

## Book Reviews

Durso, Joseph. *Baseball and the American Dream*. St. Louis: *The Sporting News*, 1986. Pp. 259.

*Baseball and the American Dream* is one of several books published recently by *The Sporting News* in an expansion of their company to include book publishing. It seems a well made book, has an attractive dust jacket, is filled with interesting pictures, and has as its author Joseph Durso, an excellent reporter who is the author of ten previous books about sports-eight of them wholly or in part about baseball. What results is less a book for academic historians of sports than baseball fans; it is full of good stories about the game on the field.

The title, *Baseball and the American Dream*, suggests that the book will address the relation of the game to the aspirations of the American people, that it will be analytic in nature, and that it will attempt serious social and cultural history. The blurb on the brochure which accompanies the book says that "this fascinating volume parallels the history of baseball with American history and cultural development starting with colonial times." This is accurate only in a minimal way; for instance, on page 26 there is a sentence about colonial America. But the book begins in 1876, and its assertion is that "baseball" means "major league baseball." All else is comparatively unimportant.

In his "Foreword" Durso says he will tell "the story of the corner of American life occupied by baseball for the last century and a half" (p. vii). For Durso, baseball is a mirror of American life, to borrow Robert Boyle's phrase. Durso says that baseball "reflected . . . stages of national development," "reflected the language of America," "reflected the focus of American life" (p. vii). But he makes no effort to prove these assertions and, indeed, they are not even phrased in such a way that allows supporting evidence to follow. For the bulk of the book Durso simply chronicles the events of major league baseball. All the old heroes pass in review once again. For example:

Joe Tinker was a third baseman from Muscotah, Kan., who could play shortstop. Johnny Evers was a shortstop from Troy, N.Y., who also could play second base, and did for most of his 1,776 games in the big leagues. Frank Chance was a catcher from Fresno, Calif., who joined the Cubs in 1898. He became a first baseman in 1902 and the manager in 1905, the "Peerless Leader." He was pretty peerless: the Cubs won 116 games, lost 36 and roared home 20 games in front of McGraw's defending champions, the Giants (p. 92).

This is good writing; it's bright, full of odd facts as well as familiar ones, quirky, and covers plenty of ground. On this level, the book is a joy to read.

Durso tells other stories more useful to the sport historian. There is informa-

tion on several businesses ancillary to professional baseball: concessions, radio, and *The Sporting News* itself. Half of the chapter "Score-card Harry" (pp. 188-195) is devoted to Harry M. Stevens, the concessionaire, and his company. This is informative, though much of it reads like a blurb for the company. There is even mention of a company historian: C. Homer Rose, Jr. Until 1982, the Stevens company was a family company, run much, one imagines, like *The Sporting News*, of which there is scattered but more than casual mention. Nineteenth Century baseball in St. Louis and the Spink brothers' part in it get a few paragraphs' mention (pp. 52-53). We learn that the editor of *The Sporting News*, Joe Flanner, wrote out the peace treaty between the National and American leagues in February 1903 (p. 77). The role of sporting newspapers in the Federal League War is mentioned on page 121. And the fact that the Black Sox scandal affected the baseball business adversely is shown by the decline in circulation of *The Sporting News* (p. 168). There is information on early broadcasting and broadcasters on pages 173-174 and pages 184-188. Each of these enterprises needs study, and Durso has provided some information on each. I have been free with page numbers because the book has no index.

And the book says little about the relation of baseball and American development. When Durso does address this subject, I suspect him of satirizing those of us who do attempt cultural analysis. Wisely, I think, he stays away from the phrase "the American Dream." It may be that the book's title is not his choice. He does use it several times in Chapter 14 in describing the careers in Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, and Casey Stengel. It's almost as if he'd just remembered the purpose of his book. Gehrig "was the American Dream" (p. 213) DiMaggio "a kind of West Coast version of the American Dream" (p. 215), Stengel?

Like Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio, he was the son of immigrant parents. Like them, he started dirt-poor and followed his stars. And like them, he realized a kind of impossible dream as a celebrity, folk-hero and even legend (p. 219).

Towards the end of the book Durso remarks of Peter Ueberroth that he "in his way cut a slice of the American dream, too" (p. 256). In its last four pages, the book concludes in a frenzy of reflection which has far too little to do with critical thinking. Durso summarizes Ueberroth's commissionership by noting that Ueberroth

also reflected the public's passion for business and the club owners' desperation for better business, just as Bowie Kuhn in 1969 had reflected their apparent need for legal and political power. And when Ueberroth took over the office on October 1, 1984, he found that baseball was reflecting all sorts of public passion, good and bad, the need for dramatic entertainment, the drive for big bucks (p. 256).

Finally, in the next paragraph, we learn that Ueberroth also found "that baseball was reflecting the curse of cocaine in life" (p. 256). These seem to me the words of a man who has decided to make fun of his own thesis, and Durso in fact abandons it, saying in conclusion that baseball is "players on the field . . . performers and performances" (p. 256).

But on the last page of the book, in commenting on the achievements of Pete Rose and Dwight Gooden and on the 1985 World Series, Durso is attracted again by the notion that baseball somehow “reflects” trends in the national life. First we learn of a presidential phone call following Rose’s 4192nd hit “carried to the crowd on the stadium’s public address system. This was not just a sign of the times, but a symbol of the times, the way Dwight Gooden became the national symbol of the strikeout in 1984 as a rookie with the Mets at 19” (pp. 258-9). “The national symbol of the strikeout?” What could this mean? Durso continues his reflections to the bitter end, contemplating the presidential phone calls which followed the 1985 World Series. “Ronald Reagan,” he writes, “was reflecting the nation’s mood again” (p. 259). Reagan even called the loser’s clubhouse, stunning Whitey Herzog, whom Durso describes as “amazed that the national mood had reached into his locker room” (p. 254). And who wouldn’t be? This is just bad writing.

And Durso isn’t a bad writer; he’s simply been asked to write the wrong book. The result is a triumph of anecdote over analysis, most enjoyable to readers in their unreflective moments.

N. C. Wesleyan College

Leverett T. Smith, Jr.