

HERO OF THE HEARTLAND



*Billy Sunday and the
Transformation of American Society,
1862–1935*

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INTRODUCTION

Few religious figures have had a greater impact on American popular culture than did William Ashley “Billy” Sunday. The colorful Iowa-born evangelist was the best-known and most influential revivalist in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1896 and 1935, he toured first his native Midwest and then the nation, preaching in tent and tabernacle, espousing a simplistic but, for many, satisfying interpretation of Christianity. By the 1910s, his name had become a household word. Millions of his contemporaries quoted “Sundayisms.” The religious and secular press routinely gave extensive coverage to his exploits in and out of the pulpit. Politicians and businessmen courted him. References to him appeared in the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Ogden Nash and even in one popular song of the day.¹

Fame, of course, is not necessarily synonymous with admiration, and opinion of Sunday was as sharply divided as the dichotomy between good and evil that he so theatrically portrayed in his sermons. Secular critics scorned or ridiculed the methods and message of the revivalist, while those of a liberal religious bent criticized what they regarded as the exclusivity and provincialism of his ministry. Proponents of liberal Protestantism also frequently condemned his message as outmoded and considered Sunday either a reactionary or a charlatan. Even some conservative Evangelicals had reservations about his unorthodox methods, but a substantial segment of the population believed him to be God’s admittedly unconventional messenger to a sinful and unrepentant nation. Associates and admirers have contended that during his career Sunday preached to between 80 and 100 million people and was responsible for the salvation of a million souls. Although such claims are probably extravagant, they accurately suggest the scope of the evangelist’s enormous appeal.²

Sunday’s fame and success stemmed, in part, from the theatrical quality of his evangelism. He was an exceptionally gifted showman with an extraordinary ability to capture the attention of audiences and to evoke, in quick succession, emotions running the gamut from grief and remorse to joy and hope. Those who attended his meetings expected to be entertained and were rarely disappointed. Applause and laughter, hardly commonplace in the middle- and upper-class white Protestant churches of the day, were routine occurrences in his services. In the small

towns of the Midwest and even in the nation's larger cities, he was sometimes the best show in town.

His flare for the dramatic became the trademark of Sunday's evangelism and that for which he is most often remembered, but his theatricality was not primarily responsible for his rise to national prominence. Neither was the conservative theology that provided the religious underpinning of his message. While both style and, to a degree, doctrine were crucial to his success, ultimately what enabled the revivalist to reach millions of Americans was the congruence between his life and work and the hopes and fears of people struggling to cope with the myriad of uncertainties inherent in the transition from a rural, agricultural nation to an urban, industrial one. For many such Americans, he became a kind of heroic figure.

In 1941, only a few years after Sunday's death, historian Dixon Wecter wrote of the hero in American history,

He is an index to the collective mind and heart. His deeds and qualities are those which millions endorse. He speaks words that multitudes want said; he stands for things that they are often willing to spill their blood for. The hero is he whom every American should wish to be. His legend is the mirror of the folk soul.³

The notion of a "folk soul" in a nation as diverse as the United States is, of course, problematic; heterogeneity is often antithetical to consensus. Nevertheless, Sunday was a hero for millions who were struggling to reconcile the present with the past. His message spoke to their desire for continuity while his life and ministry represented a link with tradition and demonstrated the possibilities inherent in change.

Although anchored in the quest to save souls, successful mass evangelism is very much about coping with the challenges of the present world. Billy Sunday's revivalism was no exception. Contemporary and subsequent generations of critics have argued that his ministry was more a matter of escapism or obstructionism than an honest confrontation of the issues of his day. They contend that he was popular with the establishment and the masses because he upheld the status quo, offering solace and hope by reaffirming traditional conservative religious and social values. There is truth in these allegations, but a careful examination of his life and work in its entirety reveals a more complex picture.

To be sure, a great many people found Sunday's interpretation of the gospel both comforting and familiar. There was nothing new in either the theological or social content of his message. Aside from a few basic tenets of fundamentalist dogma, the intricacies of theology actually mattered little to the evangelist. He viewed reality through the prism of his deeply personal redemption experience. He believed and preached only enough doctrine to make sense of his own conversion and that which he hoped to engender in others.

The majority of Sunday's sermons were exhortations to live like a Christian rather than expositions of the theological foundations upon which Christian-

ity rested. In an era when the cultural mystique of the Midwest was beginning to represent, for at least some, the quintessence of Americanism, he took for granted the mainstream social and economic orthodoxy of his native region and equated the evangelical moral code of rural and small-town mid- and late-nineteenth-century Iowa with Christian conduct. His version of the gospel contained little subtlety or recognition that personal and social problems often sprang from complex circumstances and could not always be resolved through faith and will alone. Unrealistic though it may have been, there was about his analysis of the human condition a kind of comprehensible and empowering commonsense simplicity, a sense that things were as they appeared to be, which lent credibility to his case. Furthermore, he asserted his views with such sincerity and conviction that those predisposed to believe found it easy to do so, and even skeptics were sometimes persuaded.

