To learn about American society, one should study baseball. There's no wonder baseball is called the national pastime: it is undisputedly the greatest game ever invented. It is a simple game, yet cerebral. Watching a game is like watching a scene to a great play. The box score is insignificant over a game or two; however, over a period of months you see patterns and developments.

What makes baseball more interesting than other sports is the information; it is data and statistics driven. Although numbers such as Babe Ruth's 714 home runs or Cy Young's 511 wins are part of the folklore, tradition and superstition make the game authentically American. The bonds and the commonality are what bring outs the statistician and historian in all of us.

While use of science and statistics are controversial in politics, theories and mathematical equations are welcomed in baseball. One can see Adam Smith's free market theories work with big market teams, such as the Yankees, when they try to dominate poverty-stricken cities like Detroit. This can intensify debates about capitalism, or bemoan Ayn Rand's principle of individualism where failures lies with the batter or pitcher that strikes out or gives up the winning run.
Although the game is rooted in conservatism, Karl Marx has a place. Winning teams have Marxist traits. They are multicultural, have chemistry, and players make sacrifices for the good of the team.

While other sports have unsung heroes, such as pulling guards and long snappers, there's no metric to determine their value. Baseball is meritorious, it rewards performance. There are Golden Gloves, Silver Sluggers, and MVPs. Each at bat and pitch is recorded and will be evaluated.

Rules have changed little since organized baseball began in 1879. Three strikes make an out, six outs make an inning, and nine innings make a ball game. The object is simple: score more runs than the other team.

Baseball’s idea of radicalism was in 1973 when the American league adopted the designated hitter, which spared fans from seeing pitchers hit. Since then, baseball has gradually became revolutionary, by having interleague play and a playoff system which gives a second place team a chance to play in the World Series.

Although Major League Baseball was once an exclusive club of white males, it has led the way in affirmative action. Unlike basketball and football, which aggrandize qualities such as abnormal size and strength, these traits are not required in baseball. The baseball Hall of Fame is a testament to the underachiever, the underdogs and misfits, electing players such as Babe Ruth, Mordecai "Three Fingers" Brown, and Kirby Puckett.

Baseball was the first sport to promote “The American Dream,” that one can climb out of poverty and become successful. Stories like the potbellied kid from the mean streets of Baltimore, whose parents sent him to a Catholic school where a clergyman who loved baseball taught “The Great Bambino” George Herman Ruth the game. Or two immigrants from sunny California, one Italian and one Mexican, whose drive and determination got America through the Great Depression and inspired us through World War 2. Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio gave many poor kids hope in the age of Hitler and Stalin.

Baseball also mirrored America’s attitude about race. Most ball players came from poor and non-white backgrounds at the turn of the twentieth century. Baseball led the forefront in Jim Crow, when Cap Anson boycotted several black ballplayers. This began an unofficial ban of black ball players until 1921, when Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis became the first commissioner of major league baseball. This gave rise to Negro League baseball and a sad chapter of separate but equal. It wasn’t until Judge Landis died in 1944 that the Boston Red Sox decided to give Jackie Robinson a tryout. It’s because of the baseball colorline that no one knows what early black ball players like Satchel Paige or Josh Gibson could do to major league pitching.

However, baseball wasn’t overtly political. There were no boycotts, sit-ins, and marches for social change. Baseball became America’s great laboratory. Before integration was tried in America as a whole, it was tested in Florida. Jackie Robinson had to endure Jim Crow racism, like eating and sleeping in separate facilities, while his teammates slept in a more comfortable provisions.

It wasn’t social science that made progress, it was Jackie’s performance before the American people that dispelled theories of black inferiority.

Before winning the Rookie of the Year and a MVP, the Brooklyn Dodgers were perennial bottom dwellers. After Jackie Robinson arrived, they appeared in six World Series in his ten-year long
Teams that were last to integrate, such as the Red Sox and Phillies, passed up both Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson as their teams imploded.

The Boston Red Sox passed up Jackie Robinson in 1945, and were the last team to integrate in 1959, and didn’t win a world series until 2005, sixty years later.

While Jackie Robinson fought for social equality, it did little to lift the salaries of baseball players.

Like the great struggles of class and labor in American history, baseball players, once mistreated and poorly paid, then paved the way for better labor relations. The labor history of baseball is a topic I will pick up next time.

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