A biographer’s job is two-fold: to know his subject better than anyone on the planet, and to convey that intimate knowledge elegantly and thoroughly to those who know him less well. In the case of a baseball player, a biographer must not merely know the player, but the man, his world, his sport, his youth, his passion, and his old age. His days between the white lines, his headlines, and his struggles are not enough—we want the whole of the man and all of the circumstances that make him mortal while he strives for the immortality of competitive greatness.

Rick Huhn’s The Sizzler: George Sisler, Baseball’s Forgotten Great does all this with remarkable economy. Ignore the stale debates about whether Sisler was as great as Cobb claimed he was, or if he was as overrated as Bill James says—this biography gives you Sisler whole and complete. Sisler, born 113 years ago, dead for 32 years, and remembered only when Ichiro broke his lone record, is alive in this outstanding biography. He may have been stable,
conservative, and self-effacing—character traits that lend themselves to long-term investing but rarely to memorable lives—but, thanks to Huhn, he is also fascinating.

I am not sure how Rick Huhn’s *The Sizzler: George Sisler, Baseball’s Forgotten Great* slipped through the cracks. While a better biography than Timothy Gay’s *Tris Speaker* and Leigh Montville’s *Ted Williams*, those two books received award nominations and acclaim, while Huhn’s book seems to have gathered little attention. This is puzzling, given that it is one of the best baseball biographies that I have ever read.

It is not easy to write about baseball players before they reach the Major Leagues because so much of that material can be mundane and uninteresting, often sounding like a player was destined for greatness or wholly unlikely to be recognized. But Huhn tells the story of Sisler’s high school and college years (Sisler was a graduate of Michigan in Engineering) with great fluidity, emphasizing his tremendous athletic prowess and determination to be a college graduate. He doesn’t rely strictly on statistics or game accounts, which makes the description human and compelling. His account of Sisler’s early relationship with Branch Rickey is truly well written, as is the story of Sisler’s illegal contract with the Pirates at age seventeen, and a number of other stories that come together by the end of the book.

It is equally difficult to write about a player’s career without lapsing into long descriptions that amount to box scores in prose. Huhn avoids this trap as well and narrates Sisler’s career as a part of his life. In particular, Sisler’s
shyness is highlighted by contrast with his enormous fame during and after his spectacular 1922 season, and again brought into focus with his career threatening eye problem that caused him to miss the 1923 season. You never sense that Huhn relies solely on baseball news to describe Sisler—his writing always focuses on Sisler the man and treats his baseball achievements as one important aspect of his life.

Finally, baseball biographies can flag when they reach the chapters on a player’s retirement years. Huhn’s biography, however, maintains interest to the end by relating Sisler’s continued involvement in the sport against the background of the many connections that he made as a young man. I thoroughly enjoyed the stories of Sisler’s coaching days, his relationship with Branch Rickey, and the brief stories of Sisler’s sons in baseball.

Rick Huhn’s The Sizzler: George Sisler, Baseball’s Forgotten Great is a terrific baseball biography about a man who could not have been easy to write about because he lacked Cobb’s rarified intensity and Ruth’s sublime boisterousness. It is unconditionally worthy of attention from both casual baseball fans and serious historians.