Sunday reaffirmed traditional values not only through his religious and social message but also because the story of his life seemed to exemplify the national myth of success. He was born and reared in relative poverty, never knew his father, lived for a time in an orphanage, and earned his own way by his mid-teens. He nevertheless achieved fame and fortune in the service of his God and fellow man. Though firmly anchored in and committed to the verities of an idealized past, he was also a product of the modern world. He had the good fortune to play professional baseball just as that sport was emerging as the national pastime. Thus, he was admired as an athlete in an increasingly leisure-oriented, sports-minded nation. In an age that venerated the man of business, there was about his ministry an air of professionalism and entrepreneurial acumen that millions of people appreciated and to which they aspired. At a time when concerns about the deterioration of American masculinity were rife in certain middle- and upper-class circles, the story of his triumph over adversity and his athleticism complemented his aggressive public persona to create about him a much-admired aura of manliness. In an age absorbed with progressive change, his devotees believed the revivalist's championing of Prohibition and other moral causes placed their hero in the first ranks of American reform.

An athlete, businessman, clergyman, reformer, and son of the heartland who personified manliness and exemplified the American myth of success, Sunday bridged the gap between tradition and modernity in a way that millions of his contemporaries found gratifying and inspiring. Venerated by many, vilified by some, he was neither saint nor sinner but a complex and fascinating constellation of the remarkable and the regrettable. In both his strengths and weaknesses, however, he resonated with diverse facets of the changing times in which he lived, and that resonance was a major source of his appeal.

FOUR

Playing the Game for God



If Billy Sunday's revivalism was informed by the business ethos of his day, it also resonated with the values of a culture beginning to become absorbed with sports. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the rise of the industrial city, the revolution in transportation and communication, the influence of immigrant cultures, and an increase in leisure time had converged to create a growing enthusiasm for a wide range of sports, the most pervasive of which was baseball. By the 1880s and 1890s, it had already become a passion with millions of middle-class Americans and was well on its way to becoming the national pastime. To be sure, other athletic contests had their proponents. Boxing was popular, but it was not quite respectable in many quarters. Football was gaining enthusiasts, but its audience consisted primarily of a relatively small number of collegians and those living in close proximity to the colleges and universities at which it was played. Furthermore, the game was controversial because of the brutality associated with it. Basketball did not make its appearance until 1892, and most Americans still regarded tennis and golf as elitist and somewhat effeminate. As both a participatory and spectator sport, baseball as yet had no important rivals for the hearts and minds of the populace.¹

The game's popularity, however, lay not in the absence of competitors but in its own inherent characteristics and the way in which those seemed to reflect the mood of the times. To some extent, baseball bridged the gap between tradition and modernity. Its pastoral motif and potential for drama appealed to people seeking a momentary escape from the routine and stress of an urbanizing, industrializing nation. At the same time, its symmetry, specialization, and susceptibility to statistical analysis meant that it was congruent with the increasingly bureaucratic and technological quality of American life. The fact that victory depended on both individual excellence and team effort was consistent with contemporary individualistic and corporate values. Generally lacking definite ethnic or class associations and requiring little training or expense, baseball seemed accessible to all and thus had a democratic and uniquely American aura. The sport was widely hailed not

only as physically and psychologically beneficial but also as a force for socialization, a builder of character, and a reflection of the American way of life. Yet above all, the game was fun. For tens of thousands of men and boys in city parks and country pastures, it had become, as Clarence Darrow remembered from his youth in Kinsmond, Ohio, “the one unalloyed joy of life.”²

Although at 28 years of age Billy Sunday had abandoned the diamonds of the National League, baseball remained an integral part of his life and ministry for the next forty-four years. Aside from his obvious sincerity and genuine commitment to his faith, no other single factor contributed more to Billy’s popularity than his career as an athlete. By lending a dramatic quality to his ministry and providing a familiar body of imagery and wealth of anecdotal material upon which the evangelist could draw, it afforded an important entree with millions of Americans.

A generation or two earlier, the nexus between sports and religion would have played a much less significant role in Sunday’s ministry than was the case in the early twentieth century. By the time the Iowa-born evangelist appeared on the scene, sports had become organized and, in some instances, professionalized, and the church was seeking to accommodate itself to a society in which athletic contests were becoming an integral part of leisure-time activities. Contrary to what has sometimes been alleged, American Protestantism has never been wholly antithetical to sports. Even the Puritans, renowned for their antipathy to many of the pleasures of this world, did not completely reject sport. They objected only to those physical or other diversions that did not in some way glorify God or cultivate useful life skills. Wrestling, horseback-riding, swordsmanship, hunting, or fishing were acceptable. Dancing around a maypole, gambling on horse races, or indulging in any activity for the pure exhilaration it might provide were not.³

