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Editor: Ron Kaplan (23 Dodd Street, Montclair, NJ 07042, 973-509-8162, Ronk23@aol.com)

Comments from the Chair

Andy McCue
Riverside, CA

It’s been a marvelous growth quarter for The Baseball Index. Enthusiasm generated at the St. Louis convention, and the continued efforts of volunteers such as Steve Milman have either added or are about to add major additions to the database.

- Steve Weingarden, who has been compiling a bibliography for the Business of Baseball Committee, had been keeping it in a format compatible with TBI. At the convention, Steve and I discussed some issues of conversion and he delivered the file. By early September, the 513 entries Steve had done were up on the website. And, Steve promises to keep it up as he adds new material to the Business of Baseball list.

- We also had a positive response to my posting of 2004 books that hadn’t been catalogued. Bobby Plapinger and Bob Timmermann were particularly helpful in this regard and I’ll be sending out a 2005 list soon.

- Jim Lannen completed the difficult task of creating TBI entries out of the citations in David Block’s wonder Baseball Before We Knew It. David’s book, for those of you who haven’t read it, chronicles mentions of “baseball” or variants thereof dating back several hundred years. Many of these entries were made in passing, so Jim’s task was a difficult one. That was an additional 175 very hard to find citations, many before 1850.

- Peter Winske delivered the citations for the first issue of The Sporting News in 1952 and moved on to the second issue. Mound City Memories, the St. Louis convention publication, and the first issue of Base Ball, the new biannual on early baseball from McFarland edited by John Thorn, were catalogued.

- Anthony Basich of the Deadball Committee catalogued quite a number of articles from their newsletter, as did Cliff Blau for 19th Century Notes from that Committee.

- Matt Bohn, whose interests cover the Tigers and major league broadcasting, decided to get involved and has been sending a nice, steady stream of citations for articles and books that he read.

- The project with the biggest impact is one I mentioned back in the April newsletter, the project to digitize Frank Phelps index to obituaries in The Sporting News. This project has been wildly successful, thanks mostly to the work of Phil Bergen. The obituaries covered the years from 1933 to 1991. All but about six years have been turned in to me by the volunteers. I haven’t been able to keep up with them but already just under 7,000 entries are ready to go into TBI. I hope to get the last of the files, finish my editing and have them up by the end of tear, a tremendous addition to TBI.

- I decided we should put an emphasis on Baseball Digest because of the large number of articles it has produced over the years and asked SABR members to send in unwanted back issues that could then be parcelled out to volunteers for cataloguing. The response has been strong with Chuck Rosciam, Dennis Dillon, Rob Neyer and, once again, Bobby Plapinger, providing numerous back issues.

- And, the ever-reliable Steve Milman turned up a citation from an article batting which Henry Chadwick wrote for the Scientific American issue of Sept. 11, 1886. It’s the kind of gem that really emphasizes how broad TBI’s scope is.

So, it’s been a very good quarter and I’m hopeful that trend will continue. Volunteers are always needed and appreciated, especially for projects such as Baseball Digest.

Features

Author Profile: Richard Grossinger

For Mets fans, the 2007 season ended not with a bang, but with a whimper as the team frittered away a seven-game National League Eastern Division lead with 17 games to play.

Years from now, how will fans recall the events of this major disappointment?

If they are as thoughtful as author Richard Grossinger, the bad melds with the good to form a complete picture.

In his latest release, The New York Mets: Ethnicity, Myth and Subtext, Grossinger goes beyond the team deconstruction that has become the standard in recent years. “It’s sort of a baseball book on the surface, but underneath it’s really a different book,” he said in a telephone interview from his summer home in Maine.
Grossinger, who has a PhD in anthropology and has written extensively on what would generally be considered more serious subjects, has edited several ecletic anthologies about the national pastime, including *Baseball, I Gave You All the Best Years of My Life; The Temple of Baseball; Baseball Diamonds: Tales and Voodoo from a Native American Life;* and *The Dreamlife of Johnny Baseball.* He has learned that trying to market such esoteric books for the average fan didn’t work — “They didn’t sell worth a damn,” he said — so he decided to go in the opposite direction, starting up his own publishing company.

