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Diamond in the Rough: 
Baseball and the Study of American Sports History

Paul J. Zingg
University of Pennsylvania

“Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America,” observed Jacques Barzun in 1954, “had better learn baseball.” Thirteen years ago, however, few serious scholars followed his advice. Like its parent discipline, American Studies, the study of sport — any sport — and its place in American culture and society remained lodged in the American badlands. Although an activity that preoccupies millions in our present day and that engaged Native Americans and colonial settlers on a routine basis centuries ago, sport enjoyed little credibility as an academically respectable subject. It had attracted only a handful of scholars who gave it any real attention at the time of Barzun’s statement.

To a great extent, the sharp criticism and disdain that scholars involved in more traditional studies levied at those purporting to write sports history were fully deserved. The latter’s definitions of scholarship, indeed, history, were often painfully naive and shallow. Although they revealed a fascination for myths and symbols, they at best claimed a superficial identity with the methodology and analyses employed by such pioneering scholars in American Studies as Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, Alan Trachtenberg, and John William Ward. Either embarrassingly hagiographic or tediously statistical, the sports books they produced generally celebrated, even created, heroes and dutifully quantified their achievements.

Whereas the early scholars in American Studies looked for recurring patterns and themes in American literature and intellectual history, the writers of sports “history” books appealed more directly
to a popular audience in responding to the latest sports headlines, profiling "the legends of sport," and chronicling the records that they established. Such themes bear little resemblance, semantic or not, to the formative emphasis within American Studies. Contributing little to our understanding of sport as a cultural and social phenomenon, they belonged more accurately to the worlds of press agency and adolescent fantasy.

New and provocative forces soon intervened that profoundly affected the shape of American historiography. The political ferment of the 1960s contributed to a breakdown of the conservative consensus perspective that had dominated most aspects of American historical scholarship for the previous few decades. The years of the New Frontier and the Great Society revealed deep divisions within American society and culture. The events of that tumultuous period underscored the shallowness and elitism that frequently characterized interpretations of the American experience and opened the door to new and respected inquiries into the fields of social history and popular culture. The study of sports fits well within the new imperative to explore the American scene and its individual subcommunities in a considerably broader context.

An intellectual recognition of the importance of sport in helping elucidate certain central themes of American history and life was not the only factor at work in accounting for the surge of interest in the topic in recent years. Historians have begun to draw more heavily and confidently on the works of scholars in such related disciplines as anthropology, sociology, folklore, psychology and philosophy in order to reveal the patterns of American thought and behavior. Academic demographics have also played a role in bringing sports history to light. Concern about declining enrollments prompted many humanities and social sciences departments to develop courses of topical interest, including sport. Prepared—or pushed—to offer these new courses, scholars encountered a dearth of appropriate materials that could be used in them. Many simply turned away convinced that this black hole in historical scholarship reflected the insignificance of the topic. Others, however, turned their attentions and energies to developing new materials in order to enhance the respectability and value of their courses. In the process, they discovered that they were uncovering a great deal of history that not only was interesting but also was important.

The focus of the best of this scholarship has been baseball. Baseball's attraction springs from many sources. It has the longest history of the American team sports that have emerged over the past century as leisure outlets for an increasingly urbanized and industrialized
society. It has been a remarkably stable game, undergoing few substantive rule changes in the conduct of game play since the organization of the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869 as the sport's first avowed professional team. The one-on-one character of the diamond game—batter against pitcher, hitter against fielder, runner against fielder—has made it a game of statistics and records as perhaps no other. Its immutable quality has allowed comparisons between players and teams throughout its existence and, through its own version of the Holy Scriptures, the newspaper box score, affords a sense of recognition for us today with the game's pioneers. The game even has its own archives in the National Baseball Hall of Fame, an important resource noted for both the size and quality of its collection.

The intrinsic nature of the sport offers other clues to its popularity and longevity. "Satisfying though played day after day, sufficiently complex to fascinate the poet, sufficiently obvious to please the peasant," observes Tristram Coffin, it offers a sensitive balance of physical skill, problem-solving, and chance.4 "It is," says this literary scholar and folklorist, "hard to play well, yet easy to learn. It is fun to watch, yet challenging to study."

