attorney Maclay Hoyne declared that he had evidence showing that the upcoming series was fixed too. "It appeared that the gamblers had met with such success that they were brazen in their plan to ruin the national sport," Hoyne said. "What will be the result? I will not say at this time, but I will venture the assertion that there is more and a bigger scandal coming in the baseball world."[9] Hoyne's evidence, though, never materialized. The Indians won, 5–2.

- During the 1921 World Series, Lieb heard a story about Yankees pitcher Carl Mays pitching less than his best because he had been paid off by gamblers. Lieb reported the story to Landis, who took no action against Mays. Years later, Lieb sat with Yankees owner T. L. Huston, who had been drinking. Lieb recalled the conversation: "'I wanted to tell you that some of our pitchers threw the World Series games on us in both 1921 and 1922,' he mumbled. 'You mean that Mays matter of the 1921 World Series?' I asked. He said, 'Yes, but there were others—other times, other pitchers.' By now he was almost in a stupor and stumbled off to bed."[10] The Yankees lost both the '21 and '22 World Series. Mays lost three of the four games he started in the two series.

The Black Sox have *Eight Men Out* to commemorate their role in baseball's gambling era, but the Cubs were nearly as deep in betting associations of the day as the South Siders. Even most Chicagoans do not know that the Black Sox scandal might never have become public knowledge if not for a smaller-scale Cubs gambling scandal. Only after word spread that some Cubs had thrown a game on August 31, 1920, did the state of Illinois convene a grand jury to investigate baseball gambling. That grand jury, brought together because of the Cubs, eventually uncovered the 1919 plot. (Thus White Sox fans who are harassed by Cubs fans over the Black Sox should be quick to point out that it was crooked Cubs who started it all.) And just before the start of the 1920 season, the Cubs released a player—Lee Magee—who admitted to club officials that he had wagered on ball games.

The Cubs had gambling ties at all levels. One of the odd features of the Black Sox trial was the calling of Cubs ex-president Charley Weeghman as a witness. Under oath, Weeghman testified to his close relationship with Chicago gambler Mont Tennes. According to Weeghman, Tennes told him as early as August 1919 that the upcoming World Series would be fixed. Weeghman claimed he didn't give the notion much credence and thus could not remember whether he had reported it to baseball officials. Of course, why Weeghman associated with the likes of Tennes, the biggest (and baddest) Chicago gambling figure of his day, is a mystery.

This does not mean the Cubs of the time were completely tainted or that the World Series of 1903, '12, '17, '19, '20, and '21 were *all*

fixed. But there's an awful lot of smoke for there to have been just one fire. No series-fixing evidence remains, which should not be surprising. It was by design. One of the primary aims of Ban Johnson and his friends who ruled "the greatest game in the world" was to push the view that baseball stood honestly on its merits, and to do that they snuffed out rumors about crooked players and kept whatever they knew about gamblers in baseball safely out of public view.

But Cicotte's deposition—part of a series of Black Sox documents purchased by the Chicago History Museum and shared for direct quotation for the first time in this book—provides a voice from the grave, raising a rumor and, at the same time, some questions. What if the '19 White Sox had a very recent and close-to-home inspiration for their bungled fix? What if the World Series of 1918, baseball's most tumultuous season, was thrown? What if the Cubs and Red Sox, in their only on-field meeting of the 20th century, played in a World Series tainted by gambling interests?

Considering what would become of the two franchises after the 1918 World Series, that would be fitting. Entering '18, few teams were more successful in the brief history of modern baseball than the Red Sox in the American League and the Cubs in the National League. In the first 14 World Series, each team made four appearances—the Red Sox won four times, and the Cubs won two. Boston was an unstable franchise, having undergone six ownership changes in 15 years, but fan support was strong and the team was a consistent contender. The Cubs excelled in the early 1900s behind their famed infield trio of Joe Tinker, John Evers, and Frank Chance and put on some of the best pennant races in history, against archrival McGraw and his powerful New York Giants. From 1904 to 1913, either the Cubs or the Giants won every NL pennant except one, and their '08 chase was a classic.

But the Red Sox and Cubs never met in a World Series until '18, and a funny thing happened after they did. Both teams took epic downward turns, their brief histories as dominant franchises forever replaced with a different kind of history altogether. The Red Sox and Cubs spent the rest of the 20th century, and into the 21st century, as baseball's two most star-crossed franchises. For the next 85 years the Red Sox would not win a World Series and would make just 10 play-off appearances. The Cubs would not win a World Series at all and would also make just 10 play-off appearances. The way the teams