A Deadball Era Guide to the SABR Convention

By Gabriel Schechter

No matter what aspect of baseball history interests you most, there was plenty of it at the SABR Convention in Denver. In a sense, my second convention was too much and not enough all at once. Ideas, information, and perspectives came flying faster than you could absorb, yet there were many times when fine speakers were just getting into the meat of their subjects when the allotted time ran out and we had to start all over with someone else. There was also the dilemma of having to choose between two appealing presentations given at the same time, not to mention finding time to socialize, rendezvous with old friends, make new ones, catch some ballgames, and much more. Here is one Deadball Era Committee member’s guide to the presentations which touched on our territory.

The show-stopper of the week was Rockies GM Dan O’Dowd, who riveted a Thursday afternoon panel with his dissection of the difficulties of playing winning baseball “at altitude.” As O’Dowd detailed the mental and physical travails of Rockies players constantly adjusting to baseball at a high altitude, baseball at low altitudes, and back and forth throughout the season, I couldn’t help wondering what Deadball Era baseball would have been like if its westernmost outpost had been Denver rather than St. Louis. Would Gavvy Cravath have been an early version of Dante Bichette? Would Hippo Vaughn have pitched like Mike Hampton? Or would they have attempted to use a single baseball for the whole season instead of just one game in order to hold down the scoring?

Thursday afternoon also saw a dynamic presentation by Jerrold Casway on the death of Ed Delahanty. Casway has clearly done more investigating and thinking about Delahanty than anyone else, and he squeezed as much as he could into his allotted half-hour. When the moderator informed him that he only had ten seconds left, Casway spluttered, “okay, but they’re vital ten seconds.” His big research discovery was the transcript of the hearing on the lawsuit filed by Delahanty’s family against the railroad, in which they claimed that if the conductor had waited just fifteen more minutes before putting Delahanty off the train, he would have been safely on the American side and not in the jeopardy he found himself in, stranded in the dark on a bridge with precarious footing. Casway would have been safely on the American side and not in the jeopardy he found himself in, stranded in the dark on a bridge with precarious footing. Casway forcefully refuted the theory that Delahanty committed suicide, but he ran out of time before he could disclose his view of whether Delahanty slipped and fell from the bridge or was thrown over during his scuffle with the station master. For those who missed it, the transcript is attached. 

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Rob Neyer is a columnist for ESPN.COM. This excerpt from his column of July 14, 2003, is reprinted with his permission. “Rob Neyer’s Big Book of Baseball Lineups” has just been published by Fireside. For more information about the book, visit Rob’s Web site at robneyer.com.

At the SABR convention, I attended a research presentation hosted by an incredibly thorough fellow named Richard Smiley.

The 1917 World Series pitted the New York Giants against the Chicago White Sox. After five games, the White Sox led the Series, three games to two. Game 6 was back at the Polo Grounds in New York, and after three innings, nobody had scored.

In the top of the fourth, though, White Sox second baseman Eddie Collins reached base thanks to an error by Giants third baseman Heinie Zimmerman. Collins then went to third when right fielder Dave Robertson dropped an easy fly. Batting next, Happy Felsch hit a grounder back to pitcher Rube Benton, and Collins was trapped off third when Benton threw to catcher Bill Rariden. Collins headed back for third, Rariden threw back to Zimmerman, Collins headed back home... and Zimmerman chased Collins, who scored the first run of the game. The Sox eventually clinched the Series with a 4-2 victory, and Zimmerman was awarded the goat horns.

Which doesn’t seem fair, considering that Zimmerman presumably would have thrown the ball rather than run with it, if only somebody had been covering home plate (Benton, perhaps, or first baseman Walter Holke).

And in fact, Zimmerman said after the game: “What the hell was I going to do, throw the ball to Klem?” (Klem being Bill Klem, the plate umpire in Game 6.)

It’s a great quote. The only problem with it — Zimmerman didn’t say it.

As Richard Smiley has discovered, that “quote” was actually part of an imaginary postgame conversation between Zimmerman, his manager, and his teammates, and invented by Ring Lardner, the greatest baseball writer of his time. Here’s the beginnings of what was billed as, “Ring Lardner imagines that something like this conversation between the Giants and their manager took place...”

McGraw – Well, Heinie, you gave a great exhibition! Kauff – I’ll say he gave a great exhibition! Zim – You’re a fine lot o’ yellow quitters! McGraw – Who told you that you could outrun Collins? Zim – What the hell was I going to do, throw the ball to Klem? Where was Holke? Where was Benton? It runs on in this vein for a while longer, but you get the idea. The most famous thing ever uttered about the 1917 World Series wasn’t uttered at all. For a long time, nobody knew this, until Richard Smiley came along.