It is also a game steeped in a powerful mythology that reaches to its very roots. By its own proclamation, baseball is America's "national pastime." Yet this claim reflects less a legitimate folk heritage in the play and games of the American people than it does another hallowed American "tradition"—the spirit of free enterprise. The entrepreneur who recognized the relationship between the game's popularity and the profits that could be gained from it was Albert G. Spalding, a former pitching star for the Boston Red Stockings in the 1870s, who had built a multimillion dollar sports equipment business. Spalding enlisted the assistance of Henry Chadwick as the chief editor of his American Sports Publishing Company to further his goals. For over two decades before his death in 1908, Chadwick served Spalding faithfully in this endeavor. Capitalizing on the new wave of nationalism that the end of the Civil War, the centennial celebration of 1876, and the imperial impulse of the 1890s brought, the pair worked tirelessly to exploit baseball as America's national game.

Their collaboration proved immensely successful. It led, in particular, to the enshrinement of Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown, New York, as the author and site, respectively, of baseball's birth. Both ingredients were necessary in order to "prove" the American origins of the game and to satisfy the proclamations of Spalding and Chadwick that baseball was singularly suited to the American character. Spalding financed an historical commission, comprised of men of "high repute and undoubted knowledge of Base Ball," that in 1907
delivered the news that proponents of the game wanted to hear. The commission identified Doubleday, a major general in the United States Army and a hero to boot of the Battle of Gettysburg, as the inventor of the game. The game allegedly sprang from his fertile mind in the summer of 1839 while he was an instructor at a local military prep school in Cooperstown. In one sweep of the “historian’s” pen, Doubleday was elevated into that pantheon of American military heroes, who, like George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Ulysses S. Grant, served their country in both war and peace.

Delighted, although one would suspect less than surprised by the commission’s report, Spalding proclaimed that it had at last freed baseball “from the trammels of English traditions, customs, conventionalities.”

Having cleansed baseball of any Old World artificiality and decadence, Spalding launched an aggressive campaign to celebrate the newly-certified “American game.” In 1911, he published America’s National Game, a book rarely equalled in the annals of sports history for its unabashed chauvinism and nationalistic rhetoric. “Baseball, proclaimed Spalding, is “the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combattism; American Dash, Discipline, Determinism; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility.”

Spalding was more than just a shrewd businessman who exploited a theme in order to make a profit. He recognized the appeal of patriotism and understood the dynamics of myth-making. To a great extent, he simply plugged into a process that has been evident and accepted in many cultures, but particularly active and creative in the United States. Historical myths and legends play a crucial role in forging national identity and stimulating patriotic pride. As Friedrich von Schlegel in Germany, Ernest Renan in France, Giuseppe Mazzini in Italy, Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill in England, and others have observed, collective traditions and a useful historical memory contribute to successful nationalism. In some cases, where the actual record may come up a little short, some selective invention—William Tell and his unerring aim or Robert Bruce and his persevering spider—can serve just as well.

Throughout their history, Americans have appeared unusually eager to embrace fact and fiction with equal enthusiasm—and often little discrimination—in the name of national pride. The “search for a usable past” in America, the need to assert the country’s special qualities and unique features, indeed, its exceptionalism, has encouraged a focus “on the simple, the symbolic and the ideological.”
Baseball fits this agenda perfectly. Artificially conceived, vigorously defended, ostentatiously celebrated, baseball is the quintessential American game.

