

## 'Somewhere in this favored land ...'

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Ah, baseball, and the mid-season break for the All-Star game is once again upon us. Baseball is about memory. Who doesn't recall the delight of playing some variety of the game? There's urban stickball, home plate painted on a barn wall, softball, whiffle ball; in Great Britain and her former colonies, cricket; and in Finland that wild national sport called pesäpallo.

My memories are of childhood and cheering, hot dogs and sips of my Dad's beer, and always that second chance. I grew up in New York City in the shadows of Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds, and saw Jackie Robinson play at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. It's 1951, and I remember passing a tavern with its black-and-white TV going just at the moment the Giants' Bobby Thomson beat the Dodgers in the first-ever playoff for the pennant with his "shot heard 'round the world." There were 2,453,000 fans who remember sitting in the stands just when it happened. I remember Joe DiMaggio's last time at bat - a ground-rule double, almost but not quite his 40th homer that year - yet now he and the man who took his place, Mickey Mantle, are long gone.

I was a Yankee fan through and through until I moved to Boston. It was safer to root for the Red Sox and, like someone on a steady diet of chocolate mousse, I wanted to see what starvation felt like (Cubs and Phillies fans also know what I mean). You just knew the Bosox would go like a house afire until some dreadful week in September when the blaze was doused by, well, the Yankees, mostly. When I came to Minnesota, of course the Twins became my favorite American League team, still are, though I dread the year when they'll play Boston for the pennant.

**Baseball is about records and statistics**, team and player records, and always has been. Stats were collected by fans, by kids with their baseball cards (what boy - mostly boys then - didn't have a mother who tossed out his collection when he went off to college or the Army?), and by sportswriters. So many things go on in baseball: so much interaction between players, the time of day, the day of the season, the ballpark, the players' fitness, and so on, that some rigor had to be brought to understanding what all the numbers and box scores were telling. Over the past three decades a fan-driven cottage industry has grown that uses formal statistical methods to analyze the piles upon piles of data, some stretching back for over a century. Formal statistics have influenced all aspects of the game - in contract negotiations, for on-field strategy (bunt? steal? pitching rotation and batting order? go to the bullpen? who to play on first?), scouting, and to compare great teams and players over the decades in bar bets.

Statistics boil baseball down to its essentials: How to get on base, keep from getting out, score runs, keep the other team from getting on base, make them get outs, not score.

Pitch, hit, run, field. What formal statistics also tell us is the substantial role chance and random fluctuations play. Yes, you can draw to an inside straight or go with your tired pitcher past 110 throws, but take those risks over the long run and you'll lose both your shirt and a winning season.

**Baseball is a democratic game** based on merit; loved by farmers, Harvard professors, factory workers, poets and movie stars alike. Players now come from many nations so that "World" Series has truer meaning; but it would be great if teams from different countries could compete in a "World Baseball Cup," as they do in cricket and soccer. Pure merit, however, was a late-comer. It is a national disgrace that African-Americans couldn't play in the majors or on farm teams until after World War II. Only now are statistics being gathered to show how fine the Negro Leagues' players were. Only now are those individual players being honored, such as Steel Arm Taylor, who pitched from 1903 to 1921, including a turn on the St. Paul Colored Gophers.

Baseball is also celebrated in film and literature. Who hasn't thrilled to "Field of Dreams," "The Natural," "Bang the Drum Slowly," and that three-hankie weepie, "The Monty Stratton Story." My favorite lump-in-the-throat moment, though, is when a baritone recites Ernest Lawrence Thayer's "Casey at the Bat," whose last stanza is a paean to human frailty and futility:

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;  
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,  
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;  
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.  
(He should never have taken those two called strikes. Didn't he know the odds of getting on base were then close to nil? Play ball!)

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