

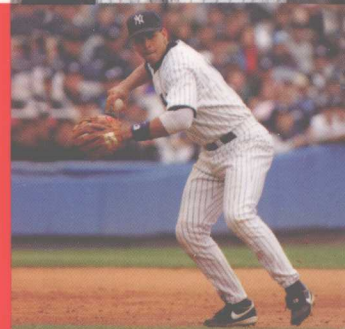
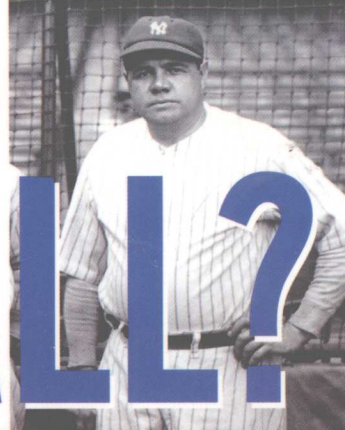
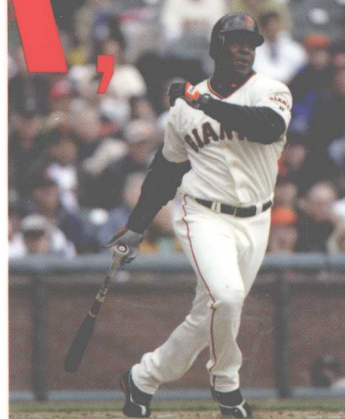
FOREWORD BY BOB COSTAS

WHO'S BETTER, WHO'S BEST in BASEBALL?

**"Mr. Stats" Sets the Record Straight
on the Top 75 Players of All Time**

ELLIOTT KALB

Author of Who's Better, Who's Best in Basketball?



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**WHO'S BETTER,
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In the spring of 1982, I earned college credits by working as an intern for NBC Sports in the Sports Publicity Department. It was staffed by three people, and when one left early in my internship, there were lots of opportunities for an ambitious kid. One of those opportunities afforded me was to accompany a newly signed baseball analyst named Sal Bando around town. First Sal needed to get an earpiece fitted, then he needed to have a publicity photo taken, and finally, he needed to get to a coffee shop, where he and I would meet the play-by-play announcer that he would be working with. When Bando and I arrived at the restaurant, we were met by a very young Bob Costas and his friend from St. Louis, Steve Horn.

I was a big fan of Bando from his playing days. As good a player as he was, he was a better person, a gentleman whom I shall never forget. But I will forever remember that lunch for other reasons.

I've come to work with Costas and Horn all over the world on various events for NBC and now HBO (including Wimbledon tennis and the Olympics), but we always seem to come back to baseball. Like Bob, I was a "Strat-o-Matic" player (a dice baseball game) for most of my youth. Like Bob, I spent a portion of my days growing up in southern California. Like Bob, I've spent a portion of my working life covering baseball, although there have been "Ted Williams-like" gaps in the résumé.

On the eve of the 1998 major-league baseball playoffs, we were in a meeting at Yankee Stadium when news broke that Yankees slugger Darryl Strawberry had been diagnosed with colon cancer. Costas was not going to accept the bare-bones facts that were trickling in. Initially, we were told that Darryl would be back in a few days, that it wasn't a serious or life-threatening condition. Bob then said, "What am I supposed to say, that Strawberry will be out of tonight's lineup with *semi-colon cancer*?"

In all seriousness, that one line typifies so much of what Costas is about. He combined journalistic integrity with a literate punch line! (Strawberry underwent surgery two days later to remove a walnut-sized cancerous tumor. The Yankees dedicated their World Series victory over the Padres to him.)

Bob and I have debated everything, from Mantle versus Mays to the difference between a nook and a cranny.

This book is for people like us who enjoy a good debate. This book is for those people who aren't old enough to remember seeing Mays or Koufax. This book is for people who want an informed opinion on where the great Negro League, Cuban, and Japanese

players might rank in relation to the elite major leaguers. This book is to stimulate conversation on how much the steroid issue taints the statistics of modern-day ballplayers.