Reflecting both the process that links myth and reality and the society that embraces its manifestations, baseball affords the historian a rich subject and an intriguing challenge. Those who now echo Barzun's advice are quick to measure the game's appeal. Steven Riess, in *Touching Base: Professional Baseball in American Culture in the Progressive Era*, explains the game's rise to popularity "because it touched base with more themes in American life and society than anything else at the time."8 Richard Crepeau sees the importance of the study of baseball as no less than providing some direction in answering Hector de Crevecoeur's enduring question, "What then is the American, this new man?"9 Donald Mrozek feels that the insistence that baseball is so American "seems to automatically make it worthy of special attention."10 The title of Mrozek's own recent contribution to sports historiography, *Sport and American Mentality: The Rise to Respectability, 1880-1910*, says as much about the topic and the period he covers as it does the scholarly legitimacy he seeks for his subject.11

Although scholars may be drawn to the game for a variety of reasons, they quickly discover that the mythology that envelopes it poses a common obstacle to its study. In a perceptive essay on mythmaking within the American experience, Thomas Bailey observed that "myths are so essential to our culture that if they did not exist, like Voltaire's God, they would have to be invented."12 As we have already seen, Spalding and Chadwick understood this concept well. Now those who are studying baseball's past and commenting on its present are finding out how deeply the myths go and how powerful is their hold.

Two former baseball players, Jim Bouton and Curt Flood, provide important lessons in the struggle against baseball's mythology. In 1970, Bouton published *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues*.13 It has since been followed by scores of similar books, including Bouton's own sequel.14 These usually dictated, ghost-written memoirs of major leaguers recount their exploits (often barroom and bedroom) away from the playing fields and their trials (often with each other and with management) in the stadium. Although Bouton's work was not the first baseball autobiography, it was at that time the best and the most controversial.15 Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn was so impressed that he promptly censured Bouton for having written it.

Beyond the details of a rather mediocre career, the book zeroes in
on the central theme that baseball is America. On that point, Bouton and his critics are in agreement. That is the extent of their harmony. For the America that Bouton’s baseball world reflects is neither virtuous nor fair nor tolerant. It is a game run by greedy egotists, scarred by the same racial and social tensions that affect the rest of the country, and played by individuals who, in Bouton’s pages, “become what they are, not larger than life, but perhaps, if anything, a little smaller."

*Ball Four*, mild and innocent by today’s standards, outraged the baseball establishment when it was first published. Sportswriters and broadcasters, in particular, who had no difficulty recognizing the hand that fed them, rushed to condemn Bouton’s heresy. Dick Young of the New York *Daily News* labeled Bouton and his coauthor, Leonard Shecter, as “social lepers.” “People like this,” wrote Young about the two, “embittered people, sit down in their time of deepest rejection and write. They write, oh hell everybody stinks, everybody but me, and it makes them feel much better.”17 It was clear that the book was being judged less for its accuracy than for Bouton’s right to be accurate. Reaction to the book suggested that even free speech should bow before the altar of baseball orthodoxy.

Curt Flood found another compromisable principle. In 1970, the all-star outfielder refused to be traded by the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies, claiming that the trade denied him his basic rights to negotiate a contract for his services on the open market. Flood initiated a suit against major league baseball that challenged the legality of the reserve clause.18 This instrument of owner collusion, that, in the name of team stability and balanced competition, bound players for life to the team that first signed them, had essentially been in effect since the formation of the National League in 1876. By the late 1880s, it had become an integral part of the Standard Player’s Contract. Described in economic terms as a monopsony, the bargaining relationship between player and owner that Flood challenged was one in which the seller (the player) was limited to only one buyer (the owner), who, in turn, set the purchase price (the salary) and used his bonded “servant” until he decided to sell, trade, or retire him.

Flood’s suit did not improve his chances for enshrinement in baseball’s Hall of Fame. Fans were not particularly moved by the $100,000 a year player characterizing himself as a “wage slave.” Owners expressed outrage over an attack which they felt threatened the very fabric of the game, not to mention their profit margins. Even Philip Roth in his 1971 satirical novel on American political leadership, *Our Gang*, had the President of the United States, Trick E. Dixon, identify Curt Flood (along with Hanoi, the Berrigan brothers,
the Black Panthers, and Jane Fonda) as a likely suspect in turning the Boy Scouts of America against him. By “destroying” baseball, Flood had apparently succeeded in undermining the youth of the country, as the Boy Scout “revolt” demonstrated.