The 63-year-old Grossinger explained the meaning of his subtitle.

- **Ethnography** comes from his work as an anthropologist: “I considered a lot of the stuff I did on the Mets field work, especially some of the stuff in the 1980s when I interviewed players and went on the field.”
- **Myth:** “I’m writing about the mythic Mets, the Mets of my imagination rather than writing about the actual Mets.”
- **Subtext:** “That may be the trickiest. I may have used it because it’s a fashionable word, and it keys to the fact that it’s not really looking for what lies underneath the day-to-day coverage of the team.”

The son of Paul Grossinger — whose hotel in the Catskills was a staple of Jewish culture for generations — the writer grew up a Yankees fan. “They had a tremendous influence over the hotel. So many of the players came there...[Y]ou’d have to say the Yankees always had that edge in New York. They’re deeper in [the city’s] history and consciousness, and in some ways they represent the New York that New York wants to see itself as.”

But when the Mets made their debut in 1962, he was hooked. “I went through my own personal transformation in college, when the culture was changing in the late ’60s and early ’70s and baseball came to seem sort of tawdry and uninteresting for a few years, and when I came back to it, it just looked different. Only the Mets seemed to relate to who I had become; the Yankees tended to relate to who I had been. [They] represented the New York in which I had grown up, which had been completely lost to me, and the Mets represented a kind of unknown future which I was looking at in my 20s.”

Jewish immigrant parents in the early 20th century disdained baseball for distracting their sons from more productive pursuits. So why would such an obviously thoughtful and learned man waste his time on such inconsequential matters? “Writing is writing. It’s what you make of the subject, the art of the subject that is interesting,” he said.

“It’s not the subject that’s trivial; it’s the way you relate to it. “What is ultimately important,” he asked? “The Zen monk sitting in the monetary getting to the bottom of the mind? The scientist trying to find the cure for cancer? The politician trying to end the war? All these things are very important but if you take a step back from any of them, you have to wonder whether they, too, are in some sense artifacts of existence and simply masks through which people find themselves. “I think baseball is one of those. It’s always better to dig into it and try and figure out the nature of the connection than to have this kind of ambivalence that says, ‘I’m not supposed to be involved in something so stupid and irrelevant [as baseball] but somehow I am.”’

The Mets’ collapse has one potential benefit for the author: Now that the team is done for the year, those more thoughtful fans will have plenty of time to read Grossinger’s books.

[Editor’s Note: A version of this article appeared in *New Jersey Jewish News.*]

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**The Muse: Mickey Rutner**

About 60 years ago — Sept. 13, 1947, to be exact — Mickey Rutner hit his only major league home run.

He did it as a member of the Philadelphia Athletics in an 8-2 win over the Chicago White Sox.

Rutner, who has made his retirement home in Georgetown, Texas, displayed that fabulous “athlete’s recall” for NJ Jewish News. “The guy threw me a curve ball, and I hit it quite well, and as I was rounding second I was thinking to myself, ‘Holy cow!’”

He also had his first base hit, which had come a few days earlier in Yankee Stadium, against Joe Page. “That’s what you dream about. You always want to play at the Stadium against the Yankees,” said Rutner, who was born in Hempstead, NY, and attended St. John’s University.

Actually, retirement is a relative term. Rutner, at 87, the oldest living Jewish ex-major leaguer, has been working for the public relations department of the Round Rock Express, the AAA affiliate of the Houston Astros owned by Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan. “I work as a greeter in the luxury suites,” he said. “I keep them away from Nolan so they don’t bother him during the game. I enjoy being out there. The people are very nice to me. I do a lot of handshaking.”

Rutner played with Lou Limmer — who had been the second oldest Jewish ex-major leaguer before passing away last April — in the Puerto Rican winter leagues. Like Limmer, he was a basically a New York kid who was shocked by the anti-Semitism he faced in the Deep South towns of the minor leagues. “It was an experience,” Rutner said.

