Book Review

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CLOSE SHAVE: The Life and Times of Baseball’s Sal Maglie

I never dreamed I’d see a biography of Sal Maglie, but here one is, more than 400 pages, complete with notes, bibliography, and index. In addition, there are some 20 photographs scattered through the book, the last a sad picture of Maglie in 1969, when he served as pitching coach of the Seattle Pilots. My favorite is one of Jackie Robinson, Maglie, and Carl Furillo all looking happy together in Dodger uniforms. Maglie has always been one of my favorite ball-players, but I hadn’t expected a biography, especially one this long. Why so much ado about Sal?

Szalontai explains his purposes in writing the book in the preface: Maglie as “a feared, hated, and respected craftsman of pitching who symbolized the rough era in which he played” (p.1). “The foundation of this [book],” Szalontai continues, “consists of a game-by-game analysis of Maglie’s professional career which was compiled using the newspapers of the day” (p.2). The book is about more than Maglie; it is “also an examination of the teams and players he played with and against” (p.2). Finally, Maglie is the symbol of a whole era of baseball, during which it was “a violent, dangerous, and manipulative sport”. Szalontai wants to deal with the “unsavory aspects” of the national pastime: “This ‘golden age’ of baseball was replete with intense rivalries that cultivated ‘beanball’ wars, fights, riots, and memorable arguments” (p.2).

As to his understanding of the craft of pitching, Maglie was known as “The Barber”, called so, it would appear, because of his penchant for aiming his fastball at batters’ chins or at their heads (see p.100 for Szalontai’s discussion of the origins of this nickname). According to Szalontai, Maglie “transformed the art of pitching into an act of terror” (p.91). In pitching, he relied on “intimidation, pinpoint control, and a great curveball” (p.261). Perhaps Maglie’s best summary of the way he pitched came in response to Jackie Robinson’s complaint that Maglie was trying to hit him. Said Maglie (p.130-131): “Look, let’s get this straight once and for all. I pitch like this: throw ‘em high inside and low outside. I got to figure that every guy up there batting is trying to bunt my brains out. So I pitch him tight, he can’t get set. He has to stay loose, can’t get that toe hold on the ball. Then when I come back with the low, breaking stuff on the outside, he really has to reach for it. That’s the only way to pitch and win.” Szalontai concludes that Sal the Barber “was not an anachronism; he played at precisely the right time in history” (p.370).

And this is why the book is of interest to those other than the small band who make up the Sal Maglie Fan Club. The book gives us a prolonged look at the dark underside of major-league baseball between World War II and expansion, a time we are all too often tempted to idealize. Although for the most part Szalontai concentrates on the game on the field, he does comment on the important off-the-field changes in the game, underlining the owners’ “iron fist domination over the game” (p.228). As one consequence, the game on the field was violent and dangerous (p.2).

Szalontai sets the scene early in the book with the story of a game in, I believe, 1939 when Montreal first baseman Gene Hasson was beaned by Buffalo pitcher Raymond Roche. Szalontai uses this incident to underline “the threat of death on the diamond”, as Hasson “had a severed fracture of the skull and for two days lay in the hospital in critical condition before showing improvement” (p.14). For Szalontai, the beanball is the defining moment of major-league baseball in the 1950s.

Szalontai suggests two other sources for the prominence of beanballs besides the owners’ “ironist domination”: 1) “the escalation of the home run ball” and 2) race. Szalontai writes: “Since Jackie Robinson ‘integrated’ baseball, the throwing of beanballs, which was already a frequent occurrence, rose significantly” (p.86). He notes (p.294): “In an eleven-year major league career Robinson was hit a staggering 72 times, including a career high 14 times in 1952. These numbers are truly high when you consider that no one eluded a pitched ball better than Jackie Robinson.” Szalontai underlines that such behavior is not confined to Giants-Dodgers games, or even to the National League, by including stories of the Milwaukee Braves (p.340), Don Zimmer (p.285), the Cleveland Indians (p.274), and Minnie Minoso (p.355). He writes (p.255): “Batters were being hit over 200 times a season on average during the 1950s, a staggering increase from prewar figures that hovered around 130.” Of course these figures don’t necessarily mean anything; Maglie, according to Szalontai (p.359), hit 44 batters in his career, a total that doesn’t seem especially high. It was the possibility of being hit that helped make him a successful major-league pitcher. And the kind of menace he presented to batters is illustrative of an era in which, as Szalontai’s research shows and as he describes the Giants-Dodgers rivalry, was characterized by “umpire baiting, beanballs, and long balls” (p.237).

Unfortunately, the book is a difficult read. Thoroughly researched, there are enough incomprehensible sentences and grammatical and typographical errors in the book to make the most enthusiastic reader gloomy. Szalontai clearly needed more editorial and proofreading help than he got.

A second difficulty is rhetorical rather than mechanical. The book seemed both unfocused and repetitive. Its lack of focus may come from Szalontai’s determination to examine “the teams and players [Maglie] played with and against”. Much of this information seems unrelated to the book’s focus. The excellent anecdote of the hit batsman in the Montreal-Buffalo game is a good example of this. The anecdote itself sets the tone of the book, but we learn much more (too much, in my opinion) about Buffalo, including the dimensions of the stadium and a list of Buffalo players who made the majors (p.8, 22).

Szalontai’s determination to examine each of Maglie’s appearances results inevitably in repetitiveness, and there are other kinds of repetitiveness that needed to be edited out; for instance, we learn (p.91) that “the hitter’s first reflex is to move backward on an inside pitch and if the ball is behind him it can result in a ‘serious skulling’.” Just two pages later, the following sentence occurs: “On such a pitch the batter’s first reaction is to move backward, which results in a life-threatening act if the ball is behind him.”

These difficulties should have been resolved before the book was published. Szalontai is clearly an enthusiastic researcher with a good story to tell. But McFarland has to take responsibility with him for the difficulties here. We are all grateful that McFarland is so interested in publishing books about baseball, but Szalontai’s is not the first to be poorly edited.

Nevertheless, I, for one, am happy to have it, not just because I’m a New York Giant and Sal Maglie fan, but because I’m interested in the way the game was played in the years between World War II and


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the major-league expansion of the 1960s. Others with these interests will also find it fascinating.

“Who is this Baby Ruth? And what does she do?” [George Bernard Shaw, quoted in Tom Meany’s *Babe Ruth* (1947)]