The Supreme Court eventually heard *Flood v. Kuhn* (407 U.S. 258) in 1972. Ironically, the case came before the court during the first real players’ strike in baseball’s history. The strike only delayed the season opener by a few weeks, but it signaled a new resolve and solidarity among the players with which the owners would henceforth have to contend. The Supreme Court, however, was not about to usher in a powerful shift in player-owner relations. The Court upheld the standard owner argument that the reserve system brought stability to the game and, as such, represented a reasonable business practice by management.

The inevitable had only been delayed. Within five years, the venerable reserve clause had fallen to new challenges and legal maneuvers. Even Flood, who had declared his readiness “to go up against the system,” expressed surprise at its quick collapse. The old ball game was changing.

Jim Bouton has experienced a curious vindication in his own right. With frequent revelations of drug dealing and abuse among major league baseball players grabbing headlines and tarnishing the game’s image (in December, 1983, Commissioner Kuhn suspended four players, three from the same team, for a year, for example, and Commissioner Peter Ueberroth in February, 1986, ordered suspensions and fines against twenty-one current or former players for their involvement in illegal drugs), Bouton’s version of the game’s underside—midnight “sexcapades” and drunken revelries—seems almost naive.

Yet, baseball has weathered difficult moments before. It survived franchise battles and player revolts in the late nineteenth century and emerged with the National Agreement of 1903 that restored order and provided a framework for league governance. It fought back from the “Black Sox Scandal” of 1919 to restore an image of moral incorruptibility and to revel in the “golden age of sport” during the 1920s. In 1947, the game finally overcame its color ban when Jackie Robinson donned the uniform of the Brooklyn Dodgers. The event changed the face of the game forever and, to the extent that it helped influence an attitude more accepting of blacks as equals, it may also have helped change American society.

Each of these crises has bolstered the basic mythology of the game and insured its hold on the popular imagination. Although images of the country itself will change from time to time and among different
segments of the population, some sacred, indefinable thing known as
"the American way" persists. Most acknowledge that this "American
way," or character, has been impossible to define with any precision.
For example, a survey conducted over forty years ago of the then
existing large body of literature on the American character concluded
that "almost every conceivable value or trait has at one time or
another been imputed to American culture by authoritative
observers."23 The quest for the national character since has neither
lacked undertakers nor achieved any greater clarity. Whatever this
illusory character may be, baseball has been advanced as one of its
sharpest mirrors. Let us now review how this reflection has been
measured.

In the lives and careers of those who have actually played the game,
as opposed for example, to those who have managed, organized,
umpired or broadcast it, baseball provides both a host of heroes and
valuable lessons in the making of heroes.24 Like the game itself,
baseball’s heroes must be understood in a wider social and cultural
context. To the extent that the game symbolizes alleged American
ideals and myths (its native origins, agrarian images, qualities of
ethnic assimilation and social interaction, individualism and rags-to-
riches opportunism, to name just a few), its heroes reflect a lingering
popular nostalgia and need for them. Benjamin Rader describes the
"compensatory cultural function" that sports heroes served as they
began to capture the public’s fancy earlier in this century.25 Achieving
their fame and fortune through individual prowess and performance
that seemed to overcome an increasingly bureaucratic, systematic,
and complicated world, "they assisted the public in compensating for
the passing of the individual dream of success, the erosion of Victo-
rian values, and feelings of individual powerlessness."26

These were a new brand of heroes. They were not, as Leo Low-
enthal describes, "idols of production" from the worlds of politics,
business, science and industry, but "idols of consumption," products
of the mass media and the world of entertainment.27 The American
public faces a news blitz every day that crowds yesterday’s heroes out
of the headlines with scarcely a backward glance. As new situations
create new heroes, consensus fades on the identification of heroic
standards. Yet, the staying power of certain sports figures in the
public’s favor is unmistakable. They are worthwhile to study because
they give us clues to the process and purpose of achieving and
retaining the hero’s mantle. America’s preeminent sport’s hero is, of
course, a baseball player—Babe Ruth.

Early accounts of Ruth’s life, including an autobiography and a
memoir by his wife, essentially retold the legendary stories already
associated with him and represented the Babe as the classic American success story.\textsuperscript{28} Consider his own words: "The greatest thing about this country is the wonderful fact of life that it doesn't matter which side of the tracks you were born on, or whether you were homeless or homely or friendless. The chance is still there. I know."\textsuperscript{29} Such sentiments may elicit only ridicule amidst today's prevailing cynicism, but there is no denying the enduring appeal of the man behind them.

