

Bryson, Michael G., Sr., and Bryson, Michael G., Jr., eds. *The Babe Didn't Point and Other Stories About Iowans and Sports by Bill Bryson*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989. Pp. 239. \$15.95.

This sprightly little book offers a sampling from the more than 40,000 stories and columns written by the late Bill Bryson during his long career (1937-1978) as a sportswriter for the Des Moines (Iowa) *Register* and its afternoon edition,

*the Tribune*. From this outpouring more than 160 pieces have been selected and grouped under twelve awkwardly labeled and organized chapters. But the articles sparkle despite such manhandling by the compilers (Bryson's son and grandson) and will surely perk the interest of ordinary sports fans and serious students of sports journalism.

A prolific sportswriter of the "gee whiz" school, Bill Bryson won national acclaim as a sportswriter despite being based on the periphery of the American sports scene. Indeed, save for the Keokuk Westerns who briefly played in the first major baseball league back in 1875, Iowa hosted no franchise in any major professional team sport. Moreover, after going 1-12 with a .167 batting average, the 1875 Keokuk entry dropped from contention, thus speedily ending the state's only foray into big time pro sports. Hence, the task of constructing a sporting heritage for a state often remembered only for the musical flick "State Fair" posed a formidable challenge. It was a test that Bryson met and easily passed by keeping his readers in constant touch with events in major sports and at the same time noting the contributions of native and transient Iowans to those sports. By adroitly performing this balancing act, Bryson won national fame as a sportswriter while also endearing himself to his Iowa constituency.

Throughout his active career Bryson covered all major sports. His knowledge of most was encyclopedic and he was also a skilled interviewer with a sharp eye for unusual, quirky and humorous happenings. He wrote in a breezy, informative style, spiced with wit and salted with Iowan connections. Thus, among many other similar insights one learns that the Duesenberg brothers, who designed and built the famous racing car of the 1920s were Iowans.

But Bryson's favorite sport was baseball, a passion instilled by his father who had played the game as a semi pro. Indeed, fully half of the 162 articles served up in this book are baseball pieces and from these Bryson's national reputation as a sportswriter mainly derives. As a baseball scribe Bryson was assigned to cover the major league scene which he did by appearing at spring training camps, All Star games, playoffs and World Series matches. His feature articles probing historical aspects of the game, debunking myths, relating humorous anecdotes, and sketching the lives of famous Iowan stars like Pop Anson, Fred Clarke, Hal Trosky and Bob Feller will appeal to baseball historians.

In one timely piece Bryson reveals how Hall of Famer Pop Anson frequently bet on his Chicago team in the 1890s. Usually he bet on his team to win, but once Anson entertained a gambler's \$10,000 offer to hold his ace pitcher out of a game at least until the eighth inning. But when Chicago fell behind, Anson reneged and called on his ace, thus forfeiting the hefty bribe. Viewed in the light of the current Pete Rose scandal, the episode shows the inconstancy of baseball law and of American moral standards. In Anson's time betting was more tolerated and Anson's indulgence posed no barrier to his later enshrinement in the Hall of Fame.

A keen student of sports, Bryson contributed insightful articles on such topics as the racial integration of the NBA and NFL, on women in various sports, and on the origins of such practices as the use of coaches, spectator

booing and of such innovations as night games and the use of batting helmets. Such forays and many of his myth-busting sallies enhanced Bryson's reputation as a sportswriter.

But the book's title, "The Babe Didn't Point," is taken from one of Bryson's least effective articles most likely for the purpose of snaring unwary customers. Indeed, Bryson tossed off this brief account after interviewing pitcher Charley Root who surrendered Ruth's famous homer in a 1932 World Series game. The article by no means stills the continuing controversy over Ruth's "called shot." In fact a recent discovery of a home movie reel taken by a fan at the game suggests that the Babe did point.

Such "hippodroming" combined with poorly organized and ill-proportioned chapters mars the book. For example, Chapter 7 which is a potpourri of anecdotes covers 30 pages and rambles from sport to sport in bewildering fashion, while Chapter 10 fields only two articles in seven pages in dealing with unsung relatives behind sports heroes. Moreover, Bryson himself errs on rare occasions as when he credits the 1944 Yankees with winning an AL pennant or when he hung an extra loss on the hapless Keokuk team of 1875.

Happily Bryson's lively and informative articles transcend such criticism. And when the history of sportswriting in America is written, Bill Bryson will stand tall as a luminary of the "gee whiz" school of baseball writers. Meanwhile baseball historians in particular and sports historians in general will find nuggets aplenty in this mother lode.

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