Something of this utilitarian justification for sport remained viable in American society into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, in fact, persists to the present in our contemporary notion that participation in athletics builds character and facilitates socialization. In the late Victorian era, games on the Sabbath and sports associated with gratuitous violence or vices were anathema to many Christians and professionalization was suspect, but in general Protestants in America had begun to make their peace with the burgeoning culture of athleticism. Indeed, many had concluded that sports could actually be called into the service of the gospel or, at least, of morality. Some, such as the YMCA’s Luther Gulick, with his emphasis on organized play, stressed socialization and character-building, while others such as Dwight L. Moody viewed sports largely as merely another means to the end of spreading the gospel of personal salvation. Although he emphasized the many beneficial effects of athletics, especially baseball, Sunday was closer to the position of Moody than to that of Gulick. Baseball and other sports might build strong bodies and teach important life skills, but these were essentially tools to be used in the struggle with the Devil for the souls of mankind. In Billy’s hands, they were tools used with consummate skill.⁴

Given the nation's enthusiasm for baseball, it is hardly surprising that Sunday's initial appeal as a volunteer and later as a salaried worker for the Chicago YMCA lay in part in his reputation as a colorful and aggressive athlete. Early newspaper coverage of his religious activities often linked his baseball career and his Christian endeavors. Yet at first Billy appears to have been hesitant to capitalize on his ties to professional sports. Indeed, he sometimes deflected questions young men posed about baseball and redirected their attention toward spiritual matters. Soon, however, he recognized his years in the National League for the valuable asset they were and began to make the most of them. The association in the popular mind between Sunday and baseball spanned his entire ministry. A contemporary biographer of the revivalist wrote:

In the early days men flocked to hear Sunday because they knew how well he could play ball, and they probably reasoned that the man who would do that so well would not preach poorly, and in this they were not mistaken.⁵

As Billy traveled about the Midwest at the beginning of his career, a Humbolt, Iowa, newspaper reported that "he carries his baseball suit with him, and plays a game now and then to keep his hand in." As his ministry expanded out of the Corn Belt into urban centers across the nation, he sometimes attended games in cities in which he was preaching. Occasionally, the local citizenry challenged Sunday and members of his evangelistic team to a game. One of the most notable of these events was a benefit performance in Los Angeles in 1917 between Sunday's "Evangelicals" and a group of Hollywood movie stars. The proceeds went to purchase sports equipment for U.S. soldiers serving in World War I. In the teens, as he approached the pinnacle of his popularity, journalists not only queried the evangelist about religious or moral issues but also frequently asked him to comment upon the quality of the teams and players of the era and sometimes to compare them with those of his day. As late as the 1930s, in the twilight of his evangelism and forty years after he had left the diamond, newspapers still remarked upon his career in professional baseball.⁶

Not only the press, but Sunday's own publicists and others who wrote books about him stressed his athletic past. An authorized biography published in 1914 described the preacher in its subtitle as the "Baseball Evangelist." The author, Rev. Elijah Brown, made much of the revivalist's athletic prowess. He recalled Billy's days with the White Stockings, reminding readers that he was the first player to circle the bases in fourteen seconds, and reported that the legendary Adrian "Cap" Anson thought him the fastest base runner ever to play the game. Brown also tried to draw parallels between Sunday's baseball and revivalistic skills, suggesting that he was as determined to win in the pulpit as he had been on the diamond and that some of the "earnestness and precision" with which he preached was due to his athletic training. Another contemporary biographer, William T. Ellis, contended in a laudatory volume that Sunday's days on the diamond had accustomed him to the adulation of

the crowd and thus inured him to the potentially detrimental effects of the popularity that accompanied his success as an evangelist.⁷

Some of this emphasis on the popular preacher's tie to sports was, of course, merely expediency on the part of the press, and his publicists recognized it as one of the easiest ways to attract readers' interest. Some of it, however, reflected the widespread faith in the salutary effects of America's favorite game. Given his own experience, it is not surprising that Billy himself believed that athletics was an important part of a man's preparation for life. It was not evangelistic opportunism but conviction that prompted him to repeatedly extol the virtues of fitness and competition. He spoke from the heart when he said, "You can bet your life that sport is a mighty good thing, and it certainly has an influence on religion." He had no doubt that

Sport teaches a man fair play. He does what is right by his opponent, and if he doesn't he's thrown out of the game—a fit playmate of the devil. To live properly a man must be in good physical shape, and athletic competition, whether public or private, will put a man in shape to live a clean, wholesome, religious life.⁸

As for any qualms the pious might have about professional baseball, Billy vehemently denied that there was anything inherently immoral or corrupting about it. In January 1909, as he was beginning to emerge into national prominence, he told a reporter that he "wouldn't take a million dollars" for his career in baseball and somewhat inaccurately affirmed his pride in having been "one of the best of them" in his day. He contended that baseball was the one sport in the nation on which gamblers had been unable to get their hands, despite thirty years of effort. There was not "the same disgrace attached to a professional baseball player" that attended "other professional athletes." Baseball had "stood the test." It was a "pure, clean, and wholesome game," and there was "no disgrace to any man . . . for playing professional baseball."⁹

