

Triple Play: Personal Reviews, Op-Ed Pieces, and Polemics from Outside the Purview of the Umpires



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Leagues of Their Own

Why would anybody spend long hours hunched over a flat surface, tracking the progress of imaginary baseball games? No simple answer may suffice, but since practitioners by the tens of thousands--some of them famous--have engaged in this unlikely pastime, it probably can't be dismissed as sheer insanity.

Long before today's "fantasy leagues"--which entail gambling far more than fantasy--kids of all ages fell under the spell of commercially manufactured tabletop baseball games. These were combinations of boards, dice, cards, and spinners used to simulate contests among actual Major League players. Equally important, the simulations allowed mixing and matching from diverse eras: 1927 Yanks vs. the Big Red Machine? Koufax vs. Cobb? Mathewson vs. Pujols? No problem. Create customized leagues? A cinch. To onlookers, the "action" might appear to be on the tabletop, but in fact, it unfolded vividly in game players' imaginations.

The first of these games appeared in the early 1940s as Ethan Allen's (later Cadaco) All-Star Baseball, a simple affair with player disks that fit over a spinner. The disks were calibrated according to the player's lifetime stats. Where the arrow of the spinner came to rest indicated the play result. Naturally the space for a home run on Babe Ruth's disk was wider than on any other.

A decade later brought Strat-O-Matic and its main competitor, the American Professional Baseball Association (APBA). These relatively sophisticated simulations used dice and player cards and charts to replicate not only the batting prowess of big leaguers but also the pitching and fielding tendencies. Game players handled all managerial duties, such as selecting lineups, dictating offensive and defensive tactics, and keeping statistics afterward if they wished. Those tabulations, computerized now, were long, hands-on labors of love.

Over time these games took on enormous cult popularity. Leagues formed across the country. Each fall, champion APBA teams and their "managers" met in a World Series tournament; each February, APBA fanatics braved snowstorms to line up outside the company's factory in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to receive the latest cards.

Writer-editor Daniel Okrent (who as an adult would invent Rotisserie League Baseball) recalls the wait for a new season's Strat-O-Matic cards as "agonizing." To the uninitiated, he concedes, the codified cards might have looked like hieroglyphics; but to the young Okrent, they were as "thrilling as an epic poem."

"From my first roll of the dice, I was hooked," says Jon Miller, San Francisco Giants and ESPN broadcaster, in *Confessions of a Baseball Purist*. After spending long months replaying the entire 1966 National League schedule with his Strat-O-Matic game, Miller proceeded to make up his own league with franchises in Hudson Bay, Rome, London, and even Machu Picchu. By then, presaging his future profession, he'd taken to "announcing" games--even imitating background sounds: PA system announcers, vendors' cries, infield chatter, and rousing stadium cheers. Miller's father, passing by his closed bedroom door, feared the boy was having a heart attack.

Partly because his mother grew tired of stepping over him on the floor, Joe Torre, former All-Star catcher and current Yankees manager, played APBA in the basement of his boyhood pal, Johnny Parascandola. The pair established a league and kept stats. "We spent hours upon hours down there, including a good chunk of our winters," Torre says in his memoir, *Chasing the Dream*. "Even then I enjoyed the decision-making involved in managing." Now, many years since his playing days, Torre still sometimes receives his own APBA card with an autograph request. "Whenever I see one," he says, "it's like opening an old photo album."

Torre stayed cool in tight APBA games--but not his buddy Johnny, who might upend the table if he lost. Once Johnny stuck a pitcher's card under a running faucet, yelling "I'm sending you to the showers!" It's good that Parascandola opposed the even-tempered Torre rather than Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane, who, as a teenager, according to Alan Schwarz's *The Numbers Game*, hurled his Strat-O-Matic dice into the street when results didn't come out his way, and occasionally destroyed the cards of players who failed in the clutch.

Two highly creative writers, Paul Auster and Jack Kerouac, shunned commercial simulations--no big surprise--and instead created their own games. Auster invented "Action Baseball," played with two ninety-six-card decks, a pegboard, and a scoreboard. The cards are reproduced in Auster's memoir, *Hand to Mouth*, and are color-coded with offensive and defensive symbols and play results. They provide, he claims, every option available to big league managers. Unsuccessful in an attempt to market his creation, Auster nonetheless insists: "Action Baseball unfolds with all the excitement of a flesh-and-blood game."