One of his teammates when he first started out was the author Eliot Asinof. “The manager of the team...said, ‘I
can’t have two Yids on my team,’ so he released Eliot,” Rutner recalled. It turned out to be a good career move for his friend. “He was a bright man and he went on to play in a different league and then he wrote a few books.” One on those books, Eight Men Out, became the seminal account of the 1919 Black Sox gambling scandal.

Rutner himself was the subject of a novel by Asinof, Man on Spikes, the fictional account of Mike Kutner, a good career minor leaguer struggling to break into the bigs.

“Asinof was visiting us at the house...and he was taking notes and he asked me if it would be all right if he wrote this book about me — but he wouldn’t use my name.”

In his book Memories of Summer: When Baseball Was an Art, and Writing about It a Game, Roger Kahn cites Man On Spikes as one of his favorite baseball books and offers an insightful observation on the subtleties of discrimination.

“Rutner was Jewish; apparently Connie Mack held that against him,” Kahn wrote. “Asinof’s hero is not Jewish. He wears eyeglasses. The techniques of novelists can be every bit as fascinating as the techniques of left-handed pitchers and center fielders.”

Rutner said he hoped the novel, originally published in 1955, will be turned into a movie some day.

Although he still enjoys good health and as much as he still loves baseball, Rutner doesn’t know if he’ll return to the Express in 2008; it might interfere too much with his weekly golf game.

Ron Kaplan


Reviews


Who would have thought that the 21st century would produce, in its first seven years, not one but two 400-plus page biographies of Sal Maglie?

James Szalontai’s 2002 Close Shave: The Life and Times of Baseball’s Sal Maglie is notable for its thorough examination of the baseball context of the pitcher’s life, revealing the dark side of 1950s baseball.

Judith Testa’s biography delivers a whole lot more. She too focuses on Maglie’s professional life, but also includes a great deal else, including his character and personality, family, and other issues. The “Maglie, Sal” entry in the index has a dozen sub-headings, including “Friends,” under which you will find “Carl Furillo.”

Testa’s preface contains her thoughts on what biography is and what she hopes hers will accomplish. For Testa, a biography is “an exploration of the subject’s life, both public and personal, including areas the individual and his family might have wished to keep private” (xiv). Those last topics she names as politics, sex, religion, race, money matters, and dedical issues. All of these are explored, “though the Maglie family declined to release Sal’s medical records and death certificate” (xiv-xv). Testa wants to write “a book about a man who played baseball” (xi). Further, she feels that “a biography should do more than merely recount the events in its subject’s life; it should also illuminate his personality” (xvii).

We learn lots about how Maglie became the dominant pitcher of the early 1950s and the mask of “stone-cold ferocity and dark, demonic menace . . . that Maglie learned to wear on the mound” (xi). We also learn about the “satisfactions and terrible reverses of fortune” of his personal life: his large Italian-American family and two happy marriages on the one hand, the loss of his first wife to cancer and his adopted son to drugs and alcohol on the other. Testa describes a private Maglie diametrically opposed to his public persona. Reporters, she says, are “amazed by the contrast between the fierce man on the mound and the gentle soul they encountered in the clubhouse” (265).

Let’s take a closer look at one of those topics Testa names as potentially controversial: race. Maglie played during the years of racial integration, and he played both for and against those teams earliest involved, principally the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers. Testa is careful to begin with Maglie’s own racial and religious background: Italian and Catholic. The neighborhood he grew up in in Niagara Falls she describes as containing “a broad ethnic mix.” “As a result of growing up in a peacefully mixed neighborhood, Sal Maglie developed into a man without prejudices, remarkable in an era when ethnic slurs were part of the common language” (11). In Cuba, “decades before any American major league team had a black manager, Sal Maglie played on a team managed by a Negro League great, without any problems. Art Pennington recalled Maglie as the only completely unprejudiced white man he had ever met, so unaffected by racial considerations that for quite a while after meeting Maglie, Pennington thought the deeply tanned pitcher with the ark eyes and curly black hair was either Hispanic or a relatively light-skinned African American” (77).