Rocky Mountain High

by Richard Smiley

Deadball in Colorado? Sounds like an oxymoron! Nevertheless, there were a number of sessions at this year’s Denver SABR Convention, which held the interest of this deadball enthusiast. Being a long-time White Sox fan, I was particularly delighted to see that the team was featured in a number of presentations. In fact, even the cover of the convention program featured a 1910 photo of Comiskey and the White Sox (in uniform) at The Royal Gorge!

In order to provide an overview of their recently published book, Paths to Glory, Dan Levitt and Mark Armour selected the 1917 White Sox as one of two teams which they explored in depth during their research session. The book delves into the backgrounds of how some of the championship teams over the past hundred years have been constructed. In the case of the White Sox, they highlighted the role that Comiskey played in rebuilding up his team by being a wise judge of talent and by being willing to aggressively pursue top players such as Eddie Collins when the ability to do so arose. They also showed that the transition from being competitive in 1915-16 to winning the championship in 1917 involved identifying and patching the holes in the team. Having read a lot about how this team came apart, it was good to see the background on how it was put together.

The presentation I gave also focused on the 1917 White Sox and a rather infamous fielding mishap by the New York Giants in decisive game of the World Series. I really enjoyed doing the presentation and was delighted by the questions and discussion after it was over. Many of these comments were from people who were not necessarily focused on the Deadball Era, but who were interested in hearing the story. I suspect that there are many such events from the Deadball Era that the general SABR membership would enjoy hearing about if properly brought to light.

The final White Sox related presentation that I attended focused on the origins of the break up of the 1917 championship team. Ralph Christian’s wonderful talk focused on the little known major role that a number of Des Moines, IA gamblers may have played in the Black Sox Scandal. Ralph showed that it was possible that the source of the money for the fix was not from the well-known East Coast gamblers, but was rather from midwestern gamblers pretending to have ties to the East Coast money. His talk was well backed up with a number of old photographs of the people involved.

Finally, Bill James and Rob Neyer presented the most exciting research I saw at the conference. Bill and Rob are putting together an encyclopedia of pitching repertoires for pitchers dating back to the Deadball Era. What was a pitcher’s out pitch? What were his other pitches? How do these pitches compare to modern pitches? These are the questions that Bill and Rob hope to address in a volume that they hope to get published in the next couple of years. It will certainly serve to enrich our images of who these players were!
answers, we will have to wait for the publication of Casway’s book on Delahanty next spring. The suspense will be killing me until then.

One of the Friday morning sessions I attended was Hern Krabbenhoft’s fine presentation of his exhaustive (and exhausting, as it involved looking at over 150,000 boxscores from 1900 to the present) research designed to determine the best leadoff hitter before Rickey Henderson. He shared a wealth of data identifying who the primary leadoff hitters were for each team in each year and who the best leadoff hitters were in each league in each season. His final determination was that Lou Brock was the best leadoff hitter before Henderson while Henderson contemporary Tim Raines was the second-best leadoff hitter ever. However, the best American League leadoff before Henderson was none other than Deadball stalwart Topsy Hartsel (who also ranked 5th all-time). In the American League, Burt Shotton ranked 12th overall and Harry Hooper 15th; in the National League, Bob Bescher ranked 3rd overall, Roy Thomas 7th, George Burns 8th, and Miller Huggins 10th. Hartsel toppled the league in leadoff performance in five seasons, and Thomas and Burns led four times apiece.

Also on Friday morning, I skipped Dan Levitt’s examination of how Charles Comiskey built his pennant-winning teams of 1917 and 1919, in favor of attending the enlightening talk by Peter Morris on the origins of the term “fan.” Morris won the award for the convention’s best oral presentation; in a nutshell, he presented a convincing case that “fan” did not originate as a shortened version of “fanatic” but rather had connotations involving baseball enthusiasts who couldn’t help talking about their obsession, spreading their words about the game in the manner of hot air being dispersed by a fan.

Jeff Powers-Beck also gave a fine presentation on the adjustments made by Native Americans playing major league baseball, focusing on John Tortes Meyers. Using quotes from Meyers interviews and other research, Powers-Beck showed how Meyers differed from Charles Bender and Jim Thorpe. Meyers used his “warm personality and hot bat” to silence his tormenters, and was willing to accept some abuse and save his protests for when it really mattered to him. His pro debut came with a team in Harrisburgh, where he experienced severe hazing, finally complained to the manager, as- serted himself, and got redress. Still, he always felt like a foreigner in his own country; in 1909, he said “this is a strange country to me.” After his successful career, he used his name to speak out about national policies and the continuing un- fair treatment of Indians by the government and the media (see his comment about movies in The Glory of Their Times).

