

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

# Race & sports: The same old story

**R**USH LIMBAUGH'S recent remarks about Donovan McNabb sparked a national debate on race in sports.

Had Limbaugh made his racist remarks at the turn of the last century, the sports pages in this city probably would have honored the comment by printing a degrading caricature of McNabb. At least that's what they did to Charles Albert Bender, a Hall of Fame pitcher for the Philadelphia Athletics who will be honored on Friday with a state historical marker at Indian Field in Carlisle, Pa.

Bender, part Chippewa, arrived in the majors in 1903 as the great hope of Native Americans. Just a decade before, the federal government, fresh from its final military encounter with Indians at Wounded Knee, S.D., instigated an aggressive assimilation process designed to extinguish Indian culture.

Baseball was an important vehicle in that process. The game was taught at all government-run Indian boarding schools as a means of cultivating Anglo-American values of teamwork, sportsmanship and personal achievement. Those who excelled at the sport could enter the white mainstream through semi-pro and minor-league ball.

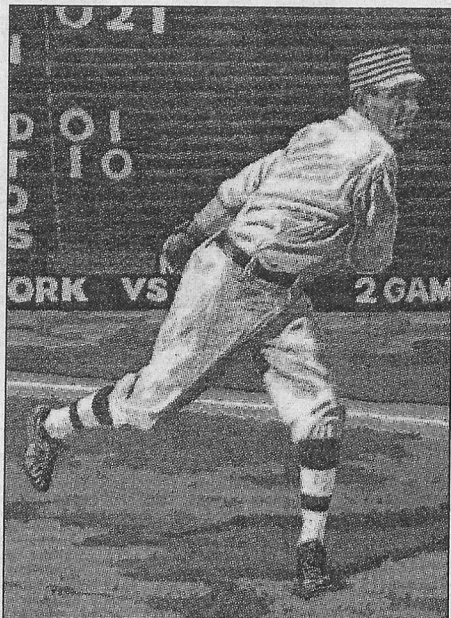
Among the very first to crack

the majors was Louis Sockalexis, who starred for the Cleveland Spiders in 1897. When a leg injury and the indulgences of an urban night life destroyed his brief career, sportswriters were quick to attribute the decline to "trysts with pale-faced maidens" and a "dalliance with the potent grape juice," alcohol. Fortunately, Bender's star was rising as Sockalexis' was flaming out.

Raised on the White Earth Indian Reservation, near Brainerd, Minn., Bender left at age 8 to attend the Lincoln boarding school for Indians in Philadelphia. At age 12, he returned briefly to the reservation before leaving for good in 1898.

For the next four years, Bender attended the Carlisle Industrial School for Indians where he played baseball, football and track for the legendary Glen "Pop" Warner. Transferring to Dickinson College in 1902, Bender spent the summer playing semi-pro baseball for Harrisburg, where he was discovered by the Philadelphia Athletics. Shortly after, Connie Mack, the storied manager of the team, signed him for \$1,800.

Bender was a soft-spoken, highly intelligent individual



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whose dark complexion and coal-black hair gave him the distinctive appearance of an American Indian, though he was actually the product of a mixed marriage.

Because of his appearance, he shouldered the burden of racism from the very beginning of his career. At Columbia Park fans taunted him with war whoops and such vitriolic jeers as "Back to the Reservation!" Teammates

nicknamed him "Chief" considered a racial slur by Native Americans.

Bender also became a popular object of derision on the Philadelphia sports pages. Once, when he misplaced his wallet on a train and asked the conductor for help in finding it, the Philadelphia North American ran a cartoon of the incident. Dressed in buckskin, moccasins and feathers, Bender is shown searching for his "wampum belt" on the floor of a sleeper car while other passengers fear for their safety.

The *Sporting Life* was more racist. Crediting A's manager Connie Mack with "much of the Indian's success," the Philadelphia-based periodical compared Bender to a "Negro on the stage who will work himself to death if you jolly him." In fact, Mack, who referred to Bender as "Albert," was probably one of the few who wanted him to succeed. Bender did not disappoint him.

He would become a mainstay of the Athletics' pitching staff for more than a decade, posting

impressive World Series victories against the storied New York Giants in 1905, 1911 and 1913. Bender's 6-4 record and 2.44 ERA in the Fall Classic is still among the very best in the history of the game.

Mack regarded him as the "greatest money pitcher" of all time, a singular honor considering that the A's also had such Hall of Fame hurlers as Rube Waddell, Eddie Plank and Lefty Grove.

When he completed his major league career in 1925, Bender had compiled a 212-127 record, 1,711 strikeouts, and a 2.46 ERA.

**E**LECTED TO THE Hall of Fame in 1953, Bender was the first Native American to receive that honor.

If not for Bender's example, the sportswriters would have buried Native American hopes for the integration of baseball, much as they had done to eliminate blacks from the game.

But Bender's remarkable playing ability and dignified behavior disproved their notions of racial inferiority and opened the door to the majors for more than 130 Native Americans who played baseball during the first half of the 20th century. ★

William Kashatus, a member of the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society, is working on a bio of Charles A. Bender.