The Bibliography Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research

Letters to Mickey
by The Friends and Fans of Mickey Mantle

Mantle Remembered
From Sports Illustrated with an Introduction by Robert W. Creamer

The Last Hero: The Life of Mickey Mantle
by David Falkner

Review by Ron Kaplan

As this review is written, the Yankees have just won the American League pennant for the first time in fifteen years. The next stop is the World Series, a venue which Mickey Mantle saw 12 times in his first 14 seasons. The original "Mr. October," Mantle had long been an American icon/hero. But his life took on a new essence following admission of his addiction problems, his stint at the Betty Ford Clinic, and finally, his battle against cancer. Following his death last August, he once again become the subject of numerous accounts of his life. Doubtlessly, some of these projects were put together hastily to maximize on the commercial impact his passing would have.

"Letters to Mickey" is a collection culled from the thousands received by the ailing Yankee over the last few years of his life. Most came during his hospital stays, although there are some from his days at the Ford Clinic.

The epistles were written by a cross section of people. Represented here are children too young to have witnessed Mantle's prowess on the field, senior citizens who did, and baby boomers for whom Mantle was a genuine hero. One missive told of a grandmother who would lock the kids out of the house lest they distract her attentions from watching #7 on the TV. Those who never cared for baseball but were well aware of Mantle's status relate stories of family members, wrote to express how his existence affected their lives and the lives of their families.

Most of the letters are obviously there to pull at the reader's heartstrings. There are pleas for Mantle to "hang in there" from fans for whom he was such an inspiration. Abuse victims found their escape in the Yankees' and Mantle's exploits. Alcoholics wrote to express their gratitude that Mantle came forward and admitted his problem, enabling them to find the strength to seek help. Cancer patients and their families also thank
Mantle for opening the eyes of the general public -- with his final illness he brought attention to organ donor programs in a way that no advertising campaign could.

"Letters to Mickey," includes in its title "With Mickey Mantle's Last Letter to His Fans" which reads like a mea culpa for his assumed wrongdoings. Over the last few months of his life, Mantle was wont to discuss these "sins," including his alcoholism and his poor performance as a family man.

But there are problems with this type of book. In an effort to be as authentic as possible, the letters are recreated from their original form. Many handwritings are difficult to decipher, even copies of typewritten notes are illegible in many cases. This may sound picayune, but in a book containing no other narrative, page after page of hard-to-read letters add up, regardless of the sentiment behind them. In fact, the number of letters is daunting, despite what must have been an extremely difficult paring down. There is no question of Mantle's place in Americana. He was hero to thousands, trans-generational.

But we get the point. It's hard to believe that many readers can get all the way through "Letters to Mickey."

Another book that came out almost immediately after Mantle's death was put out by Sports Illustrated. "Mantle Remembered" is introduced by Robert Creamer, author of such books as "Babe" and "Baseball in '41." Calling on the magazine's archives, this slim volume is broken into three sections: "The Early Years" (1951-56), "The Prime Years" ('57-'64), and "The Later Years" (65-95). Touchingly illustrated with nostalgic black and white photos, the stories are neither doting nor harsh, an excellent representation of Mantle's career from a rookie with unlimited potential to an oft-injured prototype for the superstars of today to a soul lost in retirement.

One particularly amusing item is "Mantle and Maris in the Movies," from April, 1962. The story reports on the M&M boys as they cash in on their fabled 1961 season by stepping in front of the Kleig lights to appear in "Safe At Home," considered to be one of the worst baseball movies ever filmed. Although generally amused by the movie-making process, Mantle complained "I never saw such a business. Seems you stand around all day doing nothing and then do about five minutes of the show. . . ." Sounds a bit like what some critics say about baseball's pace. The other stories are a mixture of triumph and melancholy. On the one hand, Mantle is lauded for his strength and speed and undeniable talent. On the other, he is pitied for the way his body betrayed him. Mantle is the subject of awe when managers, teammates and opposing players marvel at how he hauled his aching body back onto the field time after time. His attempts to come back in the 1961 World Series from an abscess that was still bleeding is legendary. But how much more could he have been, could he have done, had he invested time in rehabilitation for his numerous injuries, rather than believing his body and skills would never leave him?