Costas didn't agree with all my positions from the basketball version of *Who's Better, Who's Best?* and he won't agree with all of my baseball choices. I hope he enjoys the book. I've spent years giving him my opinions on various issues, and he's always taken them seriously. Thanks, Bob, for everything. This book is dedicated to you.

FOREWORD

Bob Costas

It's July 1998. The All-Star Game at Coors Field in Denver. Players are coming and going at such a dizzying clip that my scorecard looks like a Jackson Pollack painting. Up in the NBC booth, at my side, as ever . . . Elliott Kalb. For each player and situation, Elliott has a note—sometimes multiple notes. They are the product of his intensive preparation, keen eye for detail, and exceptional editorial judgment as situations unfold.

Late in the game, a 13–8 American League win, National League skipper Jim Leyland calls upon Ugueth Urbina, then of the Expos, to pitch in relief. Scanning Urbina's bio, Elliott notices that the right-hander's middle name is Urtain. In a flash, he hands me this note: "They say everybody in sports these days is all about me, me, me. But not this guy. Here's a guy who is u, u, u." Sadly (or not, depending on your taste), the next pitch ended the inning and that priceless observation went, uh, un-uttered.

So where am I going with this? I'm not sure exactly, but try to understand my dilemma. What do you say in a foreword to a book that has (to your surprise) been dedicated to you? Well, for the sake of balance, and to display my unshakable integrity, I could flatly declare that Elliott Kalb has lost his mind. That the omission of former Giants/Angels/Indians outfielder Leon "Daddy Wags" Wagner from the listings that follow both enrages and befuddles me. And don't get me started on Chico Salmon. But really, who's to say? Bill James, a smarter man than me (according to my own rankings, the 11th smartest American just behind Jeopardy king Ken Jennings—and just ahead of the guy Russell Crowe played in *A Beautiful Mind*) once rated Roy White ahead of Jim Rice! Right. And Danny White was better than Jerry Rice. Go figure. The point—and there is one here someplace—is that everyone has an opinion. Some (like Kalb's) are just better informed, reasoned, and researched.

Kalb's first book (*Who's Better, Who's Best in Basketball?*) was so provocative and popular that the people at McGraw-Hill immediately demanded a baseball follow-up. Resisting the urge to include Michael Jordan in both books, Mr. Stats forged ahead. You hold the results in your hands. This fine piece of work should be the source of both edification and argument. Perhaps some big questions will be answered, but just as many will be raised. Here's just one: How is it that Joe DiMaggio—selected in 1969 as "The Great-

est Living Ballplayer” and always introduced that way until his death in 1999—now ranks behind seven major-league players who outlived him and whose careers either overlapped his or were ongoing at the time of his passing? Just asking. Like I said, I don’t necessarily have the answers. I just enjoy the discussions. And if there’s one thing this book will do, it’s start discussions. Or debates. Or passionate arguments. Or maybe bar fights. Anyway, I’m ducking for cover. Read on.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Testosterone. I realized that after 20 years in sports television, I have spent my entire career working with athletes, broadcasters, and executives that are mostly male—and mostly guy's guys. It's a tough job, but someone's got to eat those steaks and listen to those jokes.

Thankfully, I have balance from the women in my life.

I start with my mother, Phyllis Kalb; my sister, Randi Edelman; my sister-in-law, Susan Kalb; and my aunt, Bobbi DeNoble. As proud as my mother is of me, I'm prouder of her and her accomplishments. My sister and aunt have always been my biggest fans and sounding boards. Thankfully, they brought into my life Bill Edelman and Jimmy DeNoble, two rabid baseball fans and wonderful family members.

My wife, Amy Kalb, is my inspiration. I couldn't begin to write about her love, devotion, sacrifice, and hard work to make my professional and personal life so rewarding. I wouldn't have the time to read a book, much less write one, without Amy. She brought with her Alissa, who provides someone to share other interests outside sports.

My lifelong friends Alison Geller, Ruth Harmon, and Ellen Davis have been like family to me; and time and distance can't ever change that. My ex-wife, Lisa, shares with me the enormous responsibility of raising our boys, Wyatt and Heath. Sometimes my job brings deadlines that mean additional burdens on her time. For this I thank her.

