

Skolnick, Richard. *Baseball and the Pursuit of Innocence—A Fresh Look at the Old Bull Game*. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1994. Pp. viii, 204. Notes, index. \$24.50 (hardcover), \$14.95 (paperback).

Buried deep within the 45 pages of notes that collectively are this book's principal pleasure hides the astounding statistic that 70 percent of all hats now sold in the United States are baseball caps. Indeed, observations made on a recent vacation to Washington, D.C., a city without major league baseball since 1971, suggest strongly that the baseball cap is a *de rigueur* part of the uniform for virtually every male (and some female) tourists over the age of three. Baseball fans may be upset with the direction in which their sport seems to be moving, but the caps on their heads cover a deeper truth.

Skolnick, a history professor at the City University of New York, refers in his notes to one analyst who says that caps "embody a vision of manhood that is really about boyishness and the exuberance of youth" (p. 240). And so it is with baseball. If these becaped fans suffer from arrested development and waver between childhood and maturity, baseball itself, in Skolnick's view, is similarly trapped. Comfortably defined as an idealized, romanticized "national pastime" that guards traditional values and harkens back to a rural past, baseball is simultaneously beset by challenges that threaten to twist it severely or destroy it utterly.

To examine this conflict and to give baseball what he calls "a fresh look," Skolnick has fashioned a series of essays, some only a few pages and others quite extended. According to the author, "all explore the issues of innocence and sophistication, simplicity and complexity, inheritance and innovation, thematic conflicts long present in baseball and in its attendant culture" (p. 5).

To his credit, Skolnick brings a lot of baseball knowledge to the table. Unlike David Halberstam, for example, an outsider looking in from less than

an expert perspective, Skolnick is thoroughly familiar with baseball strategy and tactics and its vernacular. He rarely goes overboard to make his point and missteps only in a few spots. Once, for instance, he argues that the visiting team is allowed to bat first as a courtesy, without noting that batting last also carries with it a built-in advantage. Then, too, he is on less certain ground when making comparisons to other sports and other countries.

Skolnick has organized his essays into three sections, each of which he introduces with a one-page preamble printed in the shape of home plate. In the first group, he lays out the case “for baseball’s role as a symbol for an America now but dimly recalled” (p. 7). Baseball summons the past, he says, to cast a light on contemporary events. Baseball is true to life, it has green and rural origins, it is highly ordered and structured, it “operates under an exacting moral code that scrutinizes performance, holds individuals personally accountable, and expresses itself in a manner pointedly judgmental” (p. 42).

The second set of essays examines the complexities and uncertainties that lie just below the game’s simple surface. Baseball has rules, for example, but they are oftentimes “loosely enforced and occasionally arbitrary” (p. 55). It is supposed to be a simple sport, but modern managers spend hours and use computers preparing for every contest. It is a game played without a clock, and yet one in which time can become a weapon as a batter seeks to upset a pitcher’s rhythm or a team with the lead hurries to finish an inning before the rains come.

Finally, Skolnick’s third brace of essays explores some further complications, including the mystery of chance, the barrage of statistics that tend to overwhelm the game, and the important role played by anticipation, the pressure of guessing what might happen next. He concludes, as so many baseball observers have, that innocence, mythic though it might be, will emerge triumphant. “Come on, folks,” he quotes columnist Dave Kindred in *The Sporting News*: “All this moaning. It’s plain silly. You’d think baseball is on its deathbed” (p. 203).

The major problem with Skolnick’s work is that it is extremely tedious and reveals precious little that is new. He has marshaled an impressive array of detailed evidence, facts and observations gleaned from a lifetime of watching and reading about baseball. But his neatly constructed argument goes on and on, Giamattizing the sport to exhaustion.

One can imagine a group of baseball *literati* trying to list all the ways in which fans affect baseball: they play the game, they discuss it year-round, they watch it on television, they listen to it on the radio, they collect baseball cards, they memorize statistics, they cheer, they boo, they write letters, they call radio talk shows, they vote for All-Star teams, they lavish attention on ball parks, they attend games, they keep score, they interfere with play, they sing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” they do the Wave. This kind of analysis is exactly how Skolnick has proceeded. And that’s in only one essay.

One final note, Academics who venture into baseball as a field for scholarship often have to battle their colleagues' prejudices for acceptance and respectability. Why, then, does Skolnick pose on the dust jacket with bats and gloves, and why does he encumber his acknowledgments with personal baseball references about himself and those who aided his work?

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