by Corey Seeman

SIMPLY put, the role of organized athletics in American society is monumental. Mere statistics cannot do justice to the way Americans see sports as a major component of everyday life. And the one game that leads them all is baseball. For 125 years, this simple game has been played in every nook and cranny of this great land: in open fields and closed streets, in Civil War prisoner camps and in occupied territory during both world wars, and in major and minor league stadiaims across the country. A current popular travel guide for the United States has opted for a photograph of a Detroit Tiger baseball player on its cover over such attractions as Mount Rushmore, the Grand Canyon, Disney World and Washington, D.C.

The path that baseball took to become the national game cannot be analyzed by endless manipulation of statistics created by legions of baseball players. And yet baseball historians generally have chosen to study these numbers over the factors that reveal how baseball be-

came the national game and maintained its role as the premier sport in America. Part of the reason for this emphasis among sports historians has been that baseball simply lends itself to manipulation of statistics generated for over a hundred years. Even the statistics that draw immediate recognition from such historians as significant (61, 7, 56, 755, 130, and .424) offer little more than a goal for players and answers to trivia contests. 1

Over the past 10 years, baseball historians have been producing articles and books at the fastest rate ever. Almost every possible aspect of baseball has been covered in books and articles in the various media devoted to sports history. Besides a growing number of major university and small presses which produce works on baseball history, numerous journals also probe the national pastime's history. The North American Society of Sports History's Journal of Sports History and the Society for American Baseball Research's Baseball Research Journal and National Pastime continually expand the base of knowledge pertaining to the national game. Independent journals such as the Elysian Fields Quarterly (formerly the Minneapolis Review of Baseball) and Nine also add to the literature on baseball history. Journals such as Pittsburgh History also provide a wonderful forum for the dissemination of ideas and history of sports, usually in a specific community. Regardless of the medium, much of this work is done by writers falling into two basic groups: amateur historians (including sportswriters) and academic historians. However, aside from their mutual interest in baseball history, works by authors from these two groups generally have little in common.

Many of the books written by amateur historians and sportswriters presuppose that the role of baseball in its

Corey Seeman is the Coordinator of Reference and Processing for the Library and Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh. He is also doing research for a full-length history of baseball's Midwest League, a professional minor league started in 1947 which continues today. Photo above: Amateur game, McKees Rocks, Pa., 1917.
context needs little explanation. Whether it be baseball in Nebraska or the Boston Red Sox, such authors assume that the sport played the same role in the history of each locale, so they will simply recite the appropriate statistical feats like CNN's Headline News. While such books are thorough in recording action on the field, the important relations between the ball club or ballplayer and the community outside the stadium walls, and a whole host of other questions important for advancing our understanding of the sport's "social history," usually are presented in such a general way that they cannot be considered valuable as historical writing. Instead of discussing how baseball fits into a city's, state's, region's, or even the nation's cultural fabric, many baseball writers see cultural and political events or historically rich periods merely as vehicles for discussing simultaneous changes on the field or with the team.

An example of this type of historical writing is a recent article on the history and future of Tiger Stadium: "When U.S. businesses crashed in the late '70s and early '80s, the Tigers were on their way again, this time with their farm-produced kids like Alan Trammell, Jack Morris,..."² The article goes on to talk more about the no-hitters, World Series games and home runs that occurred at Tiger Stadium than the more crucial question of, among many other issues, maintaining a ballpark in the city of Detroit. Even though the author's purpose was to write a simple history of Tiger Stadium, this approach makes the walls of the stadium seem impervious to economic problems and monumental social change in modern-day Michigan.

Fortunately, some works that place sports in its proper historical context are being produced by academic and academic-minded historians. The acceptance of their work and the notion that sports should be studied alongside political and military history in colleges and universities is attributed to the work, for instance, of historian Harold Seymour. His ground-breaking dissertation on the history of baseball, written in the 1950s at Cornell University, opened the doors to more scholarly examinations of sports in America.

Much of the work that Seymour began on the history of the game is being carried on in academic circles by members of the North American Society for Sports History. The society encourages and publishes research on every aspect of sports from ancient civilizations to today. These historians work from the notion that sports in different societies has different roles and it is this history that needs further research and explanation. Such an approach to baseball history includes wonderful studies such as Rob Ruck's on sports among African-Americans in Pittsburgh, Steven Riess's on urban sports, Bruce Kuklick's on Shibe Park in Philadelphia and Peter Levine's on the Jewish community's association with organized sport.³

As might be expected, the popular and often highly publicized attempts at baseball history familiar to most Americans and approaches more akin to that of the North American Society for Sports History produce two completely different types of works, though both are understood to be "baseball history." An illustration might be two books recently written on baseball in the Great Depression: Diz: The Story of Dizzy Dean and Baseball During the Great Depression and Even the Babe Came to Play: Small-Town Baseball in the Dirty '30s. Both books intend to deal with the greater questions of the role of spectator sports in the worst economic period of the century.⁴ However, the way the authors approach
the subject is as different as the Depression was from the Roaring Twenties.