There were seemingly limitless expectations placed on Mantle by thousands of baseball fans in general and Yankee fans in particular. In his introduction, Creamer explains "He was in the World Series twelve times in fourteen years. Autumn after autumn he was not
just on a local but on a national stage." Creamer concedes that other players, such as Musial, Mays or Williams, might have been better, but because their appearances in the Fall Classic were nowhere as constant, they never won that national audience.

"The Last Hero" was released at the beginning of 1996 and is the most in-depth study of Mantle. David Falkner, author of several baseball works, including "Great Time Coming: The Life of Jackie Robinson, from Baseball to Birmingham," and "The Last Yankee: The Turbulent Life of Billy Martin," starts with Mantle's humble beginnings in Depression-era Oklahoma, his tutelage under the hand of his beloved, doomed father, Mutt. Falkner injects little known anecdotes to separate this book from the many that have previously been published. For example, he notes that had a tryout with the St. Louis Cardinals (the local favorite for Mantle's family) not been rained out, Mickey might have been wearing Redbirds on his jersey instead of pinstripes. Other interesting tales, in light of how biographies have moved to included the darker side of their subjects, include George Weiss, one of the most parsimonious general managers in sports history, blackmailing Mantle to take a smaller raise lest Weiss be forced to show some compromising photos to Mickey's wife, Merlyn.

Once again we read of Mantle's dazzling highs, mixed with indications of troubling times, including drinking, infidelity, and, for all practical purposes, the abandonment of his sons during their childhood.

It is the examination of Mantle's life after retirement that will most sadden his fans. "Though Mantle was just 31 as he entered the 1963 season, the great years were behind him," writes Falkner. Even as the Yankees were winning the 1964 Series, the team was collapsing. Yogi Berra was an ineffectual manager and was fired after the season. Players aged, became injured, and their replacements were not of the same character: "Roger Repoz instead of Roger Maris," as Falkner puts it. As one of the last links with the old Yankee dynasties, Mantle took an unfair brunt of fan's impatience, unaided at times by his own brusqueness with the public and media. Falkner credits Jim Bouton's "Ball Four" for being the instrument that laid Mantle low in the eyes of baseball fans, reporting heretofore sacred secrets players kept for each other within the confines of the locker room. "It was the age of the antihero, and Bouton's irreverence fit the times perfectly." Castigated as a Judas, Bouton lead the way for the new age of biographies which paint their subjects in less-than-ideal colors.

For all his shortcomings, Mantle in retirement was a pitiable figure. The monies he'd earned during his career wasn't enough, investments he'd made never panned out and he was reduced to hiring on as a glad-hander for country clubs, department stores and in 1980 a casino, which led Commissioner Bowie Kuhn to ban him from holding a job in organized baseball. Falkner notes that Mantle would not have suffered the indignity of trying to make a living off his past glories had there been a job for him in the game. Mantle had wanted to coach or manage, but there was never anything available (not unlike Babe Ruth's desire to lead his team from the bench when he'd finished leading them with his bat).
With the nostalgia craze of the 1980s, Mantle became the subject of national interest once again. And with his admission that he was an alcoholic he became the object of affection once more, as if that admission had made him more human, more approachable. Mantle's television appearance with Bob Costas did more to revive his legend than anything else up to that point. A bemused Mantle confessed that he never understood why he was held up to such adoration, and how uncomfortable it was for him to handle.

With the news that Mantle was seriously ill, all became forgiven. During the final days. Mantle tried to make some good out of his illness, as Falkner poignantly depicts.

"The Last Hero's" strength lies in Mantle's life after baseball. There are plenty of books that tell and retell accounts of his on-the-field (and some off the field) exploits. It is only a sorrowful situation such as Mantles' abrupt physical decline that a soul-cleansing of this sort comes out. With time, there will surely be more books on Mantle, both favorable and damning. These three comprise a sort of "rush to judgment" endemic to the passing of a legend. Time and a more detached examination of Mickey Mantle's life is required to do his story justice.

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