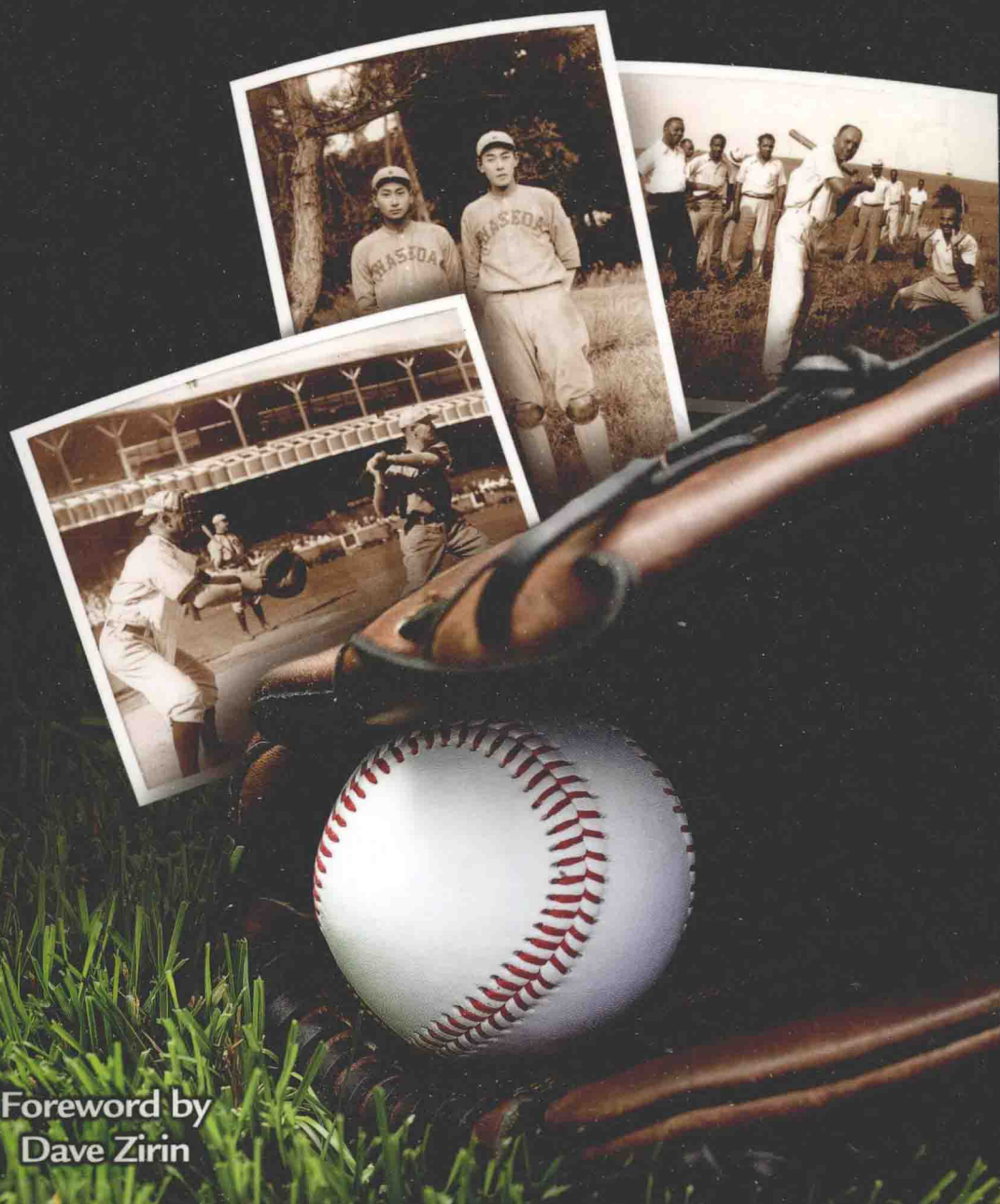


READING BASEBALL

Books, Biographies, and the
Business of the Game

BRAHAM DABSCHEK



Foreword by
Dave Zirin

READING BASEBALL

Books, Biographies, and the Business of the Game

by **Braham Dabscheck**



FiT

Fitness Information Technology

A Division of the International Center for Performance Excellence

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2. Waseda University baseball players J. Nagano, catcher (left) ,and second baseman J. Kuji. Photo courtesy of the Bain Collection: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
3. Photo of African Americans playing baseball in 1940. Photo courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M

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READING BASEBALL

Books, Biographies, and the
Business of the Game

To the memory of Curt Flood (1938 – 1997)

FOREWORD

I love baseball and I always have. I played at every level (well, through high school, anyway) and still possess my ticket stub to Game 6 of the 1986 World Series between the Boston Red Sox and my beloved New York Mets (price \$20). I also was raised to revere baseball history. My father, born and bred in Brooklyn, New York, would put me to sleep—sometimes literally—with stories about Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snider, and “the man who broke the color line in baseball”—Jackie Robinson. This compelled me to read more baseball stories from the past as I grew. But there was one problem: most of these histories were either colored by nostalgia, drenched in sentiment, or simply a collection of lies.