Those are the Deadball Era-related session I’m aware of, which leaves only the DEC meeting to discuss. There were three significant areas covered at the meeting. First, Paul Rogers presented the Larry Ritter Awards for the past two years to Martin Kohout for his biography of Hal Chase and to Jim Reisler for his history of the New York Highlanders. Last, Richard Smiley discussed plans for Hot Springs 2004, our second spring training outing to the hub of Deadball late-winter boiling out. Plans for the 2004 weekend, to be

Montreal Expos and move them to Centennial Field, but fin- ally, after two years and 17 layers of bank bureaucracy, we received permission to erect the marker on its property — pending some “minor formalities.” It was good timing, as Fisher’s Michigan-based grandson and biographer, John Leidy, spends a month each summer in Vermont at the camp on Lake Champlain where Fisher had spent his summers.

On Monday of this week I returned from being out of the office for two weeks. Awaiting my arrival was a two-foot pile of mail, and included in that pile was an 8-page, single-spaced “licensing agreement” from the bank. One of the provisions required me to take out a $1 million insurance policy to protect the bank in case the marker injured somebody. It got worse from there.

I spent Tuesday negotiating as much of the meaningful stuff as I could out of the bank’s contract, meanwhile trying to find somebody to install the marker and fielding phone calls from newspaper reporters and Fisher relatives wanting to know when the unveiling would occur. We had to hold the ceremony by the end of the week before Leidy returned to Michigan.

On Wednesday I received a good phone call. It was the Governor’s office wondering what it could do to help. Ap- parently the Governor had attended “Robin Roberts Night” at the ballpark in Montpelier, and Roberts, who had played for Fisher in Montpelier in 1946-47, told the Governor about the difficulties we were having. The Governor’s office of- fered the services of the Agency of Transportation to install the marker. It was done the next day. That afternoon I left my office at 1 p.m., but traffic and construction on Route 7 made the 45-minute drive from Burlington to Middlebury take over an hour. Each time I hit another delay, I said to myself, NO MORE MARKERS.

I caught my first glimpse as I crested a hill just north of the bank. In a state that doesn’t allow billboards, the words BIRTHPLACE OF RAY FISHER jumped out at me from 50 yards away, gleaming in gold against the marker’s green back- ground. A crowd of 50 gathered around the sign, reading the details of Fisher’s life, and cars honked as they whizzed by on Route 7 - driven by Highlanders fans, no doubt.

The crowd was awaiting my arrival patiently before begin- ning the ceremony, but before I even exited my car I was asking myself who or what might be worthy of our next base- ball-related marker.
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Mueller compares Chance to Cap Anson, who was in his mind the premier 19th century ballplayer. Anson left Chicago in 1897, and Chance started with the North Siders in 1898: “Frank Chance, just as mentally, and indeed physically as tough as his famed predecessor, Cap Anson, was already the leader on the field of play, heading up a gritty, hustling club that would fight to the last out for every advantage and every run it could get its hand on” (89). Compare this to McGraw, for whom “Championships, no matter how they were won, were clearly more important to John McGraw than social graces or public relations” (93).

With McGraw and Chance on the same field, nothing but a WWF smackdown could ensue: “Typical of the heat generated in these races was the guerre à mort staged at the New York and Chicago ballparks. And the might armies assembled to wage that warfare were beyond doubt among baseball’s premier teams up to that point in time” (95). Indeed, Wilbert thinks these Giants and Cubs rank with the greatest teams of all time and places the 1905 Giants and 1906 Cubs in his top ten teams.

The book also covers the “sabbatical years” of the rivalry (1914-20), the roaring twenties (1921-1929) during which McGraw refers to Babe Ruth as “the big dummy,” and the finish of the great rivalry (1930-1938). But his heart is in the Deadball Era, which is why many of you would enjoy his book.

His writing style is engaging and it often made me chuckle, as he refers to the “smasheroo” of the 1920s and to Charlie Weeghman as the “first of the fast food kings.” There are a few annoying typos, especially in captions, and though the listing of the Cubs-Giants series games each year may be necessary, it is often tiresome. I would have preferred the space to be spent on the characters of the Giants and Cubs of those times, and there are plenty of them. That said, I would still recommend the book to any Giant, Cub, or Deadball fan.