Sunday pointed out that he had been "converted in 1886 and lived a Christian life for five years" while in the National League. He affirmed his belief that a man could "be a Christian and decent self-respecting citizen there if he wants to be." One did not have to be a "rounder." Furthermore, "the club owners, the fans generally, and the players themselves" respected "a man all the more for living a clean, honest life."¹⁰

Billy shared the public's conviction that baseball was a quintessentially American game that instilled important qualities of character and basic national values. He believed the game to be "American to the core," as "distinctively American as are pork and beans and pie." It mirrored the strengths and weaknesses of the nation and its people and was, therefore, sometimes marred by human frailty, but it was not inherently flawed. The game was democratic. There was "the same joy in it for the youngster who hotfoots it five miles to a hole in the fence as for the broker whose six-cylinder totes him to the best seat in the grand stand." It was honest, "clean as a hound's tooth," as far as he knew, and he was prepared to defend its honor almost to the point of violence.

When some withered-up, walrus-jawed, limber-legged, gimlet-eyed, pink-tea-blooded old fool of a pessimist comes to me and tells me in a voice like a dying calf and the gurgle of a wheezy cistern pump that the game is crooked as the devil, and that pennants are bought and sold, I feel like knocking his block into the middle of next week. You can't tell me that hundreds of thousands of shrewd, keen-witted, city-bred American men would give the game so much of their time, and support it persistently and enthusiastically, if it were not clean, open, and on the square.

The sport at its best was conducive to the building of skill and virtue. A player who reached the pinnacle of success in the game could not bask in his fame but was “under deep obligation to the public to conserve and develop character and skill to the best of his ability.”¹¹

Democratic, honest, character-building, the game, Billy believed, also reflected the energy and enthusiasm characteristic of the American people. “Magnetic” and “fascinating,” according to Sunday, baseball had “the power to stand you on your toes and tangle up your diaphragm and larynx in a carnival of noise that you never dreamed possible.” With enthusiasm bordering on chauvinism, he declared:

Norwegians have their skis and Spain has her bullfights. In England, if a cricket game is drawn out, they drink a little tea and finish it the next day. Duels furnish Frenchmen with morning exercise. But what other sport could so characteristically serve as the play outlet for the nervous, high-strung, third-rail, double-barreled, greased-lightning, strenuous, hustling, bustling bunch of folks—bless 'em!—that inhabit this country to-day?¹²

During World War I, at the zenith of his success, Sunday elucidated his understanding of the importance of his own baseball experience when he declared,

It has made me fit to play this bigger game I'm playing right now, and I want to tell you that I'm mighty glad I was a professional ball player.

A man out there before a great crowd learns to know the crowd—its heart. He absorbs a complete understanding of their emotions. And he has the opportunity of doing good. And don't you forget that it takes nerve.

Have you ever stopped to consider the feelings of an outfielder waiting for a hard hit fly to come down? Up there in the stands are thousands of fans, with their eyes glued upon him. The ball is but a slight speck, and to a young player just breaking in it seems that every second is an hour. But finally the ball drops down, slowly, ever so slowly. He prepares to catch it. If he lets it get away from him—zowie!¹³

For millions of Americans, Sunday's life was a validation of the benefits of baseball. Devotees of the sport and admirers of the revivalist believed, or wanted to believe, that their beloved national game had helped to prepare him for his larger and more important career in evangelism. Both they and he persuaded themselves that it had strengthened his character, taught him to work under stress, accustomed him to the pitfalls of the approbation of the

crowd, and instilled in him the value of individual effort and the importance of teamwork. In other words, baseball had, as Billy contended, prepared him for the more significant contests of life.

Perhaps the game had indeed helped Sunday develop the physical stamina, concentration, and poise which later served him well as a revivalist. There is no doubt, however, that his reputation as a professional ballplayer provided him with the means of establishing a rapport with audiences unavailable to other evangelists. Homer Rodeheaver wrote of the role of the sports mystique in the revivalist's ministry:

Because of his experience as a baseball player, many people sent to the platform balls, bats, masks, gloves, and all kinds of baseball equipment. Usually when I presented him with some item on behalf of one of the delegations he would immediately put it on and go through the movements of a player on the diamond, to the amusement of the whole crowd. If it was a bat, he would grasp it, get into position, and take a swing, all the while making some comment about the club or about some old player who used one like that. If it was a mask or a glove, he would put it on, stand on the other side of the platform, and have me toss the ball to him. He was exceedingly graceful in his movements, and he had the smooth rhythm of the perfect athlete.¹⁴

