

"A wonderfully lyrical tale of the season that put poetry back into baseball. . . . The best book yet by America's finest sportswriter."

—Pete Hamill

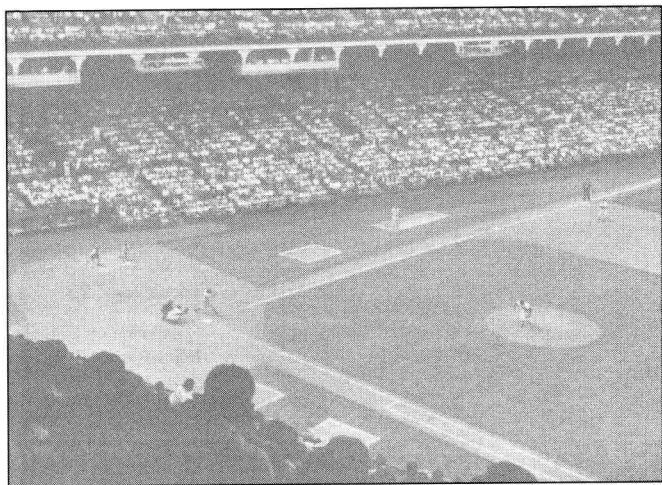
Summer of '98

When Homers Flew, Records Fell,
and Baseball Reclaimed America

MIKE LUPICA



• Summer of '98 •



WHEN HOMERS FLEW, RECORDS FELL,
AND BASEBALL RECLAIMED AMERICA



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One night in the summer, a night when both Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa had homered, Pete Hamill called up late, the way he often does, and we talked about baseball a little more. If I came to this summer from 1961, Hamill came to it from '47, from Brooklyn, from watching Jackie Robinson break in with the Dodgers, changing Brooklyn and baseball and America, all for the better.

He was eleven the season Robinson was a rookie. On this night I mentioned to Pete that my Christopher was about to turn eleven, how baseball and the home runs had turned his life upside down, had done that to the whole house; how all my sons had come to baseball in this one summer the way I had in '61, with my father.

Pete—a writing hero long before he came a friend—said, “Write a book about that. Start tonight.”

I have tried to write that book.

I could not have done it without Jeremy Schaap. Every Sunday on ESPN's *The Sports Reporters* I have the great good fortune to sit to the left of his father, Dick. I have been just as lucky on my last two books to have Jeremy as my right hand. He covered the end of the McGwire–Sosa duel for ESPN, and did so brilliantly, with a feel for the pictures, and the words of a gifted writer; he was right there when I couldn't be. He is one of the most talented young people to come into the business in years. I have benefited from his talent, and his energy, and his generosity.

Esther Newberg of ICM is a great agent; everybody in the business knows that. She is also the most loyal person I know. So thanks again to her, and to Neil Nyren, my editor at Penguin Putnam. He is class, judgment, honesty, taste: the whole package.

I received valuable contributions from three other trusted friends: Barry Werner, my sports editor at the New York *Daily News*; Barry Stanton, who writes one of the smartest and most underrated columns in the country for the Gannett papers in the New York area; and Bob Klapisch, the fine baseball columnist for the *Bergen (New Jersey) Record*. And three new friends at ESPN: producers Dan Weinberg, Rob Farris, Marc Weiner.

The great William Goldman is always there for me, in whatever I do.

The Elias Sports Bureau remains the single best natural resource in the business. Somehow everybody there treats me like a member of the family, and I am grateful.

I could not write a book about my love of baseball without mentioning two uncles, Tony DiVeronica and Sam Lupica, who always had time to watch the games with me, and who never tired of answering questions about Joe DiMaggio.

And once more, these two women: my mother, Lee Lupica, who has always been the quiet champion of our family, always had enough love and strength for everyone, over all the seasons of my life; and my wife, Taylor.

The first time Jets coach Bill Parcells met Taylor McKelvy Lupica, he called me up the next day and said, "You overmarried." I already knew. It is a happy world I describe for our family in this book: My amazing wife is the one who has done the most to create it for all of us. We now have our beautiful Hannah, born a month after the World Series ended, on DiMaggio's 84th birthday, as it turned out. When she is old enough, I will write her a note in the night, like the notes I wrote for my sons during the summer of '98, and it will contain the best possible advice:

Watch every move your mother makes.

I have also made her mother this promise: I won't buy Hannah her first baseball glove for a while.

Not until she is three, anyway.

