



Classroom Guide for
LOUIS SOCKALEXIS
Native American Baseball
Pioneer

written by
Bill Wise
 illustrated by
Bill Farnsworth

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 3

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Guided Reading Level: Q

Lexile™ Measure: AD920

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Sports (Baseball), Trailblazers, Prejudice, Courage, Dignity, Native American Interest

National Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

LANGUAGE ARTS: Understanding the Human Experience; Multicultural Understanding; Reading for Perspective

In 1884, Louis Sockalexis, a twelve-year-old Penobscot Indian, fell in love with baseball. The boy lived on a reservation in Maine where his father was a tribal leader. As he grew up, Sockalexis honed his skills and dreamed of joining a major league team. He became a star athlete in high school and college. Even so, he faced opposition from his father who wanted him to focus on tribal life and from spectators who jeered at “the Indian playing a white man’s game.” In 1897, Sockalexis was offered a contract with the major league Cleveland Spiders. Despite this accomplishment, he was lonely away from home and subjected to ugly racism from baseball fans across the country. Then, on June 16, 1897, Sockalexis faced off against a celebrated pitcher for the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds in New York City. Ignoring the heckling crowd and the pitcher who had promised to strike him out, Sockalexis hit a home run to the far reaches of the ballpark. Watching

from the left field line were his father and other members of the Penobscot tribe. And from the stands came loud cheers and applause as New York fans doffed their hats in admiration and respect.

Background

The Cleveland Spiders became known as the Cleveland Indians in 1915. Most historians believe the new name was a result of Sockalexis's association with the team. Today, some people object to using Native American nicknames in this way.

The Polo Grounds, located in upper Manhattan in New York City, was the name of the stadium used by the New York Giants baseball team until 1957, when the team moved to San Francisco, California. Today the site of the old stadium is a public housing project.

From the arrival of the first European settlers in the 1600s until the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, there were numerous conflicts between Native Americans and the newcomers. Although the preponderance of these Indian Wars were fought in the West in the early and mid-nineteenth century, they were most likely still on people's minds when Sockalexis broke into major league baseball in 1897.

Teaching Tip

You might feature this book as part of your observance of Native American Heritage Month in November.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. What sports do you enjoy playing? Why? Have you ever dreamed of playing one of these sports on a national or international level? What would you have to do to attain this level of play?
2. Why is cultural heritage important? How do you honor your heritage?
3. What special dreams for the future do you have? How do you hope to make these dreams come true?
4. What do you know about the history of baseball and the role of minority players? How do you think the game has changed over time?
5. Why is it important to have people respect you? How do you earn the respect of others?
6. What is hate? Why do people sometimes act in ugly ways toward one another, even though they may not even know one another?

Exploring the Book

Examine the book cover illustration with students. Read the title aloud and ask students to talk about what they think a pioneer is. Write students' responses on the chalkboard. Then have a volunteer look up the word in a dictionary and compare the dictionary definition to the students' responses.

Review the different parts of a nonfiction book including the title page, illustrations, afterword, author's sources, dedication, acknowledgments, and notes.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to:

- Find out why Louis Sockalexis was a pioneer.
- Learn more about the life, challenges, and accomplishments of Sockalexis.

Teaching Tip

If students read the Afterword or do additional research on Louis Sockalexis, they will learn that he was an alcoholic, and the disease played a role in ending his short career in the major leagues. As alcohol abuse is an issue in some families, you will want to treat this subject with sensitivity.

VOCABULARY

Invite a student who is a baseball fan to help you draw a diagram of a baseball stadium and field on the board. Then ask students to explain each of these terms and add them as labels to the diagram.

grandstand	bleachers	outfield
diamond	batter's box	bases
pitcher's mound	home plate	line

Challenge students to do one of the following:

- Find at least six compound words in the story that relate to baseball. Write the two words in each compound. Then use each compound in a sentence.
- Find at least two meanings for each of the following words and then use each word in two different sentences to show its different meanings.

reservation	root	bat
pitcher	curb	plate

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. How did Louis Sockalexis first discover baseball? Why do you think he might not have known about it before then?

2. What was Sockalexis's home life like?
3. How did Sockalexis begin to work toward his dream while he was still a boy?
4. How did Sockalexis gain fame during high school and college?
5. How was Sockalexis influenced by his father?
6. Why didn't his father want Louis to sign a contract with the Cleveland Spiders?
7. Why was life in the major leagues difficult for Louis Sockalexis?
8. How did the New York fans treat Sockalexis during the pregame warm-ups in the Polo Grounds?
9. How did Sockalexis respond to the fans? Why did he act this way?
10. Who was Amos Rusie? Why did he boast he could strike out Sockalexis?
11. How did Sockalexis's Penobscot tribe show support for him?
12. How did Sockalexis earn the respect of the New York baseball fans?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might find lines or passages in the story that convey the emotions of Louis Sockalexis, the fans, and the players.
- The **Illustrator** might illustrate a section of the book, such as some of the baseball game action, as if it were a graphic novel.
- The **Connector** might find books or other information about other baseball players who broke barriers.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find information about baseball (players, rules, stadiums, and so on) as it was played in the 1890s.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

The following questions or similar ones will help students personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, in oral discussion, or in written form.