Scholarly and popular accounts alike are filled with descriptions of Billy's slides, leaps, catches, judgment calls, and other baseball antics in the pulpit. These provided the color and the semblance of the unconventional for which the preacher was renowned. Yet this emphasis on the dramatic has sometimes obscured the way in which his tie to sports afforded Sunday an even more useful evangelistic tool—a body of athletic metaphors by means of which to convey his understanding of the gospel. He had a keen sense of the theatrical and instinctively grasped what would reach an audience. In an age when both participatory and spectator sports were increasingly popular in America, he often couched his message in the athletic vernacular of the day. For example, God was sometimes the “great Umpire of the universe” who called people out at the end of their lives. The evangelist once described the Devil using imagery from not one but three sports—track, baseball, and boxing. He characterized the “prince of darkness” as a sprinter who could “give a lot of men a head start and beat them to the tape.” The Devil was, in his opinion, a “major league sprinter” who was “always in the red of condition.” According to Billy, Satan “could pitch with the best of them” and possessed a “spit ball that spits fire.” Unless one was “fit spiritually,” he would “strike you out every time you come to bat.” Switching to pugilistic imagery, Sunday contended that the Devil had “knocked out more men than all the boxing champions put together” and had “a much stronger punch than Jeffries, Fitzsimmons, Corbett and Sullivan put together.” He was doubly dangerous because he was also a “bum sportsman” who was “tricky, treacherous and sneaky.” A “weak-spined, mush-hearted specimen of manhood” had no chance against him.

Only “a regular fellow, a God-fearing man” could stand his ground in any contest against Satan.¹⁵ To be sure, such metaphors reduced the cosmic struggle between good and evil to the mundane level of the track, the diamond, or the ring, but they also made Billy’s message entertaining and comprehensible to the masses. The reduction of complex ideas to the lowest common denominator and the conveying of them in the most appealing manner were the essence of successful evangelism.

In baseball, Sunday found much more than the memorable metaphor. He was a master of crowd psychology and understood the power of a good story not only to entertain but to persuade. His experiences as a ballplayer, or at least his memories of those experiences, provided him with a wealth of vivid and sometimes moving anecdotes upon which he could draw to guide his congregations where he wished them to go. To illustrate the efficacy of prayer, for example, he recalled two incidents that had occurred during his years with the White Stockings. Billy’s God was always nearby, ready to help whenever his children asked. No request was too mundane, no appeal too insignificant to go unanswered.

Prayer was an essential but commonplace feature of the dedicated Christian’s experience. Billy talked to God spontaneously, in the casual but respectful way one might address a parent. For him, faith was a practical matter that could have immediate consequences, ranging from the ordinary to the profound. He often told the story of one of the first occasions when he called upon God for help and his Lord responded. Shortly after his conversion in 1886, the White Stockings were playing a tough, competitive Detroit team and were leading them three to two in the last of the ninth inning. With two outs and runners on second and third, John Clarkson, Chicago’s star pitcher, hurled a pitch that Detroit catcher Charlie Bennett hit deep into right field. Sunday, playing in the outfield that afternoon, watched the ball sail high into the air. Knowing that it was going over his head, he turned to give chase. He described what then happened:

As I ran I offered up a prayer, something like this: “Oh Lord, I’m in an awful hole, and if you ever help me, please do it now, and you haven’t much time to make up your mind.”

The grand stand and bleachers had overflowed with people and they were standing along the wall in right and left fields. I saw that the ball was going to drop in the edge of the crowd, and I yelled, “Get out of the way,” and they opened up like the Red Sea did for the rod of Moses.

I glanced up and saw the ball coming. I leaped into the air and shot out my right hand and the ball hit and stuck fast as my fingers closed over it. I lost my balance and fell but jumped up with the ball in my hand.¹⁶

Sunday had no doubt that God concerned himself with such ordinary details of life and that his prayer had contributed to his game-saving play.

The contest with Detroit was crucial because the White Stockings were in a tight pennant race that summer. Before the season was over, Billy called

upon his God again for divine intervention on behalf of his team. As the 1886 season drew to a close, the White Stockings and the New York Giants were in a virtual dead heat for the National League pennant. As Sunday remembered it, on the last day of the season Chicago had a 1-game lead. They had one game to play, and the Giants were to play a doubleheader. A Chicago loss and two New York wins would give the championship to the Giants.

Sunday felt that an appeal for divine intervention on Chicago's behalf was warranted. On Wednesday night, before the last day of the season on Thursday, Billy attended a midweek prayer service, as was his custom. Frank "Old Silver" Flint, Chicago's catcher, sheepishly asked if he could accompany him. As the two players walked toward the church, Flint, whose religion had long been more a matter of memory than practice, said to his teammate, "Billy, I ain't prayed much for years, but I was taught to pray. Do you believe God will help us win that game tomorrow, and help New York to lose one?" Sunday replied, "Sure, the Lord will; and you and I, Frank, will do the praying for the whole team." That evening, the two men prayed earnestly for the success of their club. The next day, Chicago defeated Boston and Philadelphia took both ends of a doubleheader from New York, giving the pennant to the White Stockings. Late in his life Sunday reiterated his conviction that "the Lord helped us win that game" and affirmed that he would always believe that to have been the case unless, upon his arrival in Heaven, God told him differently.¹⁷

