

Creamer, Robert. *Stengel: His Life and Times*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. Pp. 349. \$16.95.

The subject of baseball stirs the American historian as no other sport possibly can. Football is too mechanized. Basketball is too modern. (Ring Lardner once cracked that he couldn't cotton to any game that had been invented during his lifetime). Hockey is too un-American.

But baseball-baseball with its murky origins, its (now less frequent) pastoral setting, its timelessness, its language, its reliance on intricate combinations of team and individual-provides endless fascination for the historian.

Robert Creamer, a sports writer turned historian, has already written an admirable biography of Babe Ruth. This time, however, his subject is a secure, almost placid midwesterner, not a homeless, always brawling Baltimorean. Unlike Ruth, Stengel was a middling to good ballplayer of one era, who became the most successful manager of another era. And unlike Stengel, Ruth was the greatest player of his era, only to be later (and often) spurned as a field manager.

Creamer's subtitle denotes a "life and times" biography, but there is much more life than times in his *Stengel*. And that "life" is almost exclusively focused on Stengel's days in uniform—on either side of the foul lines. This biography, in sum, is dominated by a version of military history that covers seasons (read "campaigns") in succession.

Stengel's first major league team was the "dreary" Brooklyn Superbas, which he joined in 1912 (with a four-hit debut). By 1916 he was the "key" to a Brooklyn pennant, but a year later he was traded to Pittsburgh after salary fights with owner Charlie Ebbets. The years between 1917 and 1921 should have been the pinnacle of Stengel's playing career, but constant battles with owners turned this period into what Creamer describes as a "slow-motion serio-comic nightmare." (p. 133)

All this ended in mid-1921 with a trade to the Giants of John McGraw. There

Stengel learned not only how to manage (“McGraw was the best I ever saw at adapting from the dead ball to the lively ball.”), but he was also the hero of the 1923 World Series for the losing Giants when he became the first player to win two series games with home runs. Casey Stengel would never again reach such Ruthian heights. In fact, before the end of the Babe’s decade he would find himself managing the Toledo Mud Hens. There would be major league managerial stops in Brooklyn and Boston, as well as minor league stints in Milwaukee, Oakland and Kansas City before Casey would become *the* Casey Stengel of the New York Yankees.

Creamer does not slight Stengel’s playing days, but fully a third of the book is spent on his twelve Yankee seasons (in a baseball career that spanned fifty-five years). “We’ve hired a clown,” may have been one Yankee’s response to the return of the vagabond Stengel to the major leagues, but Creamer thinks otherwise. To be sure, Casey had fun. And Creamer has fun telling his readers of Casey’s exploits, whether it be the sparrow in the cap or the grapefruit dropped on Wilbert Robinson.

No box seat psychologist, Creamer simply lets Stengel be Stengel. Why try to analyze when the “Old Perfessor” can speak for himself? Upon learning that Cleveland’s Al Lopez planned to use only three starting pitchers for the last month of the 1952 season Casey “perfessed:” “Well, I always heard it couldn’t be done, but sometimes it don’t (sic) always work.” (p. 251)

Creamer, however, never lets his reader forget that Stengel was a superb field manager. John McGraw had taught him how to handle (and not handle) players, and now that he had good ones he was able to hold them to a high level of performance for a dozen years. Blind luck? No, argues Creamer.

Stengel may have been a clown, but he was also a teacher, a maneuverer, and a platoonier (a concept Creamer credits Stengel with inventing and perfecting). In 1951 he convinced the Yankees to establish an instructional school. Its prize pupil that first year was one Mickey Mantle. McGraw had had Ott; now Casey had Mickey-and a chance to produce a great player who would be a reflection of his teacher.

It never happened. Mantle refused to cut down his swing. He failed to become a thinking ball player. And, following in the icy DiMaggio tradition, he silently defied Stengel. The two would reach a truce only after Stengel “accepted the inevitable”-namely, that Mantle was not about to change. But Stengel’s bitterness never completely left him. When asked to select his all-time, all star team he included Berra, Rizzuto and DiMaggio, but not Mickey Mantle.

Billy Martin was much more in the Spengel mold. The Kid, in turn, “loved that old bastard,” but he never understood him. Martin resented Stengel’s acquiescence in his dismissal after the infamous Copacabana incident in 1957. Casey did fight for Billy, Creamer insists, but when he knew that he had lost he simply went on to the next battle. Billy Martin could (and can) never do that. Defeat to Martin was (and is) a form of death. Stengel, however, was “never destroyed by defeat. He wanted to win as badly as Billy did but he was too used to adversity,” reckons Creamer. (p. 271)

Does that line explain Stengel the clown? On such questions Creamer is as silent as Steve Carlton after a ball game. No matter. The game itself is complicated enough without probing the psyches of those who play it. Stengel was smart enough to let his Yankees simply play the game. And Creamer is discriminating enough to let Stengel dominate his own biography. It is enough that he has unearthed, rather than untangled, Stengelese. The result is a well-written, well-researched biography in which Creamer has treated his sources as gingerly as Stengel handled his players, rather than as ferociously as Ruth attacked baseballs-or his latest meal.

Normandale Community College

John C. Chalberg