That appeal is reflected in a recent outpouring of works on Ruth's life and times.\textsuperscript{30} These are all worthwhile efforts, each rising above journalistic hyperbole and tavern gossip. Like the best biography, and sport is beginning to claim a few entries in this category, they leave the thoughtful reader with the impression that not only has he been a part of something revealing, but also something important.\textsuperscript{31}

Moving beyond the private person and the public athlete, the new studies of Ruth search in some way for the symbolic importance that his exploits on and off the playing field represented. They basically agree that Ruth was a man of immense appetite, who "lived elementally—in touch with the forces of the universe in a much more profound way than those of us who use our minds."\textsuperscript{32} As a player, the Babe revolutionized the game by celebrating its most awesome offensive weapon, the home run. It lifted the game out of its lowsoring doldrums and fired the public's imagination. It posed a sharp contrast to a game that had become increasingly rational and scientific and a society that had grown seemingly complacent and unimaginative. As the "Great Bambino" brought new excitement and joy to the game, his hedonistic tastes fascinated an America struggling to escape the memories of war and depression and anxious to throw off its inhibitions and constraints. Ruth seemed to have neither conscience nor sense of propriety. He was a breath of fresh air. The attention he continues to receive indicates that he still is.

Other recent portraits of baseball's personalities lack the high drama that is associated with Ruth but, nevertheless, provide us with important insights into the game and those who played it. The Jackie Robinson story is particularly worthwhile to study because of the influence it may have had on the civil rights movement. This is the theme that Jules Tygiel pursues in his new book, \textit{Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy}, a study that should appeal to both a popular and an academic audience. It is unclear whether Branch Rickey, the Dodger owner, promoted Robinson as an expression of his genuine support for blacks or as a response to political pressures in New York with its significant black population. Both versions of alleged motivation have their proponents.\textsuperscript{33} It is clear, though, that Robinson himself had things in fine perspective
and understood quite well Rickey's bottom line. Noting how his teammates gradually began to shed their initial coolness toward him, Robinson wrote: "They hadn't changed because they liked me better; they had changed because I could help fill their wallets."

Among the outstanding racial minority players who followed in Robinson's footsteps were Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente. Both Charles Einstein's *Willie's Time* and Kal Wagenheim's *Clemente* are more popular and less controversial in tone than Tygiel's study of Robinson. None of these works, however, carry the emotional impact of Al-Tony Gilmore's biography of a black athlete of another sport, Jack Johnson. In America's first heavyweight boxing champion, Gilmore had a subject who adamantly refused to accept the place reserved for blacks in American society and frequently challenged the outer perimeters of expected behavior. Johnson's career provides a valuable reflection of racial attitudes during the Progressive Era and Gilmore has not failed to take a sports figure effectively beyond the bounds of sports history. In probing the American "idea" of this provocative athlete, he makes a significant contribution to both Afro-American historiography and early twentieth-century American social history. Baseball biographers can learn a few lessons from Gilmore's study and a few other portraits of athletes from different sports.

Einstein's memoirs, as much his own as Mays', interchanges the career of the athlete and the history of his country. It is only a twenty-three year passage, but the innocence—lingering or otherwise—that the United States lost in the era from Korea to Watergate affected sports as well. Wagenheim particularly emphasizes Clemente's socialization into Puerto Rican culture and society and the changing force of prejudice and discrimination in the United States. Both Mays and Clemente—the former less dramatically, the latter through openly supporting Curt Flood and advocating the equal treatment of blacks and Latins—understood that their responsibility to their respective racial constituencies transcended accomplishments in the ballpark. By the time of Willie's retirement in 1973 and Roberto's untimely death in 1972, there had been a crumbling of much of the idealistic crust that supposedly had protected baseball from the racial tensions and social divisions which plagued the country. Johnson, Robinson, Mays, and Clemente knew the reality beneath the layers of sports mythology long before it became fashionable to highlight it.