• contents •



prologue

MARCH • 1

one

APRIL • 17

two

MAY • 37

three

JUNE • 57

four

JULY • 73

five

AUGUST • 87

six

SEPTEMBER (FIRST HALF) • 109

seven

SEPTEMBER (SECOND HALF) • 143

eight

OCTOBER • 173

epilogue

AFTER THE SEASON • 203

• *prologue* •



March

ALEX, MY SEVEN-YEAR-OLD, HAD THE MARK MCGWIRE card I'd bought him in the souvenir shop, holding on to it like it was a winning lottery ticket.

Or maybe just a ticket to the whole season, the first that would ever really matter to him, the one that would make him care.

The season starting right now for him, spring training on a Sunday afternoon, McGwire right there in front of him.

The McGwire card was in a plastic case, made to look like a miniature plaque. Alex liked the looks of that. He is the keeper of things in the house. Of my three sons, he is the nester. Next to his bed, on the floor, he lays out autographed balls and bats and caps and trophies and signed photographs and what he calls his "special

cards." The walls are now covered with posters of his favorite players, color photographs he has ripped from the sports magazines. Underneath the bed, in drawers, are all his jerseys, with names and numbers on the back. It is the shrine of all his stuff.

McGwire will be a special card, he had said in the store.

"If he breaks the record this year," he said, "I'll know I had this card from the start."

"It's good that it has a cover on it," he said. "You have to take care of your special cards."

This would be the season when baseball would get into his heart, the way baseball still can; the way it always has in this country, for boys like this. Alex would turn eight in April, a few weeks after Opening Day. He would play on his first Little League team. And this would just be the time in his life when the spark was lit for him. It would happen for his brothers, too, just more with him. Things go deep with Alex. In all the best, bright ways, baseball would go deep with him in the summer of 1998.

Like some McGwire home run that would never stop rolling.

It would not just be one thing, between this day in spring training and the end of the World Series. It would not just be the home runs, or all the games the Yankees would win, or the afternoon when he saw Ken Griffey, Jr., and Alex Rodriguez in person for the first time, or the manager of the Mets, Bobby Valentine, coming over to wish him happy birthday when he sat down close to the field at Shea Stadium with his friends.

It would not just be his first team, or uniform, or putting on catcher's gear for the first time, or buying the Mike Piazza mitt with his own money, or making baseball card deals with the adults who own and operate his favorite card stores; or the way he would close his door at night, when he didn't know I was on the other side, and do imaginary play-by-play of the big-league games he was playing inside his wonderful head:

"There is a long fly ball from Alex Lupica. . . . It could be a home run. . . . It IS a home run! . . ."

It would not be all the backyard games he invented, usually in the early evening after his supper, Wiffle ball games of home-run derby over the fence around the swimming pool, or all the fly balls I would feed him at the fence, the pressure all on me to make a perfect throw so he could leap against the fence and take an imaginary home run away from someone.

It was all of it, starting now, with the McGwire card in his right hand and McGwire on the field in front of him.

"He's going to hit one today," Alex said to his brothers.

We were in right field at Roger Dean Stadium, the Cardinals' new spring training home in Jupiter, Florida. Cardinals against one of the season's expansion teams, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. The opponent held no real interest for my kids. Neither did the Cardinals, for that matter. They were here to see McGwire, in this sweet spring training place, everything new and trying to look old, because that is the trend in baseball now, at places like Camden Yards in Baltimore and Jacobs Field in Cleveland. It was the same in the spring. Places like Jupiter built ballparks like these and lured teams like the Cardinals away from Al Lang Stadium in St. Petersburg, an ancient capital of spring training, as ancient as the population of St. Petersburg.

And Jupiter got lucky, here at Roger Dean, hard by I-95 off Donald Ross Boulevard.

In the spring of '98, Jupiter got McGwire, who had hit 58 home runs for the A's and Cardinals the year before, who had become the biggest action hero in baseball since Babe Ruth. The stands were full this day because they would be full every day for McGwire, and everyone was here for the reason my sons and I were here:

He might hit one out today.

Maybe he would go deep.

The simplest things always bring us back. The promise of sports, the pull of it, is always the same for fans: We show up wanting this year to be better than last year. And we want to be a part of that. If this year was better than last year for Mark McGwire, even just a little better, a handful of home runs, he would get to 60, which was the best Ruth ever did, back in 1927. A couple more and he would beat Roger Maris's 61, hit for the '61 Yankees. That was the magic number now, for baseball and all sports:

Sixty-one.

Nobody had to tell me.

The spark had been lit for me that summer of '61, the summer of Maris and Mickey Mantle both trying to break Ruth's record. They were together for most of the summer and then Maris had pulled away at the end, finally passing Ruth on the last day of the regular season.

