Breaking the Slump: Baseball in the Depression Era
By Charles C. Alexander
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Breaking the Slump is Alexander's fifth book about baseball, following biographies of Ty Cobb, John McGraw, and Rogers Hornsby, and Our Game, a brief history of baseball focusing on the major leagues. Breaking the Slump is a different sort of book, concerned as it is with a specific moment in the sport's history, one defined by the history of the culture at large. Because Alexander begins with general history, baseball is not the context but is presented in a larger context. This is an academic book with the usual paraphernalia: notes, a select bibliography, an index, and 16 pages of photographs.

Alexander describes his purpose (p.x) quite simply and directly: "What I've wanted to do in this book is to convey a sense of what baseball was like in those hard times." Though he focuses on major league baseball, he tries also "not to lose sight of the minor leagues" (p.x). For the most part, the treatment is chronological, though there is a general introduction and a chapter, late in the book, "which looks at the lives of professional ballplayers" (p.xi). This is followed by a single chapter on the Negro leagues.

Each of the seven chronological chapters follows a similar pattern. Chapter 4, for instance, called "The Leanest Year, 1933", begins with a focus on the economics of the baseball business and a summary of the events of the off-season. There follows a section covering spring training that also reminds readers of the Roosevelt inauguration, the bank holiday, the repeal of prohibition, and the general culture of poverty, and their effect on baseball. Following sections include those on the American and National league seasons, the initial All-Star Game in Chicago, an account of the World Series, and finally post-season events, in this case Larry MacPhail's arrival in Cincinnati, the continuing dismantling of the Philadelphia Athletics, and the major- and minor-league meetings.

"Baseball Lives", a chapter that describes the lives of ballplayers in the 1930s, exemplifies the focus of the book: the players themselves. It begins by underlining the negative aspects of a baseball career: an expensive way of life that did not prepare the player for a post-baseball career or for retirement. Alexander notes that three bad habits (smoking, drinking, and chasing women) were enthusiastically pursued by many. He describes the limited education and working-class backgrounds of many, but also notes that the number of "college men" rose throughout the decade. He deals with ethnicity and ethnic stereotyping and with the geographic origins of players, noting that "by the 1930s a substantial shift toward the south and west had taken place" (p.195). He briefly considers off-season employment of ballplayers. At the chapter's end, he lists memories of some of the agonies of the life: "an inviolate reserve clause, no pension benefits, and, perhaps most vividly, no air conditioning" (p.199). This leads him to consider several career minor leaguers and to the fact "that just about everybody within all-white
Organized Baseball had it better than ballplayers on the other side of the color line" (p.203).

A chapter on the Negro leagues follows. In his preface, Alexander worries about devoting only a single chapter to this subject, perhaps because it understates the importance of the Negro leagues in the history of baseball and perhaps because it effectively "ghettoizes" black baseball (p.x-xi). Actually, Alexander's treatment of African-Americans in baseball during the 1930s is broader than this single chapter on the Negro leagues. He treats the subject in his introduction and also in his handling of the post-season barnstorming tours, which often involved both black and white players. The problem in acknowledging the importance of the Negro leagues, I suspect, is our tendency to view all of baseball through the lens of the major-league game. Are there better ways to understand the game? What if we made the Negro leagues (and the minor leagues) the focus and kept the majors in the background? There might be some sense in doing this, since many of the changes that began in the thirties began there rather than in the majors. Or perhaps a more international perspective would be sensible, particularly looking at United States baseball in the context of baseball in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Japan. One thing seems sure: a focus on major-league baseball will result in the Negro leagues getting less treatment than their importance merits.

For now, *Breaking the Slump* is the best introduction to the game in the 1930s. And I've just learned that it's this year's Seymour Award medal winner. Well played, Charles Alexander!