

Nadel, Eric and Wright, Craig R. *The Man Who Stole First Base: Tales from Baseball's Past*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989. Pp. vi-ix, 163. Index, photographs, \$9.95.

Nadel and Wright's compilation of anecdotes about flakes and flukes in baseball's history will probably evoke two opposed, but perhaps appropriate responses from a baseball or sports historian. On the one hand, the book is plain fun, unpretentious, fairly reveling in its oddities, a quick, entertaining read, catering to a public wishing for little dishes of trivia. As such it will appeal to scholars of the sport, who enjoy merriment as much as do nonscholars. But on the other hand, because it concentrates on the atypical, the book has diminished value as a serious contribution to the sport's history.

Most readers will appreciate these nuggets which the authors have unearthed or dragged in from other sources. Limiting each capsule to a page or so (thereby catching the attention of even that segment of the reading audience with a nanosecond attention span), Nadel and Wright toss stories at the reader, like pitches in a mental batting practice. "Like that one? Here's another." All in rollicking prose, each segment serves the reader up a new but similar unpredictability. Famous players, the Cobbs, Ruths, Groves, Gehrigs, and Cochranes pop up like puppets, only to give way to lesser-known "giants" such as Benny Kauff, Jim Creighton, Joe "Gabber" Glenn, and Ebenezer Beatin. (Say who?! Well, read the book!) Crazy occurrences flare across the pages like comets: a player stealing first base to distract the opposition, a teenage girl striking out Ruth and Gehrig, a wild triple play, three Dodgers on third, a substitute rubber ball during WWII which the Philadelphia A's couldn't hit, three straight errors on three chances. (Was any inning, any game ever normal?) All sorts of "human interest" stories abound: drunken phenoms and Indians, nearsighted, unlucky, least-deserving, international, and self-made Hall of Famers, pre-prime careers cut short, late-bloomers. Readers would learn, with a mild gasp, that Ty Cobb nearly became a Cleveland Indian, Musial was a pitcher (as was Ruth), John McGraw was a player once upon a time, DiMaggio extended his hitting streak with a borrowed bat, and just how many offensive records Ted Williams would have broken had he avoided military service.

Fun and flashy as all these tales might be, the book suffers from several drawbacks. The authors exploit each tidbit for its inherent drama, occasionally leaving the reader hanging (for a paragraph), à la Paul Harvey, for the "rest of the story." There is no rhyme nor reason for the order of appearance; perhaps that's why there is no table of contents. Each story seems to be "equivalent" to the others, no matter whether the event or personage was major, minor, or Negro league. That is unfortunate, because a few of the tales merit true legendary status, while the others are mere also-rans in sagadom. Several of the stories deserve more detail, placing in context, or comparison to similar stories. For example, what if Bob Feller and Warren Spahn had not done military time-what would their pitching records have been like? Some emphases seem

odd: why discuss the controversies surrounding DiMaggio's hitting streak and minimize those about Gehrig's games-played run?

More importantly, and this returns to the second interpretation, *The Man Who Stole First Base* tells less about baseball than it should. Admittedly, each sport has its celebrated characters, stellar events, firsts and lasts, and other assorted inexpressibles. Yet baseball, as Roger Angell and baseball historians have reminded us, is a sport of long stretches, evening out of averages, bursts giving way to slumps and vice versa, constancy spring to fall, seasons unrolling in relentless homestands and road trips, alternating stasis and chaos. Against that backdrop, so much more impressive in its massive entirety and longevity, Nadel and Wright's tales seem mediocre curiosities, or dare we say it, trivialities. Baseball owes its prominence as the national game not to its string of surprises and unpredictabilities, but because of its conservative nature, its capacity to accompany millions of fans and nonfans through countless humdrum days and evenings during seasons, and even resonating in the mind throughout winters. *The Man Who Stole First Base* doesn't suggest that deep side to baseball, but presents it as a collection of fascinating, yet fleeting bits of action and oddity. Like "Germany" Schaefer, the protagonist of the title piece, Nadel and Wright are stealing first base on us, distracting us from the real feel of the game. It's all for fun, and the serious baseball historian might discover a story or two (haven't we read most of these before elsewhere?), but the thrill of the grass, in Kinsella's inimitable phrasing, will transcend these other cheap thrills.

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