A recent study of Sunday's baseball career suggests that the revivalist's memories of his days as a player were not always reliable. The two famous stories related above appear to be firmly rooted in actual events, but the details of the games and the circumstances in which they were played are apparently somewhat muddled. From the standpoint of evangelism, however, accuracy was less important than emotional impact. Post-conversion incidents on the diamond may well have strengthened the neophyte Christian's faith. Later, however, his recollections of them were equally important as a rich source of illustrative material that the creative revivalist could embellish and use to add color and texture to his memorable sermons. Sunday's picturesque baseball stories, permeated with the excitement and competitiveness of the nation's most popular sport, etched into the memory of his audiences concrete examples of the power of prayer and reinforced the notion that God was indeed an ever-present help in time of trouble.¹⁸

If baseball provided Billy a wealth of material illustrative of the power of prayer and the benefits of faith, it also afforded a repertoire of cautionary tales about the consequences of rejecting God. In spite of his public affirmations of the essential decency of professional baseball and its personnel, Sunday recognized that the game had its share of those whose characters were flawed by the gamut of human failings. Furthermore, just as team management had sometimes capitalized upon the disreputable image of their employees as a means of gaining leverage in the struggle with labor, Sunday found the same negative stereotypes advantageous in his combat with the Devil. During his playing days in the 1880s and early 1890s, Billy liked and admired most of his

teammates, but after his religious conversion he increasingly sensed a moral and spiritual divergence between himself and many of them. He privately cautioned Nell against associating with the wives and friends of certain Chicago players and suggested to her that at least some of his baseball companions were men of little principle.¹⁹

Sunday's often-repeated account of his conversion illuminates both his ambivalent feelings toward his baseball comrades and the way in which he used stories of former teammates in his evangelism. In a 1914 version of this story, published in a slender volume entitled *Burning Truths from Billy's Bat*, he recalled that after deciding to accept the invitation to visit the Pacific Garden Mission, he arose and said to his comrades, "I'm through. We've come to the parting of the ways." Then, as he remembered that summer afternoon, he turned his back on them.

Some of them laughed and some of them mocked me; one of them gave me encouragement; others never said a word. Twenty-seven years ago I turned and left that little group on the corner of State and Madison streets, walked to the little mission, fell on my knees and staggered out of sin and into the arms of the Saviour.²⁰

Given his propensity for dramatization and the changes that had occurred in Sunday's life in the intervening years, this account obviously should not be taken at face value, but his interpretation of the event is revealing. He remembered that summer afternoon in 1886 as marking a dramatic and abrupt break with his former life. As he tells it, he quite literally stood and walked away from his past. His teammates on the White Stockings symbolized that past of sin and sorrow on which he was turning his back.

Yet, as if to remind readers that baseball players were not total reprobates but men capable of honor and decency, Sunday described, with appreciation, their reaction following his conversion. He recalled the apprehension with which he went to the ball park, fearing the ridicule of his teammates. To his surprise and delight, he found not derision but respect.

Up came Mike Kelley. He said: "Bill I'm proud of you—religion is not my long suit, but I'll help you all I can." Up came Anson, Pfeffer, Clarkson, Flint, McCormick, Burns, Williamson and Dalrymple. There wasn't a fellow in that gang who knocked, every fellow had a word of encouragement for me.²¹

Despite his appreciation of their expressions of support for him, the lives of some of these same men provided Sunday with a point of orientation against which he could measure the spiritual and material distance that he had traveled since that summer afternoon in 1886. In *Burning Truths from Billy's Bat*, he told his version of the stories of three White Stockings teammates—Mike Kelly, Ed Williamson, and Frank Flint. Their experiences afforded vivid contrasts with his own and validated the evangelical worldview to which he had committed himself.

Sunday recalled how Mike Kelly had received \$5,000 as his portion of the deal that sent him to Boston in 1887, how fans in the city purchased a house for Kelly and presented him with \$1,500, and how within a year Kelly had spent his salary, the \$5,000 bonus, the \$1,500 gift, and had mortgaged the house. Kelly, who loved to drink and gamble, was, according to Billy, eventually so poor that when he died at the age of 36, friends and admirers had to raise the funds to bury him. He concluded the story of Kelly with the observation, "Mike sat there on the corner with me twenty-seven years ago, when I said: 'Goodbye, boys, I'm through.'"

In the late 1880s, Ed Williamson, the shortstop of the White Stockings, went on a world tour with a baseball team sponsored by A. G. Spalding. According to Sunday, as the team crossed the English Channel, a storm threatened to sink the ship on which it was traveling. Williamson, fearing for his life, fell to his knees and promised God that he would be true to Him if he survived the trip. Williamson lived but forgot his promise. He returned to Chicago and opened a saloon. Sunday recalled,

I would go there and give tickets for the Y. M. C. A. meetings and would talk with him, and [he] would cry like a baby, I would get down and pray for him. When he died they put him on the table and cut him open and took out his liver. It was so big it would not go in a candy bucket.