Race weaves in and out of Testa’s treatment of Jackie Robinson and his relation to Maglie. There are three points in the book when Testa must speak of the element of race in the Giant-Dodger rivalry of the early fifties: two instances of Robinson’s bunting down the first base line in retaliation of Maglie’s brushback pitches and Testa’s comments on the Dodgers’ reputation in the early 1950s. 

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In the middle of her account of the 1951 season, Testa stops her narrative to consider the contemporary reputation of the Brooklyn Dodgers. What she finds is that their role in the reintegration of baseball and their continuing success have made them widely unpopular outside of Brooklyn. She mentions “arrogant behavior” that made other teams play especially hard against them in the 1951 season. But perhaps even more important was the fact that “Robinson’s combative personality and aggressive play earned the Dodgers more than their share of enemies” (154). Racial animosity played a large part in the team’s unpopularity, and Robinson’s personality exacerbated that. Testa describes the circumstances. “Not even the vilest ethnic slurs directed at players of any other descent carried the historic freight of rage, fear, and hatred compacted into the insults hurled at Robinson during his first years in the majors, and he later took a fierce delight in returning those insults in kind, as well as through his breakneck style of play. Racial prejudices and animosities remained high among the reasons why many whites, both on the playing fields and in the stands, wanted to see the Dodgers defeated” (154).

In addition, Testa says that Robinson “inhabited the heart of the hatred between the Dodgers and the Giants” (248). Her treatment of two incidents is especially interesting. In both cases — one in 1951, the other in 1955 — Robinson responded violently to Maglie’s efforts to intimidate him at bat. In the first instance, Robinson bunted down the first base line following a brushback pitch from Maglie and then ran into him. Testa calls journalists’ and historians’ accounts of the incident a “fish story,” in which the writers’ sense of the combatants’ animosity won out over the facts as stated in the next day’s papers. Robinson attributed Maglie’s animosity to race, but Testa thinks not. She calls Maglie “the least prejudiced of men,” and continues “he know that racism had nothing to do with his conduct toward Robinson. The only colors he paid attention to were the colors on a batter’s uniform. Maglie was an equal opportunity intimidator” (134).

That said, Maglie and Robinson clearly singled each other out. In the second inning of a game in April, 1955, Maglie threw a pitch – probably intentionally – behind Robinson, a cardinal baseball sin (244-248. See also 288). In the fourth, Robinson bunted down the first base line, hoping to run Maglie down in retaliation. Maglie, sensing the potential for collision, declined either to field the ball or to cover first base, and Robinson collided instead with second baseman Davey Williams, aggravating a back condition that ended his career.

Neither principal has behaved well here, and both Maglie and Robinson come to know it, though Robinson is much better at acknowledging his culpability than Maglie. According to Testa, “decades later, the incident still ranked, and Maglie remained on the defensive about it. In a rare display of ill humor, during a 1974 interview he refused to discuss it” (247). “Robinson,” according to Testa, “came to believe that mistakenly running down Davey Williams was his worst moment in baseball, worse than all the racism he had endured in his early years in the game, because it put him, not his adversaries, in the moral wrong” (248). A small part of a large book, these encounters illustrate Testa’s ability to combine narrative and analysis and to show both the public and personal sides of individuals.

This is characteristic of the whole book, and there is much else in it for SABRites. The first chapters delineate Maglie’s development into a major league pitcher, particularly under the tutelage of Dolf Luque. Dodger fans will love the two chapters devoted to Maglie’s sojourn in Brooklyn. The account of the 1951 pennant race comes complete with commentary on the Giants’ use of mechanical sign-stealing devices. Maglie’s career as a pitching coach is examined in detail, as is the picture of him drawn in Jim Bouton’s Ball Four. There he looks a fool, and Testa acknowledges that Maglie could have been “too old and conservative for the game in the late 1960s” (381, 3830. Through it all, Testa keeps track of the large changes that occur, both in baseball and in American society. This is an exemplary biography.

Leverett T. (Terry) Smith
North Carolina Wesleyan College, Rocky Mount, NC


Only pick up this book if you are a) very interested in country and western music, or b) determined to write a biography of the longtime owner of the Los Angeles/California/Anaheim Angels and want to know about the rest of his life.