I'm very lucky that some very special women provided much-needed estrogen to this book, as well. Carol Mann made the deal with McGraw-Hill and Michele Pezzuti was the sharp editor who had the unenviable task of reading the first drafts of the manuscript and making sense of it all. Ellen Vinz made it a great-looking book.

If all my boys learn from me is to love baseball and befriend and listen to smart women, they'll be ahead of the game.

Speaking of which, I can't acknowledge anyone without speaking of my children. There really is nothing to compare with the joy of playing catch with your sons. My son Wyatt put it best when he told me, "I wish I could meet the man who invented baseball and thank him."

I want to thank Wyatt, and Heath, and Jordan as well—because they make life so enjoyable. I mean, after all the women have their say in your life, you have to have someone to watch *Dodgeball* and *Austin Powers* with, and discuss the merits of Shoeless Joe Jackson versus Honus Wagner.

Finally, there are the usual cast of characters that helped me write the book. Barbara and Irv Levinson; Gary Gilbert, Scott Leabman, David Fisher, Marty Appel, David Harmon; everyone at Black Canyon Productions; Jon Miller, Kevin Monaghan, and Gary Quinn at NBC; Russ Gabay at MLB; my brother, David; and my supportive dad (who took me to my first game, and encouraged this lunacy). Thanks to all.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most poignant moments in baseball history took place in a hotel ballroom the night before the 1969 All-Star Game in Washington, D.C. That moment came when Mrs. Babe Ruth slowly walked to the podium to accept an award for the Babe as the greatest player ever. She received the award from a true American hero, Frank Borman, the man who commanded the first Apollo flight around the moon.

Ruth hadn't played in about 35 years when baseball awarded him that honor. I recently brought that up on the phone with Commissioner Bud Selig, who was at that dinner. I told Mr. Selig that it's been 35 years since that night. He remembered it well, also recalling that Joe DiMaggio was named the "Greatest Living Player" on that evening. I asked the commissioner if Ruth was still the all-time best. He answered that it was hard to say, since he personally never saw Ruth play. He did say that Babe Ruth's influence was legendary. He saved the game. But he also told me that players like Aaron and Mays were at a level where they deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as Ruth. And that, for Selig, was as good as you could be.

"Babe Ruth couldn't make a college team in today's world," onetime Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton told me on the phone from his Massachusetts home.

"You don't think he would have adjusted?" I asked.

"Okay, he would have had a few years of minor-league instruction, been given weight and nutritional training, and all the video work would have helped him. Maybe you're right. He would have been a star."

"I went through that with my basketball book. People put down Bob Cousy and other players from his era. But they would have adjusted. This book (and that one) is about players who dominate games, seasons, and eras."

Bouton continued, "In the old days, there was no way to measure talent."

"So, we're to discount the fact that Walter Johnson was a great fastball pitcher because we couldn't measure him, or exclude Josh Gibson because we don't have accurate and complete statistics?"

"I think we'd laugh if we saw Walter Johnson pitch up close. We would say, 'Is this as hard as you can bring it?' He probably didn't throw 90 miles an hour."

The former pitcher turned author then continued his rant about the old-timers. "Yeah, Josh Gibson hit 88 homers in a season. But what was the competition like? I can show you guys who hit .600 in a season. They're Little Leaguers. It's all relative. Generally, the higher the averages and offensive numbers, the lower the quality of play. Guys who bat

.500 in high school and .400 in college and .300 in the majors are normal. When there is a worse talent pool, it's easier for a few to rise above."

"So, if I'm hearing you right, the quality of play in today's major leagues has gone down significantly because there has been an offensive explosion in the last decade?"

Bouton responded that there are other factors at work here, generally the size of ballparks and steroids.

"Now, Jim, help me out here. In your days, you wrote about players using 'greenies.' Did that help any of the players?"

"I wrote in *Ball Four* almost 35 years ago that if there were a pill we could take that could guarantee a pitcher 20 wins but take five years off his life, we would have taken it. Greenies weren't performance-enhancing, they just helped overcome the previous evening. But players of my day didn't take performance-enhancing drugs because we didn't know of any!"