Beat writer Kerouac used baseball terminology to track his daily writing, noting items in his voluminous journals like, "Did 17 pages, batting .329." At age six or seven, he devised a fantasy game that involved two sets of over one hundred handwritten cards. He played it for the next three decades, during which he invented scores of imaginary players, organized them into teams named for cars, and compiled hundreds of pages detailing every single game. In these pages he updated stats, wrote narrative accounts of contests, and even penned a league newsletter. In *Desolation Angels* he gives us a glimpse of game action:

To while away the time I play my solitaire card game ... between the Pittsburgh Plymouths (my oldest team, and now barely on top of the 2nd division) and the New York Chevies rising from the cellar ignominiously since they were world champions last year--I shuffle my deck, write out the lineups, and lay out the teams--For hundreds of miles around, black night, the lamps of Desolation are lit, to a childish sport, but the Void is a child too.

A rival to Kerouac's zeal might exist today in a lesser-known but no less committed player, Geoff Thevenot, who customized his APBA Baseball for Windows program in order to form a baseball universe set in the twenty-second century. Referring to himself as the High Council of One, Thevenot has populated his twenty-four-team Elite League and an ancillary twelve-team North American Federation with roughly 3,500 players in all, giving each a distinct name and playing style. Besides discarding the designated hitter, creating video-reviewed ratings for fielders and new stats such as "BG" and "BL" (bases gained/lost), establishing a Socialist Sports Administration to equalize team revenues, and tracking hot rivalries (e.g., L.A. Dodgers vs. Phoenix Flames), Thevenot has seen fit to project an entire planetary history--including World War III, which cancelled baseball between 2017 and 2046--in order to link today's players with those of his future world. Last I heard he was finishing up the 2116 season. You can't go much further than that--not within the bounds of consensus reality.

Such extreme fantasy commitment is surpassed, to my knowledge, only in the case of J. Henry Waugh, the fictional protagonist of Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*. As "proprietor" of his elaborate league, Waugh spends each night in the fascinating company of the colorful ballplayers he has invented. In the passage of seasons and generations, his players age and retire, become coaches and managers, and even die. At the story's climax, the son of one of the original players, a rising young star and Henry Waugh's favorite, is beamed. Waugh desperately checks and rechecks his Extraordinary Occurrences Chart, but the outcome is fatal. The shock of it sends him into a despair so profound that Waugh's consciousness appears to bleed into the alternate reality he has created and, too late, attempted to change.

"Baseball is not a sport or a game or a contest," John Steinbeck once wrote. "It is a state of mind." This is never truer than in the cerebral realms of simulation.

DARRYL BROCK

Remembering Bob Feller

Many of my baseball memories are just a blur, but some have remained over the past seventy years. These include a few of the games that Bob Feller pitched, including the following five.

1. On a warm July night in 1936, my best friend Lee Allen and I, both eleven, spent the night in a tent behind his home in Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland. A passionate Indians fan, I had nevertheless ignored baseball the previous afternoon, perhaps because the Indians were playing a meaningless exhibition game in League Park. I remember picking up the Cleveland Plain Dealer from the Allens' doorstep the next morning, where I read with amazement that a seventeen-year-old kid named Bob Feller had struck out eight Cardinals while pitching three innings during the exhibition game. Feller's Major League debut took place later that month. I must have seen him pitch several times that season and the next, but I have no specific recollection of these games.
2. The Indians' 1938 season concluded with a Saturday game at League Park followed by a Sunday doubleheader in the Municipal Stadium. Attention was not focused on Feller but rather on Hank Greenberg, who had hit 58 home runs to that point, threatening Babe Ruth's famous record. I saw all 3 of these games, and I recall the motion picture cameras that were filming Greenberg at League Park. More to the point, Feller pitched the first game of the Sunday twin bill. My baseball pal Mike McGean and I were keeping score as we always did. Because Feller had often fanned ten or more batters in the first five innings, the impressive number of strikeouts recorded by mid-game was not unusual. But as the strikes kept coming, Mike and I--knowing that 18 strikeouts would be a new record--were rooting for this to happen, and of course it did. We didn't care that Feller had lost an otherwise meaningless game by allowing 4 runs or that Greenberg had failed to deliver; we had seen history in the making and we knew it.
3. In 1939 lights were installed in the stadium, and my father took me to see the first night game ever played in Cleveland. The game started at 8:30, and there would be only 6 more night games played there that season, which was all that baseball law then allowed. So this was a very special event, which, as it turned out, was enhanced because Feller allowed only one hit. The lighting, poor by today's standards, seemed wonderful to me. I recall the sparkling dots of light, which never let up, created by fans lighting cigarettes in the deeply recessed areas under the huge stadium roof.
4. Although Feller pitched a few games in 1945 after his discharge from the navy, 1946 was his first full postwar season. I have never forgotten a game that was played on a weekday afternoon in May against the Washington Senators at League Park. (I was twenty-one by then and just out of the navy myself.) Based on records supplied by Bob Tiemann for an article in SABR's National Pastime, there is only 1 game that fits the bill, and this was on Friday, May 17 won by Cleveland, 3-0. (1) I remember this otherwise obscure contest because Feller was positively electrifying that day. There were only about 4,500 witnesses, so I was able to sneak into an unusually good seat from which to watch his performance. I have never seen such "stuff" before or since. The Nats got a few lucky hits, but it could have been a no-hitter. This game was already Feller's fifth win of that young season, during which he would finish with an ERA of 2.16, the best of his career. He won 26 games, second only to his 27 victories in 1940. This reminds me: if Feller had only won a another game in 1940 (the year he pitched a no-hitter on opening day) instead of losing to Floyd Giebell on that final Saturday ... but I digress.
5. Bob Tiemann's recordkeeping also helped me to pin down the date of a game in June of 1946 that Feller pitched but that I didn't see. I had traveled with my father to attend his thirtieth reunion at Amherst College in Massachusetts. On Wednesday, June 12, we decided to drive to Boston, hoping to see a game at Fenway Park. We had not bothered to buy tickets in advance, although we knew that Feller, usually a big draw, would be pitching for Cleveland. This was a mistake; after we discovered that there was no hope of getting inside the ballpark, we could only listen to the game on the car radio as we drove disconsolately back to Amherst as the broadcast faded.

Some things you just don't forget.

NOTES

1. Bob Boynton "One Team, Two Fields: Where the Indians played their home games in the '30s and '40s." *The National Pastime*, 15 (1995), pp. 51-54. (Data provided by Bob Tiemann.)

BOB BOYNTON

Bill Lee and Dick Lally. *Have Glove, Will Travel: Adventures of a Baseball Vagabond*. New York: Crown, 2005. 320 pp. Cloth, \$23.00. Paper, \$13.95.

Full disclosure: I know Bill Lee and I like him, though he's a free spirit from California and I'm a puritan from New England. We're old pitchers though my career consisted of starting 11 games for the division III college where I now teach, and he won a national championship at the University of South Carolina and 119 games in fourteen years (1969-83) in the Major Leagues. We're both Vermonters now and proud of it.

Our connection is our love of baseball. I express mine by teaching courses that connect the game to American history, culture, and art; he expresses his by still playing the game (at fifty-eight years of age) every chance he gets. The last sentence in *Have Glove, Will Travel*, his most recent autobiographical foray, is simply "I'm a ballplayer," and it's true. He will play until they carry him off the field on his shield and bury him with his spikes on. I've never met anyone who knows and enjoys the game more, and that's why I like him so.

He brings to mind Babe Ragland, the hero of Jerome Charyn's novel, *The Seventh Babe*, a rebel in the American tradition. Banished from Major League Baseball at nineteen in 1925, Ragland joins up with the Cincinnati Colored Giants, a barnstorming black team whose players suffer the degradations of the road and the depredations of prejudice to their love of the game. "All the kid ever wanted to do was play ball," and the purity of his passion alienates those who want to exploit the game. Amid the confusion of his life, he knows one thing for sure: "I'm a ballplayer," he says.

After we read *The Seventh Babe* in my baseball classes, I invite Bill Lee to visit and introduce him as Ragland's real life counterpart; and he holds forth, never failing to entertain. The students ask him what it's like to face Reggie Jackson in Yankee Stadium before a packed house. He answers, but he's clearly happier talking about his most recent outing at a senior game in Arizona or Newport, Vermont. He does not live in the past. He didn't write "I used to be a ballplayer"; he is a ballplayer, present tense--not just a former Major Leaguer.

Like players in the old days, he plays round the seasons, more or less: In the summer, he plays in the Northern Vermont Senior League for the Lake Region Rangers. He plays in Arizona in the fall in senior tournaments. In the winter and spring, he plays in Montreal and Boston fantasy camps. Other barnstorming opportunities crop up ad hoc. He has an opening day gig every April at a bar in Boston, where he "throws out the first pitcher (of beer)." Lucky for him, and us, there are so many other baby boomers who also love the game and furnish him with teammates and competition as his hair turns white and his joints creak.

His first book with Dick Lally, *The Wrong Stuff*, confirmed him as a sixties rebel, clashing with the narrow-minded suits, smoking dope, spouting leftist politics, rocking and rolling, and infuriating those who ran the game. Every one of his Dylan-loving, Nixon-hating contemporaries who had played catch with his dad was drawn to Bill Lee for his irreverence. For a time, the baseball establishment tolerated him: you can put up with a lot from a lefty who can throw strikes and beat the Yankees, a rare talent that kept him in Boston long after he had worn out his welcome with management.

When he staged his one-day walkout on the Montreal Expos on May 8, 1982, protesting the release of his teammate Rodney Scott, he became baseball's persona non grata, like Charyn's Babe Ragland. In the unforgiving argot of the game, he, too, was "released." The balance had shifted; his leverage had diminished. He was thirty-five, and his ball had lost just enough zip and dip that his value on the mound didn't compensate for his behavior. He could still pitch, but he was blackballed nonetheless. Not a single Major League team needed a left-handed reliever and spot starter who had led the

Expos' pitchers the previous season in ERA (2.94), had been second in games pitched (31), and had been first in public appearances. "I even hit .348," he adds. He should have been Jesse Orosco.

That's where *The Wrong Stuff* ended--with the Montreal protest--and *Have Glove, Will Travel* picks up. In this new book, he takes readers to those spots where his peripatetic nature and craft have taken him: Russia; Venezuela; Cuba; all over Canada--Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick; as well as Maine and other ports of call (or ball) in the United States. He describes his presidential campaign in 1984 at the head of the Rhinoceros Party ticket with Hunter S. Thompson (whom he never met) as his running mate; talks with Teddy Ballgame about hitting; outfoxes a fundamentalist evangelical baseball impresario from Pennsylvania bent on saving him; deconstructs his one dismal season as skipper of the Winter Haven Super Sox of the ill-fated Senior Professional Baseball Association; and provides, at the end, a fitting coda for the last two decades of his interesting life.

I wasn't crazy about *The Wrong Stuff*, though it was a best seller and stayed in print for years. I was uncomfortable with its portrayal of the protagonist, the hell-raiser Lee, since it overshadowed the ballplayer and original character, the real-life Lee. I also never liked that *Sports Illustrated* picture of him in the space suit that adorned the cover of *The Wrong Stuff*, nor did I like the nickname "Spaceman." It made him seem goofy, and he's hardly a clown. All of us, especially those who lived through the expansive sixties and nihilistic seventies, know infinitely more "spacey" people than Bill Lee. Only in the context of the baseball player fraternity are his views so radical and unusual.

While Bill Lee may not be an intellectual or a scholar, strictly speaking, he is a reader with a keen natural curiosity, who likes to explore the cultural connections between places and people (he was a geography major at University of South Carolina). He admires Buckminster Fuller and his global conscience. In the end, however, Lee is much more baseball player than aesthete or deep thinker. He loved to carouse in the time-honored fashion, rarely eschewing (in Satchel Paige's phrase) "the midnight ramble." In fact, he would have enjoyed the company of Paige and the Babe; and they, him--free spirits all, talented, independent, reckless, viscerally intelligent, unique. "Outlaws have always appealed to me," he explains in *Have Glove, Will Travel*. "Straight types may be more dependable, but they have zero amusement value. Anyone who can relieve the boredom of existence can drink from my canteen."

For me, *The Wrong Stuff* emphasized the wrong stuff, though it was perhaps commercially smart to do so. Bill Lee still makes a living being Bill "Spaceman" Lee, so a part of him doesn't care what people are saying as long as they get his name right. The first half of *Have Glove, Will Travel* yielded the same misgivings, as he described his escape from the disappointment of his aborted Major League career in a haze of drugs and alcohol. In a chapter called "Interlude," he discusses playing semipro ball for the Logueuil Senators in the Quebec Senior League (QSL) and the Moncton Mets, but he could go further. More detail on the actual games and his teammates, more on what it's really like to play ball in the QSL and Canada's Maritimes with "Jean" and "Rene," would have been satisfying to his baseball audience.

He spent four years in Moncton, winning 40 of 45 starts; yet the book spends only a few pages on the experience of living there and playing ball in the New Brunswick Senior Baseball League. He describes Moncton as a "good drinking town with a serious fishing problem ... the home of the four-beer lunch." This period intrigues me: can you imagine another Major Leaguer playing in Montreal in a semipro league and then at an outpost in New Brunswick? He really does sound like Babe Ragland when he concludes that

the owners had done me a favor chucking me out of their sport; I could now travel the world, searching for the game in its purest form. I made up my mind to play wherever I could find a diamond for any team that needed my talents.... My left hand, you see, felt incomplete without a baseball gripped between its fingers.

The second half of *Have Glove, Will Travel* is richer, revealing a human being and not a caricature of a man trying hard to retain his antic youth, or recover from it. In this part, he reflects on his life in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (a facetious title for the state's three northernmost, poorest, and most scenic counties); his extraordinary family; his love for Cuba and its people and countryside, borne of baseball-playing trips there; baseball's unceasing attraction; and his obsession with the game. Expect no broad transformation, however. The portrait is still one of an old-fashioned barnstormer, his own picaresque hero--a ballplayer--running it out with enthusiasm.

Bill Lee is big in Canada. He loves the country and its people, and the sentiment is returned. His second wife, Pam, was a Montrealer; and his present companion (to whom the book is dedicated), Diana, is from Calgary. Bill and Diana are helping to plan, raise funds, and build a "Fenway Park West" on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Sharing a border with Canada, Vermont then seems an appropriate place for Bill to alight when he's not on the road. As he puts it, his house in Craftsbury is a "halfway house ... halfway between the bars in Boston and the bars in Montreal."

The Vermont lifestyle appeals to Lee, this erstwhile Californian. A Vermonter since 1988, he hunts and fishes, taps his own maple trees, chops his own cordwood, mows, weeds, gardens, and generally finds a happy outlet for his iconoclasm. "I have found peace here," he writes in the chapter "Vermont Tales." "Those wild partying days in Montreal feel well behind me. People in this region take everything in stride, and I've learned to relax more by being with them." Though it is parochial of me to say, I think he could also do more with his Vermont identity in *Have Glove, Will Travel*. The Vermont chapter is a short one; the momentum of his narrative could have withstood further reflection on the refuge he finds on his fifteen acres on Route 14, living in a house he built himself, halfway between Wolcott and Irasburg, overlooking the Black River to Craftsbury Common on the next hill. In an essay in the *Boston Globe* in 2003, he wrote, "When I'm away, I can't wait to get to my own little rehabilitation center on the hill. What a view!"

Cuba is a long way from Vermont, but Bill Lee's soul finds solace there, too. He has visited Cuba and played ball there four times since 1999, and his attachment to this beisbol paradiso is now the subject of a documentary film, *Spaceman: A Baseball Odyssey* (spacemanincuba.com). Lee's main attraction to Cuba is the passion its citizen's exhibit for the game. They possess the aficion that their most famous American resident, Hemingway, so admired. In all the senior games Lee has played against his contemporaries on the island, his teams have won just once--and that, a game against hotel employees and not an officially scheduled contest. He describes in *Have Glove, Will Travel* the settings in the hinterlands where the games are played, Vinales and Pinar del Rio, and the characters his teams encounter: the six-foot-four, 240 pound fifty-five-year-old, "Lazlo," with the "perfect pitching mechanics" and "nasty stuff"; the even larger Luis Casanova, "Roberto Clemente on steroids"; and pitching legend Porfirio Perez, the "Man of 100 Moves," who resembles "an octopus unfolding from a coil".

The quality of their play is astonishing. "Those one-sided defeats convinced me and my teammates that everyone in Cuba can hit a baseball," he writes. "Kids born on that island must emerge from the womb toting fungo bats.... The Cuban hitters bludgeoned everything I threw." The crackdown by the Bush Administration on travel to Cuba has complicated visits by baseball groups in the last year and a half, but Lee hopes to go back in February (2006) with an entourage of family and ballplaying friends.

The final chapter ("Of Fathers and Their Children") and the Epilogue in "Have Glove, Still Travel" provide fitting closure to these tales from a life lived fully. Lee describes the legacy of his family, a legacy dominated by baseball, and enumerates in the book's final pages the reasons he so loves the game and continues to play it. These chapters are original, perceptive, and moving.

Bill Lee is the third Bill Lee to make his mark in baseball. His grandfather was a second baseman for the Hollywood Stars in the Pacific Coast League (PCL) in the World War I era, when the PCL was just a notch below Major League status. He taught his son by the same name, our Bill Lee's dad, "baseball fundamentals ... the proper way to play," and he, in turn, passed that passion for playing the game right along to his son. William Francis Lee III still has the glove his dad gave him when he signed his first professional contract. On the glove, the father inscribed in black marker the "credo" that the son followed for his entire career: "Throw strikes. Keep the ball down. Be smooth. Don't alibi." Across the fingers on the glove, he wrote in wide letters: "HUSTLE."

Lee also celebrates his Aunt Annabelle, who played baseball for nine years in the 1940s in women's professional leagues. Annabelle Lee threw a perfect game and two no-hitters, and her "uniform hangs at the entrance of the Baseball Hall of Fame, right next to Jackie Robinson's." She was one of Lee's first pitching coaches. She "worked on my control and mechanics and taught me to change speeds. She smoothed out my delivery and insisted I throw every pitch from the same release point and with the same motion."

The traditional roles of father and son get an airing out in this chapter. Lee's dad was a demanding taskmaster, often distant and reluctant to show affection. "Dad could be a difficult man to satisfy," he writes. "I have no doubt he loves me deeply.... [but] I recall how his words often hurt. They also toughened my hide, which was the purpose all along." The emotional reluctance of the father ("The John Wayne Code") has been passed down to the son, who regrets this aspect of the Lee legacy. He writes to his four children in the pages of this book, "I love you all and could not be prouder to be your father," noting, ironically, how easy these words are to write but how difficult they still are to say in person.

The final words in *Have Glove, Will Travel* tell us why he still pulls on the uniform every chance he gets. I will copy these pages and hand them out to my students. As a player he is able to avoid the syrupy sentiment of other rhapsodic effusions in this category, not that easy to do, and convey the game's special meaning: "I love the feel of the ball.... The years have notched my fingers with calluses that fit perfectly around that horsehide. The world resting in my palm." Though he will compete ferociously, he sees baseball not fundamentally in terms of outcome--balls and strikes and homers and wins and losses--but more broadly in the way it pleases the senses:

I love breaking in a new glove ...
I love pitching at dusk ...
I love stretching before a game ...
I love rolling in the newly mowed outfield grass ...
I love the dance on the mound ...
I love running out ground balls ...

At the end of Charyn's *The Seventh Babe*, Ragsy, in his seventies in 1978, still wearing the "pajamas of the Cincinnati Colored Giants," rescues a teammate from an old folks home in Holyoke, Mass. Along with the barnstorming Giants, they go out and lick the college-boy hot shots from Amherst College in an exhibition game. Then they all climb in their jalopies and drive off into the sunset to find other games, other fields to conquer: "Did you kick old age in the pants when you traveled with the Giants?" Life is an endless road trip, Babe's experience suggests, punctuated always by another game in a new town. We are all barnstormers of one kind or another.

That's about right. I see Bill Lee in this picture. Above all else, he's a ballplayer, and there's no clock in baseball.

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