We were living in Oneida, New York, then, about twenty minutes east of Syracuse. Yankee Stadium was five hours away by car, and so it was on the other side of the world for me. My father and I followed Maris and Mantle on the radio, and on the Syracuse television station, Channel 3, that carried some of the Yankee games in those days. No ESPN then. No cable. No color television for us. I remember the season in black-and-white. I turned nine that spring. It was my first season in Little League.

That was my home-run summer, the way this would be a home-run summer for my sons.

I followed Maris and Mantle through the voices of Mel Allen and Phil Rizzuto. There were other voices for the Yankees, and on the Game of the Week. I can only hear Allen and Rizzuto. When I would finally go to bed, exhausting the last possible angle to get one more inning from my father, he would promise to leave me a note on the floor of my room. And would:

Maris hit another one. 42.

Mantle 1-for-4, no home runs.

Yanks, 5-2.

Or whatever it was. I would find the notes in the morning.

The whole season felt like morning.

So home runs started it for me, too.

I told Mel Allen about how it happened for me that summer. We were at a table in the media dining room at Yankee Stadium. Maybe it was a year before Allen died, maybe more than that. He would still show up for special occasions at the Stadium, still do a few innings in the broadcast booth when asked; almost until the end, he was the marvelous voice of the syndicated *This Week in Baseball* television show, talking over the highlights of the week and still making the whole world feel as if it were still in Little League.

I would sit with him every single chance I got. I never got tired of hearing that voice. I would even think about having him sign something for me, though I was never much of a collector of autographs, even as a kid. But then I thought: How could he possibly ever autograph all those nights when he made me feel as if the balls Maris and Mantle were hitting were landing at my front door?

"The way you felt about '61," he said to me that time, "that's the way we all felt."

The old man, past eighty by then, smiled at me and said, "That was the year Roger and Mickey made boys out of us all."

Now all this time later, in the Florida sun, I was with my sons, to watch the new home-run hitter. Sometimes sports is a big wheel that keeps turning and finally takes you all the way back to the beginning.

Before we had come inside, we had stopped to buy things. Christopher, who would turn eleven in September, had bought a miniature bat and Zach, five going on six, had bought a baseball.

The store had been rush-hour full even a few minutes before the first pitch. This is a time in sports when the obsession and fascination for the stuff—one that would turn into a national obsession about what would happen to the home-run balls McGwire and Sosa would hit on the other side of the season, in September—had become more important than the games, a day like this at the ballpark, when the kids would see McGwire in person for the first time the way they would see Junior Griffey later.

But then we were inside. And even on this day in late March, in the exhibition season when the numbers didn't count—before the numbers would become everything—all you had to do was move through the crowd to understand that McGwire's presence, in uniform, in person, had done something to the place. A switch that would be thrown every time he came out of the dugout, and then moved from the on-deck circle to home plate.

More than the other two, Alex watched every move McGwire made. The way he took his practice swings. The way he stared out at the pitcher. Even the way he spit. Alex always notices everything. The morning after the second Mike Tyson—Evander Holyfield fight, he was watching the tape of it with his brothers, not knowing anything about what had happened the night before. And the moment, the exact moment, when Tyson bit Holyfield the first time—before Holyfield hotfooted his way out of the clinch and before the announcers even realized what had happened—Alex turned to me and said, "He bit him."

I had needed the replays the night before to see it.

"What did you say?"

"Tyson bit him."

At Roger Dean Stadium now he said, "He's bigger than he was before."

"Who's bigger?"

"McGwire."

I pointed out that he'd never seen him in person before.

"He's bigger than on his rookie card, Dad."

The stuff. He had McGwire with the A's, when McGwire looked to be about half the size he is now.

Alex nodded solemnly and said, "He has new arms."

We had started out in seats behind first base, but we spotted the patch of green grass down the first-base line, past the area the Cardinals were using for a bullpen at Roger Dean. It looked like a picnic lawn, with blankets spread out and people bringing food over from the concession stand out there. The move was booked when Christopher saw the Cardinal right fielder end an inning with a running catch and then toss the ball to one of the kids hanging over the fence.

So we went out there and sat on the grass in the early innings. This was as close as any of my sons had been to a game, the field right in front of them. Spring training baseball is always more available, the way minor-league baseball is. McGwire looked huge at first base.

The first time I had been this close to big-league ballplayers was in Cooperstown, New York, at the tiny ballpark there where they play an annual exhibition game the Monday of the Hall of Fame inductions. The Stadium was too far away from Oneida, but Cooperstown was not. And one year the Yankees were in the game.

I don't remember how long the game lasted that day. Just that the Yankees looked as if they were close enough to touch, before a hard rain came and washed the game out and made everybody run out of the ballpark and through the streets of the movie-set town for cover. The fans ran for cars, the players ran back to the hotel.