Again Sunday ended his story with the observation, "Ed Williamson sat there on the street corner with me twenty-seven years ago when I said, 'Goodbye, boys, I'm through.'"

The evangelist recounted the tale of Frank Flint, the White Stockings catcher, who played for years in the National League at a salary far above that of the average laborer of the day. After his baseball career, however, Flint succumbed to alcohol and fell into poverty. Sunday remembered seeing his old friend sleeping on a table in a "stale beer joint" with scarcely a cent to his name. He described in graphic detail the ultimate consequences of his former teammate's addiction to drink and recalled that as Flint lay dying the old catcher said to him,

There's nothing in the life of years ago I care for now. I can hear the grandstand hiss when I strike out. I can hear the bleachers cheer when I make a hit that wins the game, but there is nothing that can help me now, and if the umpire calls me out now, won't you say a few words over me, Bill?

Then, as the evangelist recounts the story, "The great Umpire of the universe yelled: 'You're out!'" And again Billy reminded readers and audiences that like the others, "Frank Flint sat on the street corner drunk with me twenty-seven years ago in Chicago when I said: 'I'll bid you goodbye, boys, I'm going to Jesus.'"²²

Sunday concluded his account of the fate of his three friends of years gone by with the question, "Say men, did I win the game of life, or did they?"²³ There was, of course, no doubt about the answer. Drunkenness, poverty, and

sorrow were the result of rejecting salvation. Happiness and success were the benefits of accepting it.

The preacher was certain that his victory over evil and its consequences resulted from his decision to heed the invitation to visit the Pacific Garden Mission and to accept the gospel espoused there, while the failure of his baseball comrades stemmed from their decision to remain behind on the street corner and their capitulation to life's temptations. Sunday's big-league cronies provided the principles in a morality play in which the rewards of salvation were measured against the wages of sin, and sin was found wanting. The years he spent in the National League became a point of orientation against which he and others could measure his growth as a man and a Christian.

Sunday's ties to baseball lent verisimilitude to his sports anecdotes. He was the first major evangelist for whom athletics, amateur or professional, had been an integral part of his life and the first to incorporate the national pastime so extensively into his revivalism. Yet his reliance upon baseball as a metaphor for life and medium for conveying the gospel was by no means unique. When he transformed the problems of life into the struggles of the diamond and reduced the complexity of human existence to the simple symmetry of a game, he was drawing analogies increasingly common in Christian circles.

By the early twentieth century, baseball had become such a pervasive part of American life that people with radically different opinions on all sorts of issues could make metaphorical use of it to convey their point of view. Sunday, for whom everything was personal and experiential, used the game to dramatize his sermons and to illustrate the motif of individualism that ran through his message. His gospel was about personal sin and salvation and the moral consequences of each. To be sure, there were important social implications stemming from whether one did or did not accept God's gift of grace, but the transformation of the heart that had to precede the reformation of society was a matter of individual responsibility.

At the other end of the religious spectrum from Billy Sunday and Evangelicals of his ilk were the apostles of the Social Gospel. For these liberal Christians, with their corporate vision of society, baseball afforded an almost perfect metaphor. Success in the game meant that players had to strive for personal excellence but also subordinate individual achievement to the welfare of the team as a whole.

Washington Gladden, one of the earliest spokesmen of the Social Gospel, did not believe that one was truly converted until "he comprehends his social relations and strives to fulfill them." Commitment to others was a fundamental component of the Christian faith. Gladden urged Protestants to think of their lives as analogous to a baseball game. An individual could not learn or successfully play the game alone. The essence of the contest was teamwork. Likewise, the meaning and significance of life lay in recognizing and acting upon one's responsibility to co-workers, community, and society.²⁴

Early in the twentieth century, Henry Pope, president of the Religious Education Association, which in conjunction with the University of Chicago Press produced much of the Sunday-school literature of the day, urged teachers to take advantage of boys' familiarity with and fondness for baseball. The game was as real to them as the workplace was to their fathers and it could be used to examine questions about the importance of skill, discipline, integrity, and cooperation.

Erwin L. Shaver, author of a number of Christian educational pamphlets, believed that participation in sport built character. In *A Christian's Recreation*, he contended that "clean sport, fair play, self-sacrifice, obedience to rules, team cooperation, skill, initiative, a sense of honor, chivalry, generous appreciation of an opponent find expression and development in athletics." Shaver's colleague, Herbert Gates, wrote:

Many a lad has learned lessons of cooperation with his teammates, of self-denial in training, of persistence, endurance, and courage in turning defeat into victory, only to have the same lessons stay by him in the stern contest of later life and make him a winner there.²⁵

Proponents of the Social Gospel shared Billy Sunday's conviction that sport in general, and baseball in particular, could prepare a man for the larger game of life. They differed, however, in their understanding of the nature of that preparation. The former, seeking to accommodate their theology and practice to an urbanizing, industrializing nation, found the game's relevance in its spirit of teamwork and mutual cooperation in the interest of achieving a higher goal. The latter, whose faith remained largely informed by the rural and small-town beliefs and norms of his youth, found the game's significance in its color, drama, and opportunities for individual achievement. Both interpretations of the national pastime were valid and had broad appeal, but one looked more to the America of the twentieth century while the other harkened back to the perspective and values of an earlier day.

