MONEYBALL: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game
By Michael Lewis

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A bestseller with the influence sabermetricians have had on big league baseball as one subject! Golly! There's been a good lot of talk about this one, some of it appearing on SABR-L, which I monitored. For the most part, I'll let those folks talk here.

The first question about the book to appear on SABR-L was quite specific. What was the source of Oakland A's assistant general manager Paul DePodesta's determination (p. 127-128, 170) that on-base percentage (OBP) is three times more important than slugging percentage (SP)? Cyril Morong first wondered about this. A day or two later, Ted Lukacs wasn't sure that "the statement that OBP is worth three times SP is referring strictly to their comparative value in producing runs". He pointed out that, for Oakland, "going deep in the count and working walks ... makes the starter reach his pitch count much faster". Consequently "OBP, to Oakland, has two values: getting guys on base, and wearing out the starter." This comment seemed to remove the discussion from the realm of the quantifiable, but it didn't. Subsequent comments by Peter Ridges and Bob Harris took the discussion into mathematical realms where I could not follow. I gathered, though, that there was reason to doubt the accuracy of DePodesta's determination. At the same time, the book makes it clear that Oakland valued OBP highly in part because it was a quality undervalued by others and consequently one they could afford.

In general, here, we are talking about one main subject of the book: the use of ideas developed by sabermetricians by the front offices of major-league baseball clubs. Lewis devotes a whole chapter to the writings of Bill James (whom, oddly, he does not seem to have interviewed). And we learn particularly of those who have joined the front offices of the Oakland A's, Toronto Blue Jays, and Boston Red Sox. There is also a rather sketchy history of efforts to understand the meaning of official baseball statistics and to evaluate their relation to team success.

There's plenty more in the book, though. David Black's response to Morong's initial query opened other dimensions of Moneyball. "I'm still amazed," Black wrote, "that Billy Beane gave such ample access to the work of him and his staff." Lewis acknowledges this (p.288): "Looking through my notes it's clear that the book arose from what amounts to a year long open-ended conversation with Billy Beane, Paul DePodesta, and David Forst. And yet not once did any of them seek to control or dilute what I might write." The book is in part organized around the A's 2002 season, with special emphasis on the amateur draft, the trade deadline, the 20-game winning streak, and the playoff failure. (About this last, Morong delivered an analysis that seemed to contradict Joe Morgan's assertion [see p.271 ff] that teams that could "manufacture" runs were more successful in the postseason.) The book begins with the story of Beane's recruitment by the New York
Mets and his major-league career as a necessary prelude to his career as a general manager.

Black was also "intrigued by the notion of character and 'makeup' in a player", which he contrasted with "looking at players for what they are and for what they can be measured objectively". This produced a couple of good points about methods of scouting and evaluating players. First, Warren Corbett mentioned that *Moneyball* might be read in conjunction with Kevin Kerrane's *Dollar Sign on the Muscle* (1984), as they "document how scouting has changed, and how it has not, since the 1930s". Rod Nelson had another, even more interesting, response: "It's far too early to suggest that Beane's emphasis on the sabermetric approach will be any more successful [than traditional methods]." He finds as "ludicrous" the tendency to regard the competing scouting philosophies as a "black and white issue". Nelson concludes: "Much of the A's recent success has everything to do with traditional scouting principals." He clearly has a point.

I enjoyed other parts of the book, too. Particularly interesting are the chapters on Scott Hatteberg and Chad Bradford, players, Lewis argues, whose virtues only the Oakland A's could discover. And then there's the voice of A's coach Ron Washington, of whom Lewis says: "[He] can't open his mouth without saying something that belongs in Bartlett's." No one should miss any of this.