In *Diz*, Robert Gregory provides an interesting and well-written biography of the great St. Louis Cardinal pitcher of the 1930s. However, Gregory fails to fully place the story of Dizzy Dean in the context of the Depression and, in turn, fails to live up to the lofty ambitions of the book's fanciful subtitle. One reviewer, Stephen Lehman, took the author to task:

[Diz] only touches on the implications of a society which, in the words of Franklin Roosevelt, was “one-third of a nation, ill-nourished, ill-clad, ill-housed.” Most of the grit and hopelessness and fear of those times is left unexplored.⁵

Even on the general issue of the great number of Americans unemployed, Gregory offers a meaningless comparison with Dizzy Dean's own fortunes:

The nation's unemployment [in 1931] was 4,500,000 and climbing. Thirteen hundred banks had closed since the market crash 15 months earlier. Already commonplace were the 1930's familiar images of soup kitchens and apple peddlers. But Dizzy was among the lucky ones. His new annual salary, a hundred more a month than in 1930, was $2,400, about $77,000 less than Babe Ruth's but $1,000 more than the average American worker's. These were hard times? Not for him, and he had no worries about the future.⁶

Gregory's examinations of other Depression-era problems are equally removed from the subject of baseball. While devoting nearly one-third of the book to the 1934 season, when Dean won 30 games and the Cardinals won the World Series, Gregory is content to relate Dean's anecdotes and statistics, avoiding serious study of broader issues in baseball and the nation during the 1930s.

Conversely, Ashe's *Even the Babe Came to Play* provides a vivid picture of life in Canada's Maritime Provinces during the Depression. Ashe writes with equal emphasis on the role of baseball in the community and economic devastation in the Maritimes, beyond merely the number of unemployed or the difference between players' and laborers' salaries. In his introduction, Ashe states his approach:

Information already made public about Maritime amateur baseball is skeletal and candy-coated. The St. Stephen team and its era warrant a more comprehensive and honest assessment of the lost tapestries of friendship, community, sportsmanship and courage found in a team, a town and a time.⁷

Ashe, who is not affiliated with an academic institution, nonetheless approaches his subject in an academic manner. He focuses his attention on the role of baseball in these Canadian towns and provides a strong historical framework for these semi-professional baseball leagues. Ashe examines equally the relative prosperity of St. Stephen during the Depression, the town's interest in sports and other recreational activities, as well as the activities on the field. Readers of this account of baseball in the Maritimes not only receive a better understanding of the baseball played in St. Stephen, but also learn how baseball fit into the community and culture of that town.

Unfortunately, for every historian examining the role of baseball in society, there are dozens who are merely recounting and re-recording the numbers baseball players assembled over time. People who pick up the pen to write on the national pastime should turn away from the anecdotal and quantitative approach and begin looking qualitatively. It would be gratifying to see the emphasis on the baseball context replaced with baseball's context. Instead of sitting in the stands of the ballparks recording what is seen on the field, more writers need to "turn around" and record what is going on in the stands and beyond the park.

The history of baseball is the history of men and women, in the major, minor, Negro, semi-pro, scholastic and amateur leagues, in sandlots and open fields, at festivals and reunions, on the field, in the stands and at home at the radio and television, interspersed with every element of American life. With the growing use of archival resources in presentations about the history of the national game and a growing realization that baseball is not merely a series of at-bats, hits, doubles and strikeouts, it is hoped that those who assess and write about the past will strive in the 1990s to place the game more firmly and more often in the realm of everyday life, where it has been all along. ■

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¹ Roger Maris hit 61 home runs in one season; Nolan Ryan has thrown 7 career no-hitters (and counting); Joe DiMaggio had a 56 game hitting streak; Hank Aaron hit 755 home runs; Rickey Henderson recorded 130 stolen bases in one season; and Rogers Hornsby's .424 was the highest season batting average ever. All of these are major league records with the latter two records for baseball's modern era (after 1900). Joe DiMaggio had a longer hitting streak in the minor leagues and numerous minor league sluggers have topped 61 homers.


³ Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Black Sport in Pittsburgh* (Univ. of Ill. Press, 1987); Steven Reiss, *City Games* (Univ. of Ill. Press, 1989); Bruce Kuklick, *To Every Thing a Season* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1991); Peter Levine, *From Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1992). These books represent only a few of the fine works written on sports history which keep the subject firmly entrenched in the greater study of North American culture.


⁵ Stephen Lehman, "Foggin" 'Em in There," *Elysian Fields Quarterly* 11: 3, 98.

⁶ *Diz*, 53.

⁷ *Even the Babe*, vii.