

TRUTH, ACCURACY AND THE AMERICAN PASTIME

Writer Steven Goldleaf's passion for baseball is a matter of fact

By JIM McKEEVER

IF STEVEN GOLDLEAF were asked to fill out a survey of his background and interests, it might look something like this:

1. Birthstone: Diamond.
2. Astrological sign: Hit and Run.
3. Hero: Diogenes.
4. Favorite Book: "Used Goods."

As an explanation, Goldleaf is: (1 and 2) a baseball fan; (3) a seeker of honest men who tell the truth; and (4) author of "Used Goods," a baseball novel.

Goldleaf, 33, is a part-time teacher of composition at Le-Moyne College. He holds two master's degrees and a doctorate in creative writing, which makes him somewhat of an authority in that field, and he's from Brooklyn, which makes him somewhat of an authority on baseball.

He has strong feelings on both subjects, but they are far from being pure "gut reactions." For instance:

✓ Former major league outfielder Jimmy Piersall, in his book "The Truth Hurts," claims to have compiled a fielding percentage of .997 and to have made an average of one error per season. Goldleaf checked it out and found that Piersall's actual fielding percentage was .990, and that he averaged about four errors per season. Respectable figures, yes, but the truth does hurt.

✓ "An announcer said once that (Oakland A's designated hitter) Dave Kingman is a great hitter," recalled Goldleaf, perhaps thinking of Kingman's mediocre lifetime batting average and high strikeout ratio. "Who's he kidding? The announcer's just admitting that he's a moron."

Goldleaf's quest for accuracy extends from the baseball diamond to the classroom.

✓ "The essay is a form of communication which ultimately should lead to the truth," said Goldleaf. "It makes no sense to try to write in two pages why the U.S. should or should not sign the SALT treaty. You're doomed to failure. But if you carve out a small piece of something and back it up with facts, then you have a greater chance of succeeding."

Goldleaf is adept at finding facts to back up his beliefs. It's a habit he wishes more people would get into, especially when they talk baseball. And especially when they're getting paid to talk baseball.

Goldleaf took New York Mets announcers Bob Murphy and Gary Thorn to task over a lengthy discussion the pair had about the speed of a baseball traveling on artificial surface compared to the speed of a ball on grass. One of the announcers quoted a player as saying that the ball picked up speed as it bounced along artificial turf, and the announcers proceeded to argue the point for several minutes.

What annoyed Goldleaf was that neither of the two thought to mention something called physics, and how a ball cannot increase speed unless a force acts upon it in the proper manner. A baseball field, real or otherwise, does not qualify.

"They actually wasted a huge amount of time debating stuff a third grader should know," Goldleaf said.

Facts are Goldleaf's lifeblood, but fiction plays a large part in his life as well. He has spent the past 12 years working on a novel. The book's origins lie in his emotions, but he backs up the novel's premise with plenty of support — 800 pages worth, currently being whittled down to a more manageable 450.

"Used Goods" is about a man who tries to buy the Los Angeles Dodgers and move the team back to Brooklyn. The question invariably asked about first novels — "Is it autobiographical?" — of course does not apply, but one is inclined to think Goldleaf wishes it were so.



Rob Crenelli/THE POST-STANDARD

Steven Goldleaf in the office of his DeWitt apartment.

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— Steven Goldleaf

Goldleaf was 5 years old and living in Brooklyn when the Dodgers moved west after the 1957 season.

"All of a sudden, for reasons a 5-year-old, and I dare say a 50-year-old, cannot understand, a team up and moves a continent away," he said. "It was a disturbing and upsetting moment ... It resulted in divided loyalties and confusion that has lasted to the present day. But it has made me more objective as a fan."

Goldleaf's objectivity concerning baseball is apparent when one reads his letters that were published in the 1986 Bill James Baseball Abstract, a collection of essays and statistics published annually by James, a self-described baseball nut.

Goldleaf started corresponding with James about a year ago and has since sent about a dozen letters to James' Kansas home. The letters that appeared in the 1986 Abstract analyzed such things as the successes and failures of converting outfielders into third basemen and the likelihood of the Mets winning the National League pennant after two second-place finishes.

Goldleaf goes as far as to suggest that James conduct a more in-depth look at an aspect of the game that probably would not concern most fans. But it's just that part of baseball, the statistical nuts and bolts, that Goldleaf and James thrive on.

"I'd be interested in a more systematic study of defensive switching of positions affecting hitting," Goldleaf wrote to

James. "Was that what stopped (Ron) Santo, as you've suggested, or was it his age, the switch of leagues, the switch of parks from Wrigley to Comiskey. (Toby) Harrah seems to be coping well with many of the same conditions."

James, who said he receives "a lot of fascinating mail from some very bright people," rates Goldleaf "among the best" of his regular correspondents.

"He understands the process of research so well," James said of Goldleaf. "Rather than start with statistics and shake them out to see what you come up with, he looks at the big picture and comes up with evidence to support his views."

Although Goldleaf devours the Abstract every year, he is not a clone of James, who admits that he thinks about baseball "virtually every waking hour of the day."

"Bill James is completely wrongheaded a lot of times," said Goldleaf. "But what he does is make the game of baseball more enjoyable."

Goldleaf is trying to make baseball more enjoyable in another way as well.

He has designed a table game called "Full Count," which he says is a "sophisticated improvement on APBA, Strat-O-Matic and those kinds of games." He is trying to work out what he feels is the game's only kink — the games he has played to test "Full Count" have averaged about nine runs, slightly higher than the major league average of eight.

Once Goldleaf feels the problem is fixed, he plans to market the game, which he started tinkering with when he "was supposed to be working on my dissertation."

Here are a few more of Goldleaf's thoughts on the national pastime.

✓ "What bothers me is when announcers fill the airwaves with things that seem to be interesting, valid or true, but are either plain wrong or misleading."

✓ "A lot of innovations are not in the players' or the fans' interest ... they don't add anything to the game. The biggest thing that modern technology has added to the game is that they're not building interesting stadiums anymore. What we're being left with are these 'cookie cutter' ballparks."

✓ "The 1950s were the last time that baseball was capable of being perceived as a sport. In the late 1960s and 1970s, that became an untenable position ... The illusion is gone."