"Okay, Jim, one last question. Who was the best player you ever saw—either as a teammate, an opponent, or on television?"

"Mickey Mantle. He had tremendous power from both sides of the plate, and had speed. You don't see that combination."

Seymour Siwoff, of the Elias Sports Bureau, who has been around the game for half a century and is the official statistician for Major League Baseball, didn't need more than a second to respond to my question. He told me Willie Mays was the greatest, that there was nothing he couldn't do. Curt Gowdy, the Red Sox announcer when Ted Williams played, and later the "Game of the Week" announcer for more than a decade, said that Mays was the best player, but Williams the best batter.

Bill White, the former first baseman, announcer, and National League president, told me that Mays was the best player, but Stan Musial was the best hitter he ever saw.

Tony Kubek, who played in the American League before becoming a national voice on "Game of the Week" for years, had a different take: "Ted Williams was the best hitter I ever saw. But I'll say that with a caveat. One man—Mickey Mantle batting right-handed—was better even than Williams. As a left-handed batter, Mantle was a low-ball hitter and an upper-cutter."

Among more modern experts, Fox's Joe Buck—the voice of baseball in this generation—told me that Alex Rodriguez is the best player he's ever seen to be able to play shortstop, hit home runs like he does, and handle everything. He went on to tell me that his dad, the late Jack Buck, always maintained that Mays was the best player he ever saw, but Stan Musial was the best person he was ever around.

Joe Buck's partner in the broadcast booth, Tim McCarver, played in four decades ('50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s) and has announced games in three decades ('80s, '90s, '00s).

McCarver said, “When I retired, I was asked the question a lot of who the greatest player I ever saw was. I said Willie Mays, but the more time goes by, the closer it becomes in my mind between Mays and Aaron. When I retired, it was Mays, head and shoulders over Aaron. Mays is still the best. He could beat you in so many ways.”

McCarver also said that Barry Bonds is among the top five players in baseball history. Bobby Bonilla and Johnny Bench told me that Bonds is the best.

We’re just getting started. This book isn’t only about who is ranked number one—I rank the top 75 players. I talked to owners, commissioners, statisticians, announcers, players, and historians. I went through the microfilm and read through way too many newspaper stories. I read hundreds of books.

I went to Yogi Berra, through his friend Dave Kaplan at the wonderful Yogi Berra Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, for thoughts on Johnny Bench. It’s not that Yogi doesn’t love Johnny—he does—but I was reminded by Yogi that when Berra and Bench were chosen as the two catchers on the 1999 All-Century Team, Berra went out of his way to mention that he saw Josh Gibson in 1940, and that Gibson might have been the best catcher ever. Gibson is ranked that way in this book.

I have followed baseball since I was eight years old and remember the teachers wheeling in a portable television set to the cafeteria so we elementary school kids could watch a few innings of the 1970 World Series games (when the entire Series was still played entirely during the day). Thousands of tabletop baseball games later, this fan grew up and found a dream job—serving as NBC Sports’ chief statistician for their “Major League Baseball Game of the Week”—at the time, a sports institution. Beginning in 1987, I assisted the deepest roster of baseball announcing talent ever assembled—including Vin Scully, Joe Garagiola, Tony Kubek, and Bob Costas. Scully had called Dodgers games since 1950, and when I was growing up, his was the last voice I heard nightly going to sleep with my transistor radio at my side. There was no greater education to an inquisitive kid out of college.

I was in the press box when Kirk Gibson hit his dramatic home run in the 1988 World Series, and for countless other Series games, All-Star Games, and divisional and League Championship Series playoff games. During the pregame ceremonies before one of the 1999 World Series games, I was in the press box at Turner Field when colleague Jim Gray persisted in grilling Pete Rose about admitting to gambling on baseball. In my estimation, he should have grilled Rose about being on the field with the other members of the All-Century Team! Fans voted Rose ahead of Musial? Absurd!

Ever since that fall night in Atlanta in ’99, I had dreamed of writing a book ranking the greatest players in history. When I was growing up, the biggest question concerned the great outfielders Hank Aaron and Willie Mays making their run at Babe Ruth’s home