



The TRIANGLE

The Other Sport: What happened to baseball at the University of Michigan?



In 1866 baseball became a sanctioned sport at the University of Michigan. That was thirteen years before the school would even begin competing in football. At that time, baseball was clearly enshrined as America's pastime, with football just starting to be played around the country. Shortly after becoming a sanctioned sport, baseball transformed into the most important and influential extracurricular activity at Michigan. At the time it was adopted, the school's baseball field existed in the area that is now the [Chemistry Building and Dow Laboratory](#), making it one of the first times a school prioritized a sport so much that it gave up a prime location on its central campus. Richard Adler, a professor at UM-Dearborn and a member of the Society for American Baseball

Research writes, “By the dawn of the 20th century, [baseball] evolved into the most popular spring leisure event in which students participated. Crowds of 500 were not unusual at a time when enrollment at the university was approximately 2,500 students.”

Aside from being the most popular activity on campus, baseball also helped the university and its community to transcend a major barrier. In the 1880s, Weldy and Fleetwood Walker became the first African-Americans to play a varsity sport at Michigan, spurring a change that provided future students of all backgrounds more opportunities outside of the classroom. Fleetwood even went on to be credited as the first African-American to play in the major leagues. Did I mention Michigan’s baseball teams have historically been great too? As if the program’s legacy couldn’t get any stronger, Michigan has the fourth winningest program in the country. In spite of the success and influence baseball has had at the university and beyond, Michigan’s baseball team hardly receives attention today, while the football team receives frequent attention at the national level.

While the popularities of professional football and baseball have been routinely compared for decades, there is simply no contest at the collegiate level. Football is simply the more popular sport at colleges around the United States. At the University of Michigan, this notion holds true, despite its storied baseball history. In 2010, Michigan’s baseball team had an average attendance of 1,278 people per game. Compare that to the mammoth crowds of more than 100,000 that flock to Ann Arbor for each home game during the football season and it’s easy to see this striking contrast, but why is this the case?

1. The Northern Climate

When most people think of baseball they think of blue skies and sunny spring days, with smell of freshly cut grass in the air. Sadly, with the college baseball season beginning in February, it is not uncommon for northern schools like Michigan to still be dealing with snow, which leaves the exact opposite scenery for fans to sit through. While it is challenging for teams to even play in the frigid weather, it is even more challenging to draw a crowd. As a result, Michigan tends to play less home games and spends more time on the road at the beginning of the season, which is limiting for fans. Major League Baseball teams don’t even start their seasons until April and they spend March in warm areas of the country for spring training. Until colleges change the timing of their baseball seasons, it will remain difficult for Michigan to properly condition and to convince fans to come to games early in the season.

2. The Top Talent is Missing

Each Saturday during the fall, college football fans have the opportunity to watch NFL caliber players when they come to watch Michigan play. There are currently 23 former Michigan football players who are playing in the NFL, while just two former Michigan baseball players can be found on an MLB roster. At first glance, it may seem as though the best athletes come to Michigan to play football and not baseball, but that is not entirely the case. Generally, the best talent in baseball goes straight from high school to the minor leagues. In baseball there is no regulation against this, while football players are required to be out of high school for three years before they can enter the NFL Draft. As a result, most of the top football players choose to play college football and end up playing for schools like Michigan. This gives fans the opportunity to see the best of the best play in

college, an obvious upside for attending a Michigan football game on Saturday, rather than attending a baseball game in the spring.

3. Lack of Television Coverage

Until 2013, college baseball typically went untelevised until the start of the College World Series. As of today, ESPN now covers the 64 contestants for the national championship in the “[Road to Omaha](#)”. With the Big Ten Network launching a new setup as of March 2014, [240 baseball and softball games](#) will be televised as well. Sadly only two of Michigan’s regular season baseball games are included in this total. Despite the recent improvements to showcase live college baseball games throughout the season, college football has had regular season games televised by ESPN for thirty years. A large majority of college football’s popularity can be [attributed to its television coverage](#) throughout history and college baseball was simply never given the opportunity. This has effectively stunted the growth of college baseball and it may not recover.

4. NCAA Scholarship Rules

With baseball players having the option to go directly from high school to professional baseball, it seems as though there needs to be an incentive for players to choose to go to college instead. Unfortunately college baseball does not provide nearly as big of an incentive as college football does, as collegiate baseball teams are required to split [11.7 scholarships between everyone on the roster](#). Comparatively, college football teams receive 85 scholarships. Although college football teams have significantly larger rosters than their baseball counterparts, this is still very detrimental to college baseball. According to Peter Keating, [a writer for ESPN](#), if you compared the number of scholarships in each sport to the number of players in the starting lineup, college football teams have enough scholarships for 3.68 starting lineups. Baseball only has enough scholarships for 1.30 starting lineups, an obvious disadvantage that shows the lack of resources available for baseball players when the University of Michigan is the [most expensive state supported school](#) in the country.

Perhaps the NCAA will eventually address these issues so that college baseball can make improvements. It is only then that Michigan baseball will gain popularity, but even then it seems unlikely that it will ever return to the glory that it once had. Times have changed and football is Michigan’s sport now. Baseball is officially the other sport in Ann Arbor, but underneath the concrete and brick of the Chemistry building lies a deep-rooted, historic field where past students thrived and laid a foundation for the students of today.



BRENDAN MONTGOMERY *is a contributing writer for Grantland.*

ARCHIVE | [@BMontgomery_3](#)