Given his drive, commitment, and flair for the dramatic, Billy Sunday would no doubt have achieved success as an evangelist even had he not first been a professional ball player, but his earlier career was fortuitous. It enabled an increasingly sports-minded nation to identify with him and his message in ways and with a facility that would have otherwise been lacking. He had accomplished that of which millions of American boys had only dreamed. He had gone to the city in search of success and had found it racing around the base paths of the National League. It mattered little that his lifetime batting average was only .256 and that for several seasons it was significantly lower. As his fame as an evangelist grew, the nation, and perhaps Sunday himself, forgot that for much of his career he was a second-stringer and remembered only that he had played with the best of his era. That fact alone created a charismatic aura about the revivalist and contributed to his ministry an enviable, if not always warranted, credibility.

Some scholars have interpreted the social significance of sports in terms of their congruence with prevalent values and norms, while others have sug-



Billy Sunday playing baseball with the Kansas City
Rotary Club, 1916.

*Billy Sunday Archives, Grace College and
Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana.*

gested that they play a compensatory role, allowing an escape from the routine and rigors of everyday life. Neither interpretation is wholly satisfying, but both illuminate the operation of sport in our culture. They also suggest something of the way in which Billy Sunday's evangelism functioned in the lives of his admirers. For those who attended the revivalist's crusades, the structure of the services was traditional, the sports imagery familiar, and the gospel message comforting. The messenger, on the other hand, appeared unconventional. In the early days of professional baseball, some of its attraction lay in the fact that fans perceived many of the players as nonconformists. They seemingly refused to fit the mold into which an increasingly urban, industrial, bureaucratic society tried to place men. Despite the fulminations of moralists and management against their excesses, the best players were sometimes colorful, daring, aggressive individualists who challenged authority and bent the rules of both the game and society.

Sunday's appeal as an evangelist was similar to that of the free spirits of the diamond. The revivalist, who ranged the pulpit with the same abandon with which he had once streaked along the base paths and across the outfields, sacrificed contemporary liturgical and theological norms on the altar of showmanship and thereby created the illusion of defiant unconventionality. The rituals of the revival and the content of the message—a simple, practical, evangelical version of the gospel—were familiar, but the preacher was refreshingly, though not disconcertingly, different. In other words, the revival was congruent with socioeconomic and religious norms, but the evangelist's persona and unique style of preaching offered a welcome, albeit temporary, escape from the humdrum routine of contemporary civilization.

This major-leaguer-turned-preacher was well aware that the popularity of baseball and his relationship to it added luster to his ministry, and he used that knowledge to his advantage. Yet the prominence of the national pastime in his revivalism was not simply a matter of pandering to the passion of the masses. To be sure, Billy Sunday's role-playing as he raced across the rostrum, mimicked the impossible catch, slid dramatically for the base, or shouted the umpire's verdict as he called a player out at home plate were tabernacle theatrics, but these athletic antics also enabled him to live again in his imagination the thrill he had once known in the ballparks of Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. His years on the diamond with their camaraderie, popular acclaim, and opportunities to excel had brought him a great deal of personal satisfaction. They had elevated his life above the level of the ordinary, and, in some ways, they remained a high point of his experience. Neither the plaudits of the rich and powerful nor the approbation of the millions who flocked to his crusades ever fully eclipsed for him the sheer exhilaration of a baseball game.

That his career as a professional athlete never lost its allure is obvious in the autobiography Sunday wrote in the early 1930s. In one passage, the aging apostle reflected upon his possession of a silver baseball, a token of one of the White Stockings' league championships in the 1880s. "Every time I look at it," he recalled, "I become young again, and the faces of the old team pass in panorama before my eyes and the scenes of other days flit by like a butterfly." He confided to his readers that he occasionally took his old uniform and spiked shoes out of mothballs, looked at them, and fondled them "as though they were the crown jewels of Egypt." Whenever he did so, they seemed to say to him, "Hello Bill, put us on once more and we'll go out and do our stuff and show some of these birds we are not all in yet." He acknowledged that "the old urge" was there but admitted that the "dogs" were "a trifle stiff." Nevertheless, even at the age of 70, the once agile outfielder professed to believe that with a little limbering up he could still do 100 yards in fourteen or fifteen seconds.²⁶

Although extraordinarily advantageous, the fusion of sports and religion in Billy Sunday's ministry was not mere opportunistic showmanship. Rather, it

was, at least in part, a logical expression of his own experience. In the 1880s, baseball and the evangelical gospel of the Pacific Garden Mission had converged to engender in him a sense of confidence and self-worth at a time when he felt profoundly rootless and insecure. Given the meaningful role they had played in his own personal development, it was only natural for him to weave these two integrating forces in his life into the fabric of his evangelism.