1. Although he chose not to heed his father's wishes, Louis Sockalexis deeply admired his father. Think of an adult you admire. How does that person influence you? Why might it be hard to go against his or her advice?
2. During his career, Sockalexis suffered numerous taunts and insults. How did he react to these? Why? Do you think he responded in the best way? Explain.
3. What are the happiest parts of this story? What are the saddest? Why do you think so?
4. How does this book affect your thinking about prejudice and the way people sometimes treat one another?
5. In addition to encountering prejudice, what other problems did Sockalexis face? How do you think young athletes deal with some of these problems today? Do today's athletes face more challenges? Explain.

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Baseball players are often given nicknames by fans and the press. What were some of the names Sockalexis was called? How can names make people feel special? How can names be hurtful? Write an essay explaining your feelings about nicknames.
2. Suppose people were able to write blogs during Sockalexis's lifetime. Write a blog describing his performance in the 1897 game at the Polo Grounds.
3. Pretend you are a sportswriter assigned to interview baseball players after games. Write a list of questions you would ask in an interview with Louis Sockalexis and his father after the game against the Giants.
4. This book has won numerous awards. Make a list of reasons why you might give this book an award. Then use these reasons to write a persuasive paragraph explaining why an organization should honor the book.

ELL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Assign each English language learner to a partner who is a strong English speaker and reader. Have partners read the pages and discuss the illustrations together.
2. Teach ELL students simple phrases such as "I don't know that word." "I have a question." "Speak more slowly." "Please repeat that sentence." Encourage ELL students to use these phrases to communicate their needs while reading.
3. Like Louis Sockalexis, ELL students may feel like outsiders at times. By offering frequent praise and support for their reading efforts, you can help them feel more confident.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Interested students might do research in the library and online to learn more about the Penobscot Nation. Ask students to report on their findings to the class.
2. Have students use maps to locate places mentioned in the book such as the Penobscot Indian reservation in Maine; Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts; Cleveland, Ohio; and upper Manhattan in New York City, home of the former Polo Grounds.
3. Baseball has long been a favorite sport in the United States. Explore with students some of the ways that baseball has become part of American culture. Some areas to consider include: recreation, economics, food, language, and entertainment.

Math

1. Have students find the measurements for a professional baseball diamond today. Then have them draw a baseball diamond to scale on a sheet of paper or create a scale model.
2. Teach, or have students who are baseball fans explain, how a professional baseball game is scored. Compare this to the scoring of another sport in which students are interested.

Art

1. The first Topps baseball card to feature Louis Sockalexis was not issued until July, 2003. Students who like to collect baseball cards might enjoy designing their own version of a card for Sockalexis.
2. Explain that baseball equipment and uniforms were different in 1897 than they are today. Have students research what earlier uniforms and/or equipment looked like, then make drawings to share with the class. Students might select three or four different periods between the late 1890s and today to show how the uniforms changed over time. Suggest that students begin their research by studying the illustrations in *Louis Sockalexis*.
3. The book's illustrator, Bill Farnsworth, looked through many old photographs before beginning his illustrations. Suggest that students use old photos of baseball or another sport as inspiration for their own paintings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Wise first learned about Louis Sockalexis when he was a teenager in Maine. He was researching a report for a junior high school English class on major league baseball players from Maine. He says, "I discovered that Sockalexis was not only one of Maine's greatest athletes ever, but also one of America's most talented baseball players of the time." As an adult, Wise was inspired to write about Sockalexis's courage and passion for

baseball. "His story deserves to be known. Louis Sockalexis was truly an American hero." Today, Wise is an eighth-grade teacher and because of his great interest in the sport, a "baseball historian." He and his family live in Gorham, Maine.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Bill Farnsworth grew up in Connecticut and is a graduate of The Ringling School of Art and Design. He is the illustrator of more than fifty children's books and has also created paintings for magazines, advertisements, and galleries. His work has won numerous awards and honors, including Teachers Choice awards, Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, and *American Bookseller* Pick of the Lists. Farnsworth does careful research before creating his illustrations for a story. "After I've done the research," he says, "my goal is to give the viewer a sense of what the main character in the story is feeling, so you can imagine yourself actually there!"

Awards and honors *Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer* has received include:

- Carter G. Woodson Book Award, National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)
- Children's Book Award, Primary Nonfiction, International Reading Association (IRA)
- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- Notable Books for a Global Society, International Reading Association (IRA)
- Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, Honorable Mention

Book Information

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(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

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Guided Reading Level: Q

Themes: Entertainers, Activism, Perseverance/Overcoming Obstacles and Hardships, Discrimination, Dreams and Aspirations, Education, Sports, African American and United States History

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *Louis Sockalexis* at

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/80/pb/louis_sockalexis

Also Illustrated by Bill Farnsworth

Buffalo Song

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/171/hc/buffalo_song

BookTalk with Bill Wise and Bill Farnsworth on *Louis Sockalexis*

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/louissockalexis.mhtml>

Painting Demonstration with Bill Farnsworth on *Louis Sockalexis*

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/sockalexisartdemo.mhtml>

Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/80/pb/louis_sockalexis (secure on-line ordering)

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