My father and I ended up under an awning with Bill "Moose" Skowron, the Yankee first baseman. I don't remember a word of what was said. My father made small talk with Skowron, who had a crew cut and a face as broken-in as his glove. It was a way of keep-

ing Skowron there a few moments longer, before he caught up with his teammates.

He was as big to me as McGwire was in Jupiter.

Much bigger than his baseball card.

MCGWIRE GAVE ONE A RIDE HIS THIRD TIME UP.

We had decided that the one more inning before we left was this inning, the fifth. McGwire would come up in the fifth, against Rolando Arrojo of the Devil Rays.

And so, for the last time for us that day, there was the current that hitters like McGwire have always sent through ballparks. Big guys have always brought the place to a stop, made you watch, all the way back to Ruth. Mantle and Maris did it, Hank Aaron did it. Darryl Strawberry, with the Yankees by now, did it the first time he ever had a bat in his hands at Shea Stadium, as a kid for the Mets.

They make you watch even when they miss.

McGwire didn't miss Arrojo. All these months later, I cannot tell you what the score was at the time. But I can tell you about the sound the ball made on McGwire's bat, even from where we were down past first base. And the way we jumped up, because all of Roger Dean Stadium was up. And the way my sons' eyes were suddenly full of the sky, just on the chance . . .

The ball missed by a foot.

Maybe two feet short of going over the wall in left center field.

He had to settle for a double, and so did we.

The ballpark sat back down and we began to move toward the exit behind home plate, while McGwire stood grinning at second base, grinning at his near miss and maybe just the joy of being able to hit a ball that hard and know you didn't get it all.

Alex took one last look before we left. At McGwire, dwarfing the Devil Rays' second baseman. At the field. At the day.

"You think he can do it?"

I said, "You mean break the record?"

He nodded.

"I actually think he's going to do it and Griffey's going to do it, too."

Alex said, "If they both break it, who wins?"

"The one with the most home runs wins."

He took my hand and we caught up with his brothers. From behind us, from inside Roger Dean Stadium, we heard the start of a cheer, then a break in it, then a much bigger cheer. It was either a ball in the air that had fallen in the outfield, or maybe a ball in the air that had made it all the way out. It was the sound of baseball, though.

Summer begins early sometimes.

OUR FIRST OFFICIAL DAY WAS ABOUT MCGWIRE. We had come to see him get his swings. We didn't know in Jupiter in the spring that he would hit 70. We didn't know that by September, on the other side of the season, it wouldn't just be one spring training park coming to a stop for him the night he broke Roger Maris's record, it would be the country.

But the feeling we had that September night, my sons and I knew that feeling already, because we took it away from Roger Dean Stadium and kept it, like Alex's card.

In October, watching the World Series one night, I said to him, "Do you remember who the Cardinals played when we saw them?"

"Devil Rays," he said.

"How come you remember that?" I said.

His eyes briefly left the television screen and he gave me that look kids give you, when you don't understand the video game they are playing or *Rugrats* or the card trade they have just made with one of their brothers.

“Because I do,” he said.

Because no matter how old you are or how much you have seen, sports is still about memory and imagination. Never more than during the baseball summer of '98, when baseball made everyone feel like a kid again, when it felt important again. At a time in American life when we all would feel as if a law had been passed requiring us to look through some White House peephole at Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in a charming little study off the Oval Office, baseball would feel as if it were saving not just the country, but the whole world.

For one magic season, everybody's eyes would be full of the sky.

I never thought I would have a better baseball season than the one I had in '61, not just because of the home runs, but because of what I thought was the best Yankee team I would ever see in my life. Now I saw more home runs, and a better Yankee team.

It was McGwire and Sosa and Ken Griffey, Jr., at least until McGwire and Sosa pulled away from him the way Maris had pulled away from Mantle once. It was a strikeout pitcher for the Chicago Cubs, a twenty-year-old named Kerry Wood who could strike out 20 batters in a game.

David Wells of the Yankees would pitch a perfect game for the Yankees in May, the first perfect game in Yankee Stadium since Don Larsen in the World Series of 1956. Wells has the tattooed body of a bouncer and tells anybody who will listen that Babe Ruth is his hero. Ruth wore No. 3. Wells wears 33. He likes late New York nights and closing the bar as much as Ruth did. He did not look like the most likely candidate for a perfect game. Neither did Larsen in '56. Larsen, with his tired saloon face, was known for drinking and late nights himself, as much as for his pitching. Before the '56 Series, his lifetime record was 30-40. In 1954, his record with the St. Louis Browns had been 3-21. After the perfect game against the Dodgers, this was the lead Joe Trimble wrote about Larsen in the New York *Daily News*: