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Preface

Baseball is the eternal game, melding past, present, and future in a sport that never dies. In fact our oldest professional sport prospers after all the knocks it takes—labor disputes, greed, venality, management incompetence, and petty politics—through the decades.

No wonder we talk about baseball 24/7/52/365. The free-agent era brought the end of the off-season as traditionally perceived. But if truth be known, baseball fans never took a month or two off. We've always talked, debated, and argued baseball year-round, even if the news slowed to a trickle. We could always time-travel to some previous era to compare present achievers with those in the good old days, which often seem more glamorous in hindsight. Now the never-ending parade of player movement and related developments provide fresh fodder even during the traditional downtime between Christmas and New Year's. As a result, for sheer athletic entertainment value, the sport provides conversational grist and analogies for other parts of life like no other. Baseball terminology pervades so many facets of life, from politics to sex.

Measure its competitors—many say its superiors. The NFL is a white-hot focus of office-cooler talk when betting pools are set up on Fridays and settled on Mondays, sandwiched around the social event of sixteen Sunday games. In between, however, these amateur gamblers are not exactly talking up the merits of the slant play. Most who call themselves NFL fans probably could not name their favorite team's starting offensive linemen or top defensive reserves. "If gambling could somehow be outlawed, football would dry up," sportswriter-pundit-turned-travel-writer Alan Solomon said around

1988, a feeling seconded by those who can see beyond the NFL's intensely choreographed marketing and media machine.

The betting aspect isn't as prevalent in the NBA, whose fine points of the give-and-go and the triangle offense are not chewed over by the average league follower. Aerial artistry, slamma-jamma, and other deft body English are the main lures here. Professional basketball is intensely visual, a perfect made-for-TV winter game where the players wear less than any other sport and whose identities are not obscured by helmets. But the NBA has been a big deal for only a generation. "I'd love to have the history baseball possesses," NBA commissioner David Stern once said. Indeed, when Joe DiMaggio was captivating the country and building up mythic legend by hitting in fifty-six in a row, what passed for pro basketball were vagabond teams playing for coffee money in small industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

Hockey? Remember that winter sport? After a brief upsurge in the 1970s and into the 1980s, the Canadian import was steadily reduced to cult status long before labor squabbles cashed in its 2004–5 season. Hockey faded behind other individual sports in popularity, falling totally off the table.

Golf, tennis, and NASCAR are all good visual theater. But they don't cut to the base loyalties of the average sports consumer like baseball does. In the end—and despite the criticism battering it from non-fans and football lovers—baseball remains the one sport so closely intertwined with other classic Americana.

To be sure, the game was overromanticized by too many authors and essayists. They read into it far more than it is. *Field of Dreams* was well-made Hollywood fantasy, but that's all it was. Don't try to whip up assorted allegories for deeper human meanings. The game does have some social significance. Jackie Robinson's color-line busting of 1947 was a true landmark in American history, with a baseball player representing progress that presidents and Congresses before and after 1947 shamefully refused to foster. And in some cases, a winning team is a psychological salve, uniting a disparate community and temporarily healing wounds, a function served by the world-champion 1968 Detroit Tigers a year after their city burned in horrific riots. Yet to apply all kinds of links to the human soul that might puzzle Freud himself is unsuitable.

Simply put, baseball is the first sport we usually love. And if a gaggle of propagandists don't convince us we should have a passion for other sports or forsake baseball entirely, it's a game that sticks with us a lifetime, passing down to our heirs in the process.

Baseball is a game we pursue at many levels. Almost all of us have played it or its variant, softball, at the very least at a basic level. Beyond park-league, flag-and-touch contests, football winnows out most competitors with its jarring contact, equipment requirements, and sheer brute strength. Basketball has approached baseball in the last two decades in year-round participation by both adults and those at the formative stages of their sports loyalties, yet height and quickness absent in most competitors will prevent it from being pursued at a truly competitive level.

Most sandlotters and park-district participants waive themselves out by the time serious interscholastic competition begins. Yet the love of the game simply is transformed into day-to-day interest in the Major Leagues via the media, the prism through which we truly get to know the game and its stars. Long before the inception of the Internet, that gateway usually was provided through published accounts of games near and far, along with the ubiquitous box score, the collection of baseball hieroglyphics and codes that got more detailed as the twentieth century progressed. Poring over the box scores and game stories was a morning ritual of countless millions, with even more up-to-the-minute accounts of day games featured in afternoon newspapers before that genre began slipping away in post-World War II America.

The newspaper and magazine coverage of the game was joined around 1930 by radio play-by-play accounts. Fans' favorite teams were augmented by loyalties to announcers, who like hitters' stances and pitchers' deliveries offered up a myriad of well-remembered styles. Voices of the greats still resound in millions of memory banks. They range from the exciting, tell-it-like-he-thought-it-was warbling of Harry Caray, with Stan Musial conquering the pavilion wall in old Busch Stadium; to the poetry-in-motion of Vin Scully as Sandy Koufax channeled other-world lightning through his left arm to throw a perfect game; to the vocal-chords-busting deliveries of Jack Brickhouse, Jack Quinlan, and Vince Lloyd when beloved Ernie Banks hit another out of Wrigley Field.

Print and radio were joined by tv by 1950. At first restricted by cumbersome equipment, the video presentation of baseball soon became a classic directors' game. Be it Harry Coyle's capturing of Carlton Fisk trying to gesture his home run fair in the 1975 World Series or Arne Harris working magic with just four cameras and one replay machine in Chicago, baseball's daily personality came alive in living color. Advancements in replays, camera lenses, and other equipment dissected the sport up close and personal as never before.

And, in turn, the march forward of broadcast coverage improved the print coverage. Instead of sometimes purple prose offering up a mere play-by-play of the game, quotes began to pepper game stories. Notebooks and "sidebar" stories were added to coverage packages, taking the reader inside the clubhouse and executive suite to explain the "whys" of the game. Clashes and divisions erupted between print and broadcast, the former considering itself the old guard protecting its turf, the latter demanding, but not always getting, equal access despite the mega-millions pouring into the game through broadcast rights fees.

By the 1990s, the Internet finally grabbed a toehold in the baseball prism. But if in the early twenty-first century the online purveyors were about as advanced as radio was in, say, 1928 or tv in about 1953, the cyberspace coverage of the game was not yet on equal footing with the older forms of media.

Baseball and the media cannot get along without each other. From the very day the National League opened for business in the Grant administration, team owners could not afford to purchase the space that newspapers allotted for baseball coverage, for which they paid in writers' and editors' salaries. Nearly a century later, owners depended upon raking in seven figures in revenue from radio and tv rights. But it would have been unthinkable for the lords of the game to have paid the broadcast outlets for three hours a day, at some 190 games a year (including spring training and the postseason). Baseball has wised up in the nascent Internet era, owning a portion of the leading online purveyor of baseball information.

Without the media conduits to the fans, who talk up the game and eventually are its paying customers, baseball would go the way of a gambling-free football. So you'd figure the sport and those who

cover it would be one big, happy family. Figure again. Rather than keep the slow, loving embrace going, baseball and the media have allowed a gulf to grow between them. Both parties are still in it together, but increasingly at arm's length. And the consumer at home is the loser in the end.

Players and executives, in whose best interest it lies to make their personas accessible through the media, are increasingly keeping their distance. Soaring salaries allow players to morph into Hollywood celebrities with a careful filter masking what they're really like, if not an outright wall around them. A careful corporate mentality has enveloped much of baseball. Fans have always felt close to their baseball heroes, even if they've never met them, but now they are increasingly light years' removed. Trust has been replaced by bitterness.

But the media itself also has had a big hand in the breakdown. Baseball writers don't stay at their jobs long anymore, disrupting the continuity of coverage demanded by fans. Many on the beat eschew relationships with players in favor of roaming clubhouses and foul territory in packs or cliques in what one writer calls "socialized journalism." Elitism and arrogance, as bad as any practiced by wealthy players, exist among the pen-and-mike crowd. Columnists and radio sports-talk-show hosts often don't show up at the ballpark. That in turn creates ill will among baseball folk when the opinion-meisters craft their output on the basis of second- and thirdhand information to which their readers and listeners already have access. "Entertainment" is liberally substituted for accurate journalism by ratings-hungry broadcast executives. The presentation, or the "sizzle," is perceived as more important than the truth, or the "steak."

The fans deserve better, as they do from their politicians and business executives. After all, baseball is supposed to be a passionate escape from everyday worries. Instead the outside world intrudes into the toy factory. Politics is political, sport is more political than politics, and media is worse than both of them.

How things came to be, and how things could be better in how baseball is perceived through the media, will be detailed in the next couple of hundred pages. But there's one reassuring certainty. The game goes on. It's so tough, it always gets up after being knocked

down. It's been buried and pronounced dead so many times that you'd scarcely pay attention to the next such proclamation.

In an era of bullpen specialization, of five-and-fly starters, baseball itself still goes the distance. Harry Caray once said the names change, die, and fade away, but the game continues on. Thank goodness for such small favors in a tough, tough world.