Holly George-Warren has written a nice biography for the music aficionado. Her details of recording sessions rival those books by our colleagues who want to record every plate appearance their subject ever had. She puts him in the context of the growth and spread of country and western music with tremendous context and background knowledge.

However, I found two passing (less than a sentence) mentions of his ownership of the Angels and the book essentially cuts off in the early 1960s, as his singing career ended but just as his years as a baseball owner began. There is also little discussion of the investments in radio, television and hotel properties that gave him the fortune to buy the franchise.

However, if you are going to be his biographer, there is excellent material on his early years, his music career and the drinking and womanizing the characterized much of his life. It’s a very good biography of a part of the man’s life that isn’t going to fall into the interest area of SABR members.

Andy McCue

Even without the baseball on the cover and the reference to Christy Mathewson’s out pitch, fans of baseball fiction should have no doubt that The Fade-away is a sport novel. The town baseball team is the heart of Port Newton, as revealed by the newspaper clippings that make up a number of the book’s chapters.

Baseball is the main concern of the book’s narrators, from former-player Doc Fuller to second baseman Calvin Elwell, and Sophie Fuller, Doc’s daughter and Calvin’s girlfriend.

Another way to look at a historical novel is to see if its seams show, along with whether or not the author can refrain from trotting out research that doesn’t quite fit (otherwise known as Flannery O’Connor’s “Kill your Darlings” Principle). Along similar lines, the mark of quality in a novel about racism could be whether or not the book sheds some light on making the world a better place. The Fade-away hits the mark on two of these three qualities.

For the most part, Jansen’s readers are rewarded for the effort required to track the threads of the book’s multiple narrators. Doc Fuller is perhaps the most effective narrator, as well as being strategically chosen since he is privy to much of Port Newton’s inside game. Calvin Elwell, second baseman and bartender, speaks well as a player, although his voice might have been more distinct if it had carried bitter undertones from being replaced by a professional ringer as part of manager Foghorn’s plan for coping the championship. Calvin tells us that he can’t bad mouth Foghorn after being taken in by him, but that wouldn’t necessarily stop him from showing resentment.

Often the narrator with a score to settle tells a more pointed tale. Even more pointed, perhaps, would be for us to hear directly from Foghorn as the architect of the team’s transformation or to hear from Jack Dobbs, the mysterious stranger who comes to Port Newton and becomes a target for local racism after being the first Native American to play in — and subsequently run out of — the major leagues.

With regard to the historical content of The Fade-away, the “sources, disclaimers, acknowledgements” before the title page come close to being a case of the author getting between the reader and his work, to paraphrase Judith Winthrop, the literary critic turned baseball apologist in Heywood Broun’s The Sun Field. Although these mea culpae seem somewhat defensive and untrusting toward the reader, the historical elements in the novel ring true overall. The device of excerpting from the Port Newton News is a large part of this success because it allows Jansen to summarize the town team’s games without falling into the trap of play-by-play analysis, which has been the ruin of many a baseball novel, according to Kinsella. The material listed under “Local Brevities” and “Meetings and Events” captures the flavor of newspapers of the time — if not the appearance since setting them in columns would have given them a more authentic look. The author largely avoids showing off his research, although a trip to San Francisco’s red light district has little consequence in the larger scope of the novel (i.e. Sophie never finds out about Calvin’s adventure). Also, the opportunity to treat the topic of women attending boxing matches — to which they were invited in the late 1800s in an attempt to legitimize the sport — goes largely by the ropes since there is no larger discussion when Sophie and one of her friends sneak into an exhibition given by Gentleman Jim Corbett.

The Fade-away certainly documents the existence of racism at the turn of the last century, but this is something we already knew about as readers. As noted above, the book missed the opportunity to give Jack Dobbs his own voice to tell his own story. The romance between Dobbs and Lily Newton (who is the Emily Grierson of Port Newton, searching for the lost family fortune by digging holes in the yard and letting her lovers go without resorting to rat poison) is another avenue for advancing a progressive cause, but their story is told indirectly for the most part. Doc Fuller passes this off with a line about how “unanswered questions do seem to be the rule these days” (229), which may be true enough in our postmodern age, but still seems like a cop-out somehow. If the Dobbs-Newton union were to produce a child, wouldn’t that create some hope for a better future, as is the case when Judith Winthrop and Tiny Tyler bring forth a power-hitting intellectual in The Sun Field? In Doc Fuller’s take at the end of The Fade-away, the future of baseball in Port Newton is decidedly uncertain and the issue of racism is left to be resolved by future generations.

Scott Peterson
University of Maine


The mecca for baseball fans everywhere is the Hall of Fame, located, as everyone knows, in Cooperstown, New York. It is an institution so well known that, for the most part, it is largely taken for granted — something that always was — and no one knows the labors involved in its establishment. That is, until the publication of this book.

Jim Reisler has created a wonderful book using the inauguration of the Hall as a backdrop to relate the creation of the mythology of baseball’s origins in America. While accurately recording the erroneous story of Abner Doubleday’s invention of baseball, Albert Spalding, and the Mills Commis-
tion’s support of that myth, Reisler subtly introduces the more accurate evolution of the game from cricket and town ball and the efforts of Alexander Cartwright and Henry Chadwick to set the story right.

The main focus of this story is the creation of the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, the efforts behind it and the events that occurred on the inaugural day. The creation of the Hall was the result of the efforts primarily of two men: Stephen C. Clark, Jr. and Alexander Cleland.

Clark was a Cooperstown native whose family made a fortune with the Singer Sewing Machine Company. He never forgot his hometown amidst other philanthropic projects partnered up with Cleland, whom he knew since 1931, to make the Hall a reality. Emigrating to the United States in 1903, Cleland worked in a series of increasingly responsible reform jobs and ran Clark House, under the auspices of the Clark family.

Meeting with Clark in Cooperstown in 1934, Cleland saw workers renovating Doubleday Field in preparation for celebrating baseball’s centennial in 1939 and the idea for a museum took root. The two men had no interest in baseball to this point but they were definitely focused on philanthropy and public service.

Interwoven with this story are anecdotal pictures of the first eleven inductees to the Hall. Reisler introduces them in the order in which they spoke on that day in 1939. There are two exceptions to these speakers—Christy Mathewson, who had died of tuberculosis in 1925 and Ty Cobb—who got to the ceremony at the end. As each is called up to the microphone to say a few words, the author uses that instance as a springboard to launch into the history of each player. Here is described highlights from each man’s career and, most interestingly, the order in which they spoke on that sunny day in 1939, he tosses in the subterfuges involved in deciding who gets credit for “inventing” baseball, as well as the behind-the-scenes ministrations to create the physical space for the Hall of Fame and Museum itself.

In trying to do it all, he does justice to none of the individual components.

What’s particularly disturbing is the lack of attention to detail. One example: the author quotes Christy Mathewson heaping praise on Mr. Mack and Honus Wagner at the opening event. The problem: Mathewson died in 1925. In another example, he credits Walter Johnson with an “unreal 212 shutouts,” as if the actual amount of 110 wasn’t enough.

Who is to blame for such mistakes? The author? The editor? Even if these are the only factual errors, it renders questionable other information which might go unnoticed by the casual fan. To say nothing of other portions of the book. “Alexander had sought a job as a big-league pitching coach, but no team had taken a chance, with the $250,000 that he was thought to have earned in baseball long since gone.” Is the author trying to say that Alexander was not considered for employment because he wasted his career earnings? That Reisler has written for such prominent publications as Sports Illustrated, Newsweek, and The New York Times makes such statements all the more disappointing.

Ron Kaplan

[Editor’s Note: A version of this review appears on the blog, rksbaseballbookshelf.wordpress.com and was written when Cooperstown was first published. Since then, Reisler has come out with another — The Best Game Ever: Pirates vs. Yankees, October 13, 1960 (Carroll & Graf) — that has been criticized by reviewers for similar gaffes.]