

# What has happened to baseball?

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Baseball: New Type Of Fans, Statistics more important than the game itself. This year's *Baseball Abstract* was in the bookstore window. I couldn't find it on the shelves, so I asked the saleslady.

"Baseball Abstract"? she repeated, looking puzzled. "It's in the window."

The woman said she thought she knew all the books, but never heard of this one, and maybe her grandson would like it.

Every year, I explained, a guy named Bill James feeds a lot of statistics into a computer and comes out with team and player ratings.

"Oh," said the saleslady. "Then I guess it's not for kids." So much of baseball isn't, anymore.

Somehow, in the last few years, the national pastime has become X-rated, as in X plus Y equals the Turf Factor — who is the most valuable infielder on cloudy days, but only on Astro Turf.

Also X-rated, as in "No one Under 18 Admitted." Unless he/she can operate a slide rule.

A certain brand of baseball fan has stepped to the front of the class. (They laughed when he sat down at the computer.) It's the grownup who never had an interest in playing baseball. As Bill James proudly asserts it's outside baseball, James' heroes growing up, he says, weren't players at all. They were sportswriters.

This baseball fan is not so much interested in the game as it is played by real teams in real places. That's secondary to his/her real interest: the statistics that it generates. For example, in this year's *Baseball Abstract*, James explains the equation for the "B" Factor in determining "Runs Created" — James' original contribution to baseball lore.

And I quote: "TB + .26 x (TBB-IBB + IBB) + .52 x (SB + SH + SF)."

"Runs Created" is one of the reasons why Mike Schmidt is such a great player.

Uh huh.

The *Baseball Abstract* and other examples of what happens when college graduates get ahold of baseball are rather fun, certainly harmless. But they point out how little of baseball remains a kids' game — the kind they used to play in the streets and sandlots, the way they used to root, root, root for the home team.

Baseball cards are big business, of course, bought in bulk,

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pre-sorted, no gum even. Added to the long-standing APBA baseball, there's been an explosion of baseball game games.

One of these, *Rotisserie League Baseball*, is the subject of a paperback in which several literary types describe the league they created and named for the restaurant of its birth: La Rotisserie Francaise.

The players staff their own cutely named teams (The Pollet Burros, named for Michael Pollet; The Okrent Fenokeos, named for Daniel Okrent) from the real rosters of one league or another. Their teams do as well as their players do on any given day.

Perhaps I shouldn't criticize these baseball games — they're probably single-handedly going to save newspapers. They necessitate buying a big city paper

every day, for the all-important box scores.

But these folks are not so much fans of players as fans of general managers. They'd rather watch John McHale than Reggie Jackson.

Recently, we got a questionnaire from something called Diamond Software, asking how we would feel about a software package "which put the rosters of all 26 Major League Baseball teams at your fingertips, accurately represented all individual and team performances for an entire season, put you in control of all strategy decisions and allowed you to play 9 inning games on your computer."

Baseball without the inconvenience of having to watch it.

That's not all. Adult baseball has become the subject of a whole new genre of fiction: the "literary" baseball novels.

These are not "The Johnny Bench Story," nor are they non-fiction exposes of just how mean, petty, and adulterous baseball players are.

Rather, it's something like: "The baseball diamond is a metaphor for life." Perhaps it's because of the current popularity of baseball on college campuses, writes Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post*, "where people like to talk about its metaphorical undertones and deeper cultural meanings."

Unfortunately, he says, the authors don't know much about writing — or about baseball, either.

So on a Sunday afternoon, with nothing to do, and no neurotic coaches to push them, what do kids play?

Basketball, of course.

There are hints that they watch it more, too. Bob Bradley began doing the half-time and after-game shows for the 76ers a couple of years ago, after years of doing the same thing for the Phillies.

He says he gets more recognition from kids on the street because of the basketball connection than he did from all those years with baseball.

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