In Braham Dabscheck’s *Reading Baseball*, we get an understanding of baseball more appropriate to non-fiction than fiction. In writing this work, Dabscheck is taking on more than a century of writing that has been crippled by half-truths, myth-making, sanctimony, and outright mendacity. The book corrects our understanding of the political economy of the national pastime. The game was said to have been born in the United States, the product of a young nation celebrating its own innocent past. Unfortunately, this is a lie, and not just because the past of this nation—dripping in blood and bondage—was anything but innocent. Our national pastime did not hatch from the minds of hearty pioneers bravely forging a New World. In fact, there is ample evidence that its true roots are with the British game of rounders, combined with Native American gamesmanship. Perhaps we can forgive the collective baseball historians with “poetic license” in the name of nostalgia. But there are other lies we should be less quick to forgive.

At the turn of the 20th century, we were told that baseball was created in beautiful Cooperstown, New York, by former Army general Abner

Doubleday. Yet once again facts are stubborn things. Doubleday never set foot in Cooperstown and there is no evidence that the general knew a baseball from a Johnny cake. The myth was born when baseball owner Albert Spalding of Spalding & Co. sporting goods put together a blue ribbon panel that would definitively claim how baseball was invented. Cooperstown was chosen because of its small town beauty. And Doubleday, who led slaughters of Native Americans and Mexicans, and starred in the Civil War, seemed as good a choice as any to be the founder.

Spalding loved the idea of forever merging the sport with war. Upon announcing his findings that Doubleday invented the sport, he said:

Baseball, I repeat, is war! And the playing of the game is a battle in which every contestant is a commanding general, who, having a field of occupation, must defend it; who, having gained an advantage, must hold it by the employment of every faculty of his brain and body, by every resource of his mind and muscle.

Spalding did, however, play a large role in promoting the game of baseball—and his sporting goods company—abroad in the late 1880s when he organized a tour of his Chicago White Stockings and an “All-American” team throughout several different countries, which is detailed in chapters 13 and 14 of this book. How baseball has been used abroad is a critical component to our understanding. Spalding wrote about how baseball could aid in far-off military ventures:

Baseball has “followed the flag.” It followed the flag to the front in the 1860s, and received then an impetus which has carried it to half a century of wondrous growth and prosperity ... It has followed the flag to the Hawaiian Islands, and at once supplanted every other form of athletics in popularity. It has followed the flag to the Philippines, to Puerto Rico, and to Cuba, and wherever a ship floating the stars and stripes finds anchorage today, somewhere on nearby shore the American national game is in progress.

But the greatest lie that accompanies baseball is that it is a pastoral, innocent enterprise, best suited to being played in a “Field of Dreams” in an Iowa cornfield. As *Reading Baseball* makes all too clear, this is no more than mythology and marketing. Dabscheck does more than state the obvious: that the current multi-billion dollar international enterprise that is Major League Baseball does not resemble anything innocent (unless 10-dollar beers and billion-dollar publicly funded ballparks are your idea of innocence), but the game was never anything other than a big business riddled with social conflict.

Toward the end of the 19th century, baseball was hardly safe harbor from the age of the “robber barons.” In fact, it was seen as prime territory. Entrepreneurs saw baseball and they saw big money. Contests began to be advertised, marketed, and sold to the public. Tickets ranged from a quarter to a shocking five dollars to enter and crowds were beginning to gather in the thousands. Despite the big money, in the robber baron tradition, no players were paid.

This changed in 1869 when the Cincinnati Red Stockings fielded a team with an annual payroll of \$9,300. They traveled nearly 12,000 miles and played before over 200,000 people. Total gate receipts were \$29,724.87; salaries and expenses, \$29,726.26; net profit, \$1.39.

In late August 1867, a team called the Mutuels traveled to Washington to meet with President Andrew Johnson at the White House. Johnson declared baseball to be “the National Game.” But “National Game” or not, the sport was floundering as graft, open cheating, and utter disorganization pervaded the sport. It mirrored the way the early years of industry thrashed about in utter anarchy. In 1876, this changed when William Hubert formed The National League of Professional Baseball Clubs. The National League’s initial salvos were executed with a reformer’s zeal. The league banned open gambling and liquor sales at games. They pledged to expel clubs that failed to stick to schedules and even prohibited the playing of league games on Sunday.

Their desire for order extended to labor and management relations.

In 1879, the owners unanimously agreed to that they should be allowed to “reserve” five players for the next season. This was the birth of what came to be known as “the reserve clause.” The reserve clause, which as detailed in Chapter 3 was challenged nearly a century later by Curt Flood, was extended to cover all major league players, virtually binding a player to the same club for life. Business was booming. Publishers of major daily newspapers such as Charles A. Dana, William Randolph Hearst, and Joseph Pulitzer increased circulation by creating regular sports sections with separate scribes: it was the creation of “the sportswriter.” By the 1880s, professional baseball was a \$10 million-a-year enterprise.

This was an era, however, of not only robber barons but rebellion. Baseball was not immune. In 1885, Billy Voltz, a minor league manager from Chattanooga, founded the National Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players, the first players’ union. Their president was New York Giants pitcher John Montgomery Ward, who also held a law degree from Columbia Law College. After negotiations failed to address salaries and the reserve clause, “Ward led the Brotherhood in open revolution at the end of the 1889 season.”

A large swath of players, furious about the owners’ total lack of desire to take their demands seriously, split and formed their own separate enterprise called “The Player’s League” in 1890. The cry on their lips was “Fire the boss!” One writer called the entire Player’s League exercise “a failed slave’s revolt.”

Ironic, that they would use the term slave revolt, since one issue the first players’ union failed to address was the most pressing issue of its time: the systematic expulsion of black players from the game. Yes, baseball like all sports in the United States was integrated until the defeat of reconstruction at the end of the 20th century. Jackie Robinson, therefore, in 1947 didn’t so much integrate the sport as “reintegrate” it, and at a terrible cost to the Negro Leagues, which gave him his start. As Dabscheck details in Chapter 8, there was nothing innocent about any of this, nothing excusable, and nothing nostalgic. It was the use of a glorious game to reinforce racism and keep people divided.

But what is truly ironic is the way the so-called innocent past is used relentlessly to hammer today's "greedy athletes." The reality is that the game was never blessed with innocence—only cursed by those "minders of the flame" who have forever felt compelled to whitewash the past and deny the hallowed game's roots are best remembered as fiction. In the contents of *Reading Baseball*, we get more than a counter history: we get a historical rectification that everyone—scholars, historians, and particularly baseball fans—have an obligation to read.

—**Dave Zirin**, author of *Bad Sports: How Owners Are Ruining the Game We Love*. Zirin also writes a weekly sport column, *The Edge of Sports*, and contributes to the *Nation*, *SLAM*, and *The Progressive*. He hosts Edge of Sports Radio on Sirius XM.

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I would like to thank all those players, officials, academics, and others who have provided me with information and ideas, and an ongoing forum for discussions concerning sport and how it fits into the human condition. Thanks are also expressed to the Australian Society for Sports History for providing me with a convivial environment and a home for my research.

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Braham Dabscheck

PREFACE

Most of us are first introduced to sports by a parent or family member. They teach us how to throw, catch, hit, and kick balls and how to run and move and inculcate us into the rhythms of play. They take us to games to watch their favorite teams, explain the rules of play, extol the virtues of players, and tell us about the stars and great teams of yesteryear. At school or in community-based clubs we learn the rudimentary skills of the game and play in underage competitions. As we become more proficient, we dream the impossible dream that one day we will play at the top level and may even be a member of a championship-winning team.

Our appetite for the sport is whetted by following it in the media and discussing it with our peer groups and family members. As we get older, we find ourselves immersed in books and magazines about the history of the sport, the fortunes of a favorite team and the statistics and achievements of legendary players. This interest in sports is something that is encouraged by parents and teachers. Sports are seen as having positive physical and social functions; sports help to enhance fitness and provide an endless source of communication for those who find themselves caught in its net.

As sports fans grow older, they may find their interests moving, or extending, from action on the field to what happens off the field. Sports, like everything else, interact with broader societal forces. Sports have to work out how they should operate and be organized. There will be disputes about how this should be achieved. Such disputes may be resolved by discussions, and some may even find their way into the courts. There may also be disputes over who can and cannot play the sport, such an issue being a reflection of broader social mores. Changes in the media and broadcasting may provide another set of tensions. And then there will be those who muse about other

dimensions associated with sport, of how it “fits” into the broader reaches of society itself.