Baseball's other leagues—its minor, little, and long defunct Negro leagues—provide additional sources for study that further attest to the lure and lore of the diamond. Pat Jordan's two books on minor
league baseball and Martin Ralbovsky's studies of the little league world reveal that the ethos of the game exists on various levels and affects virtually all ages.\textsuperscript{38} Ralbovsky's summary of little league baseball, that it "is a hydra-headed enterprise devoted to earning money and promoting America," has a familiar ring to it.\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Only the Ball Was White}, Robert Peterson's fine history of the old Negro leagues, surveys the only outlet for such great players as Josh Gibson, Luke Easter, John Henry Lloyd, and Satchel Paige before Jackie Robinson broke the "color line."\textsuperscript{40} Among the few first-hand accounts of life in the Negro leagues are Satchel Paige's autobiography and John Holway's \textit{Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues}.\textsuperscript{41}

The task of drawing together baseball's many themes and sources in either general histories of the game or specialized studies on particular eras or teams has produced, so far, mixed results. The multi-volume works of Herold Seymour and David Voigt are the most comprehensive surveys of the game's history.\textsuperscript{42} Both describe the growth of the game in the context of American history and emphasize the mirror quality of baseball regarding the country's socio-economic development. Seymour's study is probably more consistent and academically satisfying than Voigt's three volumes, although both eschew the anecdotal style that can easily entrap such efforts. With few exceptions, Roger Kahn's sentimental study of the 1950s' Brooklyn Dodgers being the most noteworthy, the histories of the individual teams are not so successful and are riddled with anecdote and cliche.\textsuperscript{43}

Two worthwhile studies that examine baseball during the early decades of the twentieth century are \textit{The Glory of Their Times} by Lawrence Ritter and \textit{Baseball: When the Grass Was Real} by Donald Honig.\textsuperscript{44} Although Ritter's work is superior, they are companion pieces both chronologically and methodologically. Ritter artfully arranges his interviews with twenty players who, gracefully and easily, narrate their reminiscences of the old ball game from 1900 to the onset of the Depression. Honig picks up the story at that point and carries it into the 1940s through the words of the eighteen ballplayers he interviewed. The semi-amateur game that some of Ritter's subjects played probably has more nostalgic appeal than the corporate profession that engaged most of Honig's athletes. That, in itself, may explain the great appeal of Ritter's book. More likely, though, is that Ritter has set a standard for the sports memoir that avoids simpering modesty and high-minded platitude.

Other attempts to celebrate baseball's charm are Roger Angell's \textit{The Summer Game}, Douglas Wallop's \textit{Baseball: An Informal History}, and Honig's \textit{Baseball America}.\textsuperscript{45} Angell's work represents a
decade’s worth of meditations and observations on the metaphysics of the game from his regular column in *The New Yorker*. These are warm, affectionate pieces that successfully capture the feel of selected players, games, series and pennant races from 1961 to 1972. Arranged in diary fashion, however, the book lacks the continuity and cumulative power that marks *The Boys of Summer*. Wallop, author of the 1954 novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* that inspired the musical “Damn Yankees,” has written a general history of the game to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its professional beginnings. Honig’s most recent work is perhaps the best single-volume history. Both Wallop and Honig adequately relate baseball to the various social, political and cultural climates in America throughout the century they cover. Geared for a general audience, however, both books lack the rich detail of Seymour’s study and the critical perspectives of less extensive, but more focused, studies.

Finally, there are two works in particular that, taken together, reflect the kind of sustained analysis and scholarly achievement that are necessary in order to win academic respectability for sports history. Steven Riess’ *Touching Base* and Richard Crepeau’s *Baseball: America’s Diamond Mind* are complementary studies in much the same manner as the works of Ritter and Honig. Riess examines the game’s roots in the mid-nineteenth century but focuses primarily on its status during the Progressive Era. Crepeau studies the game during the interwar period. Both examine the sociocultural heritage and significance of the sport and the interaction between the ever-changing values of the country and those of the game. From King Kelly to Babe Ruth to Joe DiMaggio, these two works trace the evolution of America from an agrarian society to an industrial giant and the transformation of those who played the game from rugged individualists to corporate cogs. More than outstanding contributions to sports history, they are valuable resources for the sociologist and the cultural anthropologist too in the quest to better understand the country’s mores, values, and beliefs. Crepeau’s research emphasis on *The Sporting News*, baseball’s weekly trade journal, gives his work a certain one-dimensional character. However, he has creatively used that resource as no other baseball historian and effectively demonstrated along with Riess that the diamond game has begun to smooth away some of its rough historiographical features.

