

Forever Baseball. The American Experience. (PBS). A co-production of WGBH/Boston, WNET/New York and KCET/Los Angeles. Written, produced, and narrated by Irv Drasnin, and first aired on November 7, 1989. One hour.

Any program which in one hour purports to capture the lasting qualities of baseball and to analyze its meaning and history is as guilty of biting more than it can digest as Babe Ruth in his prodigious binges. *The American Experience* series claims that it does “not [provide] an historical survey of facts, but rather delves much deeper into history, capturing on film the people who lived the events.”¹ As part of this series, *Forever Baseball* is not intended by its writer-narrator Irv Drasnin to be an organized history of baseball, but a collage of perceptions and impressions, a wide-ranging visual and aural experience, imparting the varied pleasures gained from playing, observing, and thinking about the national pastime. The formula for the program consists of combining archival and contemporary footage, narrative voiceover, and commentators—five writers and one artist, representing different races and genders. The voices and the visuals work together to produce authority and experiential fullness.

The eminent American historian David McCullough begins the program with observations about the fairness of baseball as the provider of equal opportunity for all participants who can go as far as their talent will carry them. Baseball is presented as the facilitator of the melting pot action of American society, a beacon inviting immigrants to partake of the blessings of a democratic society. Even though it later introduces the subjects of gambling and racism in baseball, by beginning with these laudatory platitudes *Forever Baseball* declares that it wants to celebrate baseball as the representative game of an all-embracing American society.

At the outset, Irv Drasnin, the writer/producer/narrator, conveys the portentous importance of baseball when he declares that it “is a game that carries with it the power of myth, the weight of legend, and the burden of history.” To show how it shoulders these heavy tasks, the program discusses baseball under two major headings, as a game with rules and strategy and as an integral part of American history. The ethos of *Forever Baseball* is formed by the celebration of the mental and physical joys accruing to players and fans alike. Daniel Okrent, the author of *Nine Innings*, which is about the strategy involved in every pitch of one game, explains that the mental excitement is created by the imagination of the fans in the periods of waiting for the game to explode into what John Updike describes as its “sudden electrical moments.” To exemplify this point, the great Babe is shown uncoiling and hitting one out and then trotting around the bases in his dainty style.

1. Scott Sedar, “Experiences-Made in America: The Second Season of *The American Experience Comes to PBS*,” *PBS Video New* (November/December, 1989): 1.

Throughout *Forever Baseball*, the national pastime is associated with spring, innocence, and regeneration. Children are shown playing ball on sylvan diamonds, choosing up sides on sandlots, going through the various motions inherent in the game, being instructed by famous ballplayers or by their fathers. Updike eloquently describes the unbroken continuum of our participation in baseball which begins in childhood and adolescence and is continued into our adult years when we recapture the joys of the past through observation of the game. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and poet Quincy Troupe warmly describe the close relationships they developed with their fathers as the result of their shared love of the details of the “human drama” contained in the games. Thus, baseball emerges as the sport which provides connections between the generations, restores the joys of our innocent youth, and enacts its pastoral rituals on diamonds whose perfect geometric dimensions represent the powerful Edenic theme in American culture.

However into that garden crept a serpent in the form of a gambling fix when in 1919 eight players on the Chicago White Sox conspired with gamblers to throw the World Series. This scandal is introduced by an undated conversation between the legendary Connie Mack and Kid Gleason, the manager of the 1919 Sox. The narrator says that at this time they both could look back upon more than twenty-five years in the game, which makes the conversation between 1911 and 1913, about six or eight years before the thrown Series. Mack asks Gleason to name some “modern” players who play for the fun of it, and the Kid laughs and says he can’t. The narrator claims that there was no more hollow laugh in baseball in the light of the fixed Series. But this irony is anachronistic because Kid’s laughter preceded the tragedy by at least five years. The camera then shows the “eight men out” without identifying them, leaving us in the dark after tantalizing scrutiny of their faces. Okrent solemnly reminds us that gambling did exist in the early days and that two greats Speaker and Cobb were implicated in throwing games. However, the Black Sox scandal was heavily emphasized, and it caused a vigorous backlash in the banning of the acquitted players by the newly appointed Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who demonstrated, as Updike remarks, the investment of the country in the virtue of the national pastime. Immediately after the recounting of this scandal, images of springtime revitalization and purification show how baseball was reborn after its degradation. There is no narration, just Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony playing as children frisk in oversized uniforms and major leaguers cavort in spring training antics. Baseball forever.

Halfway through the program, the shame of racism in baseball is introduced. Portions of a propagandistic film-within-a-film entitled “The Democracy of Baseball” are shown, which, like “Forever Baseball,” maintains that baseball has been a democratic game connecting all classes with the promise of America. However, Drasnin uses this insert as an ironic parallel to his script, which now states that the rhetoric of the game and the ethos of the country perpetuated the same lie: segregation did not exist. Drasnin moves seamlessly from the pieties of “The Democracy of Baseball” to scenes of segregated black baseball

and black crowds cheering their heroes. Baseball artist Ralph Fasanella claims that he never knew or thought about the fact that blacks were not allowed to play in the big leagues. The black journalist John Williams, who declared at the outset of the program that baseball has come the closest to realizing the opportunities of America for the most people, now says that when he was growing up blacks had no hope of playing organized baseball. The legendary Satchel Paige is then depicted in picture and song as a great player prevented from displaying his greatness in the major leagues until he was too old. His lowly barnstorming in the negro league is contrasted with the meteoric rise of Rapid Robert Feller, an Iowa schoolboy sensation whose big-league debut at seventeen was promoted by his parents and community and cheered by American society. After Troupe recounts how the legend of Paige as the great pitcher inspired young blacks, Jackie Robinson is shown running out a double at Ebbets Field in 1947, the year he broke the color line.

Forever Baseball ends with scenes of the minor league team the Pittsfield Mets and their fans getting ready for another game. Drasnin remarks that big-league baseball can be a heartless business, not a kid's game, but the Pittsfield Mets and their fans experience baseball on its pristine level where harsh reality is what the rest of life is about. Fans, young autograph seekers, brass bands, the anthem, flags waving, and the players poised in balletic postures create the rituals of the game which have been "repeated summer after summer, as far back as anyone can remember."

In sum, *Forever Baseball* provides an experience of the meanings of baseball by presenting bits and pieces of perceptions, illuminations, and rhapsodies, short bursts of visualized concepts backed by various voices—a smorgasbord of baseball as game, art, and history. Its overriding effect is not to create a deeper sense of history than that provided by a survey of facts but a hymn of praise to our national pastime and its pastoral roots and innocence. The program celebrates the idea of the game, ignoring the reality of rival league wars, strikes, gambling, drugs, astronomical contracts for mediocre players, and continuing exclusion of blacks and hispanics from managerial and front office positions. Racism is introduced after the program has already saluted its purity and democratic openness, and the subject is treated summarily, as if it must be swept aside by the wave of hyperbole on the curative social powers of baseball.

Forever Baseball is not history at all, but a propagandistic presentation of the thesis that the American democratic ethos as embodied in the national pastime has and will conquer corruption and racism. However, instead of convincing us of the democratic nature of baseball, the program raises the nagging irony that the insistence on baseball as the American institution dedicated to springtime regeneration and childhood innocence—the whiteness of the ball, of the uniforms, and of the participants—may have been one of the major ideological reasons for keeping the grand old game segregated until 1947. Baseball is a fascinating game, provides an absorbing myth, and contains a significant history; however, like the history of the country, the game and all the rhapsodic

theories about its regenerative powers do not prove the purity and democratic openness of America.

University of Hawaii

Frank F. Ardolino