

Sowell, Mike. *The Pitch That Killed*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989. Pp. xvii, 330. Illus. \$17.95.

Mike Sowell, the sports editor for the *Tulsa Tribune*, gives us a narrow slice of early baseball history in this, his first book. *The Pitch That Killed* is subtitled "Carl Mays, Ray Chapman and the Pennant Race of 1920," which aptly describes the book's contents. One of baseball's most celebrated and tragic incidents, Yankee pitcher Carl Mays's fatal beaming of Cleveland shortstop Ray Chapman in August 1920 is the heart of the book, but Sowell takes his readers far behind the scenes by means of rather thorough biographies of the two principal protagonists and sketches of a good number of their contemporaries. In addition, Sowell describes the fatal pitch in the context of the 1920 American League pennant race, a close three-way battle among the Indians, Yankees, and White Sox.

Sowell's research is based on newspaper and secondary sources, and a handful of interviews, either from Hall of Fame records or done personally. The latter include interviews with Joe Sewell, the shortstop brought up to replace Chapman, and Bill Wambsganss, the Indians' second baseman and probably the only other survivor in the mid-80s from the 1920's team. Unfortunately, the book is not footnoted, so the reader does not know who or what contributed any particular bit of information.

This is popular history at its best. Sowell is an engaging writer, and he has put together a dramatic story in a highly melodramatic manner. The first half of the book contrasts the youth and pre-1920 careers of Mays and Chapman in

alternating chapters, drawing the reader ever closer to the inevitable tragedy on that August day in New York. The drama is heightened by the characterization of Mays as the villain and Chapman as the (tragic) hero, and by the Yankees as a Babe Ruth-led team of louts and rowdies, and the Indians as a star-crossed team of hard-working young American boys who liked to sing together in the locker room.

We learn that Carl Mays, after a somewhat difficult childhood, became a loner and an outcast, even at the lower level of the minor leagues, and developed a reputation for deliberately throwing at batters. He had a mean streak that brought comparisons with Ty Cobb, and he had a fiery temper that nearly ended his career in 1919 when he threw a fastball into the stands in Philadelphia to vent his annoyance with some loud and highly partisan fans. No one was seriously injured, but the Yankees had to pay a fine on Mays's behalf, and it was some time before he appeared with the team in Philadelphia again. Mays was, however, one of the most effective pitchers in the league; he won over 200 games in a thirteen-year career by means of an unusual underhand delivery. At the same time, he knew the advantage of keeping batters on the defensive by using brushback pitches and several times led the league in hit batters. Although Mays claimed all his life that he never purposely threw at batters and that his conscience was clear regarding the Chapman affair, Sowell leaves just enough doubt in our minds to make Mays's motivation an intriguing question.

If Mays was dour, unpleasant, friendless, Ray Chapman was just the opposite. Born, ironically, in the same year (1891) and state (Kentucky) as Mays, Chapman was the high-spirited cheerleader of the Cleveland team. Always laughing or singing, seemingly incapable of unhappiness, he was also a solid ballplayer, with good speed on the bases, good range at shortstop, and above average hitting ability. He and Wambsganns were said to be the best double-play combination in baseball, and Chapman once said he never wanted to play with any other second baseman. While Mays lived a secluded life with a wife (we are not told how anyone as unpleasant as Mays could persuade someone to marry him) and child, Chapman married the daughter of a wealthy Cleveland industrialist and became a prominent local celebrity. The contrast between the two players could not have been more striking.

Sowell is at his best drawing word pictures of characters in his tale. Ruth, who came up to the Red Sox with Mays (both were subsequently traded or sold to the Yankees), is shown to have developed his good-humored boorishness at an early age. Ty Cobb, so often compared with Mays, Stan Coveleskie, ace of the Indians' pitching staff, Steve O'Neill, the Indians' catcher, and Miller Huggins, the Yankee manager, are among others who are clearly and sensitively described in the book. A long section is given over to Joe Sewell. He did his job well as the new Cleveland shortstop and went on to carve out a Hall of Fame career.

Sowell also attempts to place the focal incident into the context of professional baseball in the post-war years, and here he does not quite succeed. We learn about Ban Johnson, the beleaguered American League president, who

had to deal with a threatened player boycott of Mays after the beaming. We are told of the machinations of various team owners and their dealings with players at this time, and we are even reminded of the Black Sox scandal, which came to light toward the end of the 1920 season. But much of this is cramped because of the episodic organization of the book, and we are not fully apprised of just how the whole puzzle fits together.

Even with this shortcoming, this is a fine book, full of insight into ballplayers and their game some seventy years ago. Sowell tells his story with drama and even suspense, despite the fact that we know how it will come out. It is truly to be hoped that he will continue to publish in the area of sport history.

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