

Helyar, John. *Lords of the Realm: The Real History of Baseball*. New York: Villard Books, 1994. Pp. xiii, 576, Index, \$24 (Canada, \$31.50).

Most historians confronted by a phrase like “the real history of baseball,” especially when it comes from a non-historian, are likely to quickly dismiss the claim. It is in fact difficult to know if there is a “real” history of anything, and equally puzzling to contemplate the existence of an “unreal” or “non-real” history. The temptation then is to dismiss John Helyar’s work and move on to others making less pretentious claims. This inclination is reinforced when it becomes apparent that this is not a full-blown history of baseball, but in fact a history of the past 25 years in baseball with an emphasis on the business side of the game. But then marketing supercedes truth in packaging almost everywhere these days.

John Helyar is a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and winner of the Gerald Loeb Award for distinguished business journalism for his co-authorship of *Barbarians at the Gate*. After covering the business of sport for the *Wall Street Journal*, Helyar was drawn into the historical dimensions of the baseball business and the result is this lively and stimulating rendering of recent baseball history.

Based heavily upon interviews with some 200 people in baseball, as well as some of the standard literature on the game, Helyar recounts the struggles and madness in the baseball business over the past 25 years. The primary focus is on the rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association and its running battle with the Lords, baseball’s menagerie of owners.

Mini-biographies of the major figures in ownership, management, union leadership, and player representatives, personalize the story in an appealing fashion, as the colorful characters of baseball make for highly entertaining reading. The material on Ted Turner, Gussie Bush, Charles O. Finley, and so

many other colorful characters keeps the flow of the narrative moving in brisk fashion. The egomania and backstabbing featured within ownership circles bears out one observer's comment on the Lords that "these guys don't like each other and they don't trust each other" (p. 542).

In Helyar's account there are several constants. First and foremost is the egomania, stupidity, and division of the owners. This is placed at counterpoint to the brilliant generalship of Marvin Miller and the resulting unity and determination of the players. Third is the fact that in every strike or lockout the owner unity broke down, and the commissioner intervened. The result was, more often than not, a victory for the players.

Helyar offers an interesting and personalized account of the inevitable march to free agency and the death of the reserve clause. Portraits of Curt Flood, Andy Messersmith, and others who moved to challenge the clause, are especially interesting. Equally important in terms of player association power was the securing of an independent arbitrator and the acceptance of salary arbitration. It is the latter that has produced the greatest upward pressure on salaries, and led Mike Norris, after losing a salary arbitration case to say, "No problem. I was either going to wake up rich or richer" (p. 290). It also led to Jerry Reinsdorf's observation that "Baseball is the only industry where I have to pay someone what my dumbest competitor pays" (p. 305).

Beyond the labor front *Lords of the Realm* offers analysis of the rise of agents along with a look at some of the more prominent agents and their negotiating tactics. Baseball commissioners from the Unknown Soldier to Fay Vincent are critically evaluated, with Vincent the subject of a particularly disturbing portrait. Bowie Kuhn appears as irritating as always, and Peter Ueberroth emerges as the king of dissembling.

Not to be neglected are the Pete Rose Case and the George Steinbrenner-Howard Spira-Dave Winfield love triangle. In the Rose case, Bart Giamatti emerges with a strong image as commissioner, while John Dowd and Fay Vincent appear to have been on a witch hunt. By the end of Helyar's look at the treatment of Rose, one can almost be sympathetic to Charlie Hustle. The Steinbrenner-Spira-Winfield fiasco and the commissioner's investigation of it is replete with double and triple standards of judgment, leaving everyone connected with the events and the investigation under a cloud.

Other matters such as collusion, the rise of television and cable television, the big market-small market differences, revenue sharing, a salary cap, expansion, the strikes and lockouts, all get sufficient attention from Helyar. The result is a lively and enjoyable read, and a stimulating and thought-provoking book.

But is it a "real history" or even a "history"? Like most journalistic accounts of baseball and history—one is reminded of the work of David Halberstam—this one is without footnotes, while loaded with direct quotations. The body of the text is full of gossip without attribution. How is one to

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evaluate these materials? Where do these quotes come from, especially entire conversations which supposedly took place behind closed doors? It will take a generation of baseball historians to sift through all of this, and one hopes that at some point Helyar will set aside his notes in some archive somewhere. Unlike many journalistic efforts this has an excellent index along with a bibliography of sorts in the preface.

In the meantime one is left to enjoy this delightful and lively volume, and to marvel at the antics of those at the helm of this major American industry. That baseball survives all of the antics and egos seems to confirm the old saying that God looks out for children, drunks, and the national pastime.

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