My interest in baseball did not take this conventional route. I came to baseball backwards, as it were, by first developing an interest in how it was managed off the field. I was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1949. While baseball has been played in Australia since the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is a minor sport. A national league (the Australian Baseball League) commenced operation in 1989 and folded at the end of the 1998-1999 season (The league, through a partnership with Major League Baseball, relaunched in 2010). As a young child I was not even aware that there was a game called baseball. Like all young boys of my acquaintance, I became immersed in two sports. They were and still are Australian football, a game played in winter, and cricket, which is played in summer. Between the seasons there was swimming and athletics. I became and still am an avid reader of the back pages of newspapers.

I first became aware that there was a game called baseball in my reading about cricket, during my early teenage years. Baseball was something that cricketers did during winter to keep fit and hone their fielding skills. I can also remember seeing Gary Cooper playing Lou Gehrig in *The Pride of the Yankees* on television sometime in the 1960s. By then I had also become aware of Babe Ruth, if only in comparison with Australian cricket’s master batsmen Don Bradman. But I had never seen a game of baseball or knew what its rules were, other than three strikes and you are out. I certainly didn’t know that a foul could also count as a strike!

The turning point for me occurred following a decision I made concerning a postgraduate thesis. Late in December 1971, I embarked on a research project concerned with examining the operation of the labor market for Australian footballers.¹ The key issue was whether or not the transfer system (similar to that which operates in soccer world) helped to enhance competitive balance. The transfer system operated in a similar way to the reserve system in baseball prior to 1976. The evidence revealed that it did

not enhance competitive balance and I argued that the costs imposed on the economic freedom of players were far in excess of its imagined, or not realized, benefits.

One of the advantages of being an Australian is that we have developed the practice of looking to other countries for guidance or models on how we should proceed. First we looked to the nation that established European settlement in 1788, England, then to Europe and America, and more recently to Asia. We live in the hope of being able to cherry pick from the best offered by overseas experience. I examined developments in English soccer and American baseball to enhance my knowledge of the workings of professional team sports.

At the same time that I was undertaking my research, Curt Flood, with the aid of the Major League Baseball Players Association, challenged baseball's reserve clause. His case was decided by the Supreme Court in June 1972.² He was unsuccessful in his suit. This volume is dedicated to his memory.

Flood v. Kuhn was among the first things that I ever read on baseball. The inclusion of material on baseball in my thesis started the process of the development of what subsequently became an ongoing interest in the game and its place in American society. For several years in the 1970s, I subscribed to *The Sporting News*. When it began to take over my office, I donated my copies to the University library and stopped subscribing. In the 1970s, the World Series started to be shown on Australian television. I watched games and learned about its rules and finer points from commentators. I also found myself purchasing numerous books by scholars, journalists, and commentators on baseball and scouring academic journals for further information and ideas. And the internet, of course, has made it much easier to obtain information, especially from primary sources.

In 1983, a seminal event occurred in Australian sports' scholarship with the formation of the Australian Society for Sports History. Its journal, *Sporting Traditions*, provided an outlet for research and writing on sport. Many

of the items brought together in this volume first had an airing in *Sporting Traditions*.

Through my reading, I have obtained more information on the history and evolution of baseball as a game; a business; a site of struggle between players and owners; the operation of the American legal system, especially the interaction between anti-trust and labor laws; baseball as America's national pastime; the importance of race and the civil rights movement; the slow, erratic bubbling of the American "melting pot"; and those larger than life characters, players, managers, owners, and others who have been part of baseball's grand parade.

This volume is organized into three sections. The first is concerned with issues of Business. It contains material on industrial relations in baseball, the broad interconnections between sport and the American legal system, Curt Flood and his unsuccessful action against the reserve system before the Supreme Court, and a comparison of the operation of sporting cartels in baseball and European soccer.

The second section deals with Books and Biographies. It provides commentaries on Stephen Jay Gould's writings on the game, the connections between baseball and philosophy, and Ken Burns' masterful series of documentaries, *Baseball*. It also examines biographies of Babe Ruth and Satchel Paige, Branch Rickey, Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax, Babe Ruth (again), Lou Gehrig, and Barry Bonds and finishes with an examination of the role of commissioners.

The final section examines issues associated with Boundaries and Borderlands. It provides information on baseball in Australia and, what turned out to be, the ill-fated Australian Baseball League; Albert Goodwill Spalding's world tour at the end of the nineteenth century; baseball in Asia; and an historical analysis of the rise of Latinos in American baseball.

Jacques Barzun has said, "Whoever wants to know the heart and soul of America had better learn baseball."³ Learning is an ongoing process. I am different from the typical follower of American baseball. I have not closely