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The acerbic theater critic George Jean Nathan (1882–1958) came from Indiana to New York where he edited *The Smart Set* from 1914 to 1923 with his partner in venom, H. L. Mencken. The next year the two founded one of the most consistently brilliant and wide-ranging periodicals in United States history, *The American Mercury*. Nathan published extensively on the theater, and it seems only appropriate that one of the country's most self-assured arbiters of taste would have taken time to hold forth (in *Harper's Weekly* in 1910) on baseball's arbiters, the umpires.

George Jean Nathan



Baiting the Umpire

Baseball is the national side-show. The baiting of umpires is the real big-tent entertainment. In Spain, by way of passing the time, they bait innocent bulls on holidays. In America, by way of the same thing, they bait inoffensive men in blue suits every day in the week during the warm season, and twice on Saturdays. What the Latins call “fêtes” the Americans call “double-headers.” Also, what the Latins call “matadores” the Americans call “bleachers.” Some years ago, the Spanish sport-loving public was satisfied with one bull in the ring, just as the American public was satisfied with one umpire. But, as taste became more hysterical and bloodthirsty, the Spaniards demanded at least two bulls for killing purposes, and the Americans, following suit, demanded two umpires. That is the real reason the Solons of baseball added the extra referee to the game. They told the second umpire he was supposed to “watch the bases.” It was a snare. He was put there simply to gratify the public's augmented longing for “sport.”

In comparing the national sports of Spain and the United States, it may be readily seen that the bull has a marked advantage over the umpire. The bull has two horns that he is allowed to use in self-defence. He is given a fair chance for his life. The umpire is not. The bull, furthermore, is not compelled to abide by any printed rules in the process of having his mortal coil unwound for him. The umpire

is. He is not allowed to protect himself. Clause No. 65 of the rules governing baseball says that "under no circumstance shall a player dispute the accuracy of the umpire's judgment and decision on a play." When he applies for a job, the umpire is beguiled by that clause. But no sooner has he donned his blue serge suit and placed a lozenge in his mouth, than he perceives the trick that has been played on him. There is an unwritten law among the players that Clause No. 65 is in violation of their rights, and they feel justified in doing away with it, accordingly, whenever they see fit. There are twenty-five clauses telling the umpire what *he* must do, but only the solitary No. 65 telling what the *players* must not. And, as has been indicated, No. 65 does not count.

But the players do not concern us. They may feel like killing the umpire, but they must stand by and let the bleachers do the job for them. The bleachers are governed by no regulations and may "kill" umpires in any manner and at any time they, in their infinite wisdom, may choose.

The favorite way of doing away with this much-tried official is by word of mouth. Sometimes this is supplemented by leather cushions, pop-bottles, and apple cores, but usually the assault is committed verbally. It is rare sport. Hundreds of thousands of games of baseball were played in the United States during the season of 1909, and yet it is a matter of record that in only *one* of these contests was no umpire's scalp sought. The exception occurred in Jersey City, New Jersey, on Sunday, April 18th. The game in point was played between the Jersey City Eastern League team and the New York National League team, the latter winning by a score of six to three. Before the game, the management of the Jersey City club, as a safeguard against further Chancery Court proceedings to restrain the team from playing ball on Sundays, distributed cards to each spectator requesting the elimination of all loud speech. This was obeyed by the eighteen thousand persons present, and, as a consequence, a record was established. The entire nine innings were finished without any "umpire-killing" whatever. It was miraculous. You cannot kill an umpire in whispers. It is as unsatisfactory as it is impossible.

"Kill the umpire!" is the battle-cry of baseball. Compared to the umpire, the proverbial fat man is a universally loved individual. If there are twenty thousand men at a ball game, each one of the twenty

thousand, as well as all the small boys on the near-by telegraph poles, hate the umpire. Every one itches to take his life. According to the shouted consensus of opinion, hanging is the favorite means for the disposition of the gentleman. "Hang the umpire!" sound the bleachers, in tones of thunder. The electric chair, the guillotine, asphyxiation, poison—none of these will do. The umpire must be hanged. Such is the lynch-law of the stands.

In the famous world's championship series last year between the Detroit and Pittsburg teams, Umpires Klem and Johnstone, of the National League, and Umpires O'Loughlin and Evans, of the American League, were "killed" in almost every inning of every game played. In fact, things got to such a point that the National Baseball Commission was forced to step in. The players had tried to do a little assassinating on their own account. For verbal assault with intent to kill, players Leach, Clarke, Camnitz, Maddox, and Donovan were fined twenty-five dollars each, while Miller, for insisting that one of the umpires must be killed at once because he had called a ball a strike in the fourth game when Miller knew very well it was no such thing, was fined twice that amount.

Once in a while, to vary the monotony of simply clamoring for the umpire's immediate demise, the spectators take it upon themselves to accomplish his death with their own hands. And once in a while they would succeed in their laudable purpose if it were not for the unwelcome intrusion of the police. Twice during last September at the Polo Grounds in New York, a squad of guardians of the law saw fit to spoil a good half-hour's amusement by escorting an umpire to the clubhouse, when a vast throng of lovers of clean sport longed to indulge in a little killing-bee. The umpire, in the second instance at least, *should* have been killed, according to the bleachers. There was justification a-plenty. Had he not robbed the home team of a game by calling a player out for not having touched a base? To be sure, the player should have touched the base according to the rules, and, to be sure, he failed to do so; but was that any reason for the umpire's decision? It most certainly was not. Any umpire who does not know enough to give favorable decisions to the home team in a case like this ought to be killed. The police are the greatest foes of good sport in this country. Thirty-seven times last season, in the two big leagues alone, did they interrupt the killing of umpires.

According to bleacher law, there are three particularly justifiable motives for doing away with umpires. An umpire may be killed, first, if he sees fit to adhere to the rules and make a decision against the home team at a close point in the game. Secondly, an umpire may be killed if he sends a member of the home team to the bench when the player in question has done absolutely nothing but call the umpire names and attempt to bite his ear off—an umpire has no business to be touchy. Thirdly (and this is a perfect defence against the charge of murder), an umpire may be killed if he calls any batter on the home team out on strikes when the player has not even struck at the balls pitched. That the balls go straight over the plate has nothing to do with the case.

It was estimated by a well-known baseball writer at the conclusion of last season that, judging solely from the newspaper records, three hundred and fifty-five umpires in the United States had been molested physically during the period stipulated. That is, three hundred and fifty-five of only the more spectacular instances had found their way into the prints. That the number of actual attempts to do physical injury to umpires was many times in excess of that chronicled cannot be doubted for a moment when it is remembered that there are, in this country, tens of thousands of professional and amateur teams which play a total of hundreds of thousands of games each season. And each game lasts at least nine innings. What a magnificent field of opportunity!

There is ample proof at hand to show that killing-the-umpire is a distinctively American sport. Other countries have tried baseball, but they have not tried killing-the-umpire. That is probably the reason why they have not waxed enthusiastic over baseball. For baseball without umpire-killing is like football without girls in the grand-stand. It simply can't be done. That foreign countries know nothing about our king of outdoor sports was indicated forcibly when, in the fall of 1909, the Detroit team made a trip to Cuba under the management of Outfielder McIntyre. In the entire series of twelve games with the Havana and Almendares nines, not one single objection was made by either the Cuban players or the silent Cuban spectators to a decision of the umpires. The Americans did not know what to think of it—until they counted up the gate receipts at the end of the series. Then they realized that, in their

own country, it is the delight in killing-the-umpire rather than the pleasure in watching-the-game that draws the tremendous crowds through the turnstiles.

When the University of Wisconsin ball team went to Japan last fall at the invitation of the Keio team of Tokio, nine games were played on the Keio grounds at Mita Undoba and all nine games were umpired by one man—a Japanese named Nakano, a former player on the team representing Waseda University. Not once in any of the games did the Japanese spectators make any demonstration against Nakano, and, as a result, the games took on the appearance of “roll-the-ball”—the Japanese sport most familiar to Americans, bazar-goers, and Coney-Islanders. As one of the Wisconsin players said afterward, “For sheer excitement and outbursts of enthusiasm it rivalled a field-day at a deaf-mute asylum.” In Victoria, Australia, where a determined effort is being made to popularize baseball, the prime movers in the campaign, appreciating full well the important and necessary relation that killing-the-umpire bears to the game, have tried the novel experiment of working up the hostile spirit toward the referee by playing the baseball contests—all or in part—before the huge football crowds. These crowds are demonstrative in the extreme, and it is hoped by the baseball promoters that part of the excess football emotional tumult may, in time, be directed against the umpires, thus insuring the success of the game. At Melbourne particularly, where baseball games have been tried on Saturday afternoons preceding the regular football matches, considerable progress has been noted in working up the feelings of the thirty thousand or more spectators against the umpires. Things are going so well, in fact, that there are now twenty-three baseball teams in Victoria as compared with five in 1904. The figures are vouched for by P. B. Seyffarth, one of the leading baseball campaigners in Australia.

In addition to the countries named, baseball has been tried recently in Great Britain, in Mexico, in Central America, in New Zealand, Canada, Italy, and in the Sandwich Islands. In none of these lands, save Australia and the Sandwich Islands, however, does it seem destined to become the national game. The reason is not far to seek. They have begun at the wrong end, these foreigners. You can’t “institute” baseball. You must begin by building up a bleachers. The bleachers will “institute” killing-the-umpire, and then the game of

baseball itself will begin to flourish. In Australia, the matter has been approached in the correct way. In the Sandwich Islands, baseball cannot possibly fail. The natives will take to umpires as naturally as they have taken to missionaries. Only with them, probably, the shout will be, "*Eat the umpire!*"