Wartime Baseball Encyclopedia Article

Wartime Baseball

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Wartime Baseball

Throughout World War II, going to the ballpark was a favorite pastime on the home front. In January 1942, just over a month after the United States entered the war, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that major-league baseball could serve as a big morale booster for the American public. The country was at war, but the 1942 baseball season would proceed. Major-league baseball did its part for the war effort by sponsoring scrap drives. Kids who brought metal and rubber items to the ballpark for recycling were admitted to the game for free. Sometimes baseball fans could get free admission with the purchase of a war bond.

Four thousand professional baseball players—about 70 percent of the league—joined the armed services during the war, including Joe DiMaggio (1914–1999), Ted Williams (1918–2002), and Bob Feller (1918–). As a result, many unknown names filled the league rosters. Despite this fact, attendance rose to the highest it had ever been in major-league history to that point. The wartime stand-ins were old-timers, foreign players recruited from Latin America, and men who had not passed the physical requirements for U.S. military service. Pete Gray (1915–2002), a one-armed outfielder, was a big attraction. To many war veterans who had lost limbs in combat, Gray was an inspiring figure.

Minor-league baseball was also a popular attraction, although only nine out of forty-one minor leagues continued to play during the war. Some of the players were defense workers who played in their off hours. A professional league of female ballplayers formed in 1943; it was called the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. Women's baseball games drew a good attendance, but the league folded in 1954.