Baseball history is not unlike a diamond in the rough. In terms of the entire field of American sports history, baseball provides the richest heritage, offers the most abundant resources, and exercises the widest influence. Each superlative commands attention. Each underscores the value and attraction of the study of the game and the
potential it has only begun to realize for earning respect and achieving credibility. Yet, for the most part, the scholarly virtues of baseball are comparative ones—ones more keenly felt because of the lackluster quality of other sports' studies.

As this essay has noted, baseball studies are not without their rough spots too. The best baseball biographies have yet to be written, although some excellent ones have recently appeared and others may soon be on the way. Baseball's impact on the local and regional level has yet to be adequately measured, although some important contributions have certainly been made. Studies on the international aspects of baseball that examine both the game's role as an agent for the exportation of American values and its differing forms and functions in Japan and Latin America have only scratched the surface. The Negro leagues may well have been from another country for the inattention they have received. And, of course, there are the fans. Box seats and bleachers, neighborhood bars and hot stove leagues are occupied by persons who are untapped resources for the work of the folklorist and the historian, the ethnographer and the anthropologist.

Binding all of these areas of study together is the relationship between myth and reality in the search for baseball's true identity and the source of its enduring appeal. It may well be that myth and reality have intersected to such a degree in baseball that they have become one and the same thing. Like the country that claims it, then, baseball offers a myth-encrusted world that gives a fuller meaning to its characterization as the national pastime. As scholars are discovering with other aspects of the American experience, a "mythological" approach is both relevant and exciting. It can also be fun. Baseball is, after all, a game, an expression of our basic need to play. In the final analysis, to overlook this point is to fail to keep one's eye upon the ball.

Notes

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17. Quoted in Halberstam, ibid., 25.


33. Arthur Mann's biography of Rickey (note 24) celebrates the owner's alleged commitment to black equality and opportunity in baseball. Less sentimental accounts that stress political and economic motivations are: Milton J. Shapiro, Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers (New York: Julian Messner, 1957) and Jay J. Coakley, Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies (St. Louis: Mosby, 1978). On other aspects of "breaking the color barrier" and Robinson's role, see: Ronald A. Smith, "The Paul Robeson-Jackie Robinson Saga and a Political Collision," Journal of Sport History, VI (Summer, 1979), 5-27; David K. Wiggins, "Wendell Smith, the
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37. As effective as Gilmore's study is in conveying a sense of Johnson's controversial importance, it is probably not the best overall biography on Johnson. That distinction is reserved either for Finis Farr, Black Champion: The Life and Times of Jack Johnson (New York: Scribner's, 1964) or Roberts, Papa Jack (note 31). The memoirs of two black athletes from other sports that are worth reading are Bill Russell (with Taylor Branch), Second Wind: Memoirs of an Opinionated Man (New York: Random House, 1979) and Arthur Ashe (with Neil Amdur), Off the Court (New York: New American Library, 1981).


Senators (New York: Putnam's, 1954).


48. The growth and popularity of professional and college football have led some observers to argue that football has replaced baseball as the national game. Leverett T. Smith in The American Dream and the National Game (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1975) contends that football's ability to reflect some of the basic virtues (and vices) that constitute "the American Way" have led it to a new popular prominence. Its claims to the "most American" label, however, are unlikely to go unchallenged by the likes of Peter Ueberroth, Ted Turner, Gene Autry, George Steinbrenner and those who keep the lights burning in Cooperstown. Neil D. Isaacs makes a plug for college basketball as the new national pastime in his All the Moves: A History of College Basketball (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).


