

Charles Alexander. *Rogers Hornsby: A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995. Pp. 366. \$27.50.

Jack Kavanaugh. *Walter Johnson: A Life*. South Bend, Indiana: Diamond Communications, 1995. Pp. 300. \$24.95.

Near the end of the 1955 baseball season, the founder, president, and chief field instructor of the Rogers Hornsby Baseball College (late of Hot Springs, Arkansas) cut loose (yet again) on the subject of the sorry state of the game he had come to love and hate. "It's getting daffier every year," he complained to Clarence (Pants) Rowland, who had had the good fortune to lose his only managerial job when the Chicago White Sox terminated him after the 1918 season—or on the eve of transforming themselves into the Chicago Black Sox. Daffiness to five-times-fired Manager Rogers Hornsby was platoon baseball. "The ball has to come over the plate no matter which side the pitcher is throwin' it from." The agreeable Rowland agreed: platooning "ruins the spirit of a player."

The next item on Hornsby's permanent list of grievances was the penchant of modern managers to call upon a succession of relief pitchers, thereby depriving novices of learning how to "work out of jams." As of the mid-1950s harumphed Hornsby, the "average starting pitcher is just somebody who starts the game because somebody has to." The always imperial (and usually impecunious) "Rajah" did concede that a dearth of pitching talent contributed to the parade to and from the mound during a modern big league game. And, as always, he had a solution: deaden the ball. This reform would not only help pitchers, but it would lead "mediocre hitters" to "forget those long-distance swings and begin going for individual averages again."

There, that's it, "it" being the question that has to be near the top step of the dugout of the reader's mind, if not actually in everyone's on-deck circle: What possibly could Rogers Hornsby and Walter Johnson have in common? The former hated nearly everybody, but atop his enemies list were pitchers (followed closely by ex-wives); the latter hated no one, not even American League right-handed hitters who liked to crowd the plate. Hornsby had his own version of the platoon system when it came to wives

in particular and women in general; Johnson married once, and happily, only to become a grieving widower at forty-three. The sour-tempered hitter could not envision a life away from baseball—and found none. The sweet-tempered pitcher planned for a life away from baseball—and had one.

Aside from their affinity for the dead-ball era, this matter of sourness and sweetness did contribute to another shading of similarity. Neither was much of a big league manager. Hornsby, the terminal sourpuss who held his players in complete disdain, piloted five different clubs over portions of thirteen seasons. Eight of those campaigns found his teams in seventh or eighth place at the time of his dismissal or the season's end, whichever came first. (Those numbers alone offer ample testimony to the dearth of original thinking in more than one front office.) The ever placid Johnson whose players routinely took advantage of him was only marginally better. But he was better. His Washington Senators won ninety or more games and finished second once, and third twice between 1930 and 1932. This nice guy didn't exactly finish first, but at least he came close before ending his relatively undistinguished bench career with three middle-of-the-pack campaigns (1933–1935) at the helm in Cleveland. On the other hand, reflections on Hornsby as manager inevitably prompt a play on Leo Durocher's line, as in "obnoxious guys often do finish last—or darn close to it."

The sweet and sourness of this unlikely pair has also had its effect on their respective biographers. Jack Kavanaugh, professional administrator of everything from an advertising agency to an association for the "mentally handicapped," is a career baseball fan who has devoted the first phase of his retirement to writing this labor of love. If his research unearthed anything that might have jostled Johnson from his pedestal, Kavanaugh must have suppressed it. The result is biography that verges on hagiography. Walter Johnson, it seems, was a superb pitcher who also happened to be a wonderful and wonderfully uncomplicated, if not always terribly interesting, human being.

Charles Alexander is a professional historian who has already chronicled the lives of two other less than cherubic Hall of Famers by the name of Cobb and McGraw. Rogers Hornsby completes a trilogy of sorts—or should that read a trilogy of out-of-sort bad sports? What has attracted the seemingly mild-mannered Alexander to these, shall we say, cantankerous figures of "our game"? No answer springs immediately to mind. And yet it is somehow unimaginable that Alexander would bother writing biographies of, say, Christy Mathewson, Lou Gehrig, or Walter Johnson.

But bothered he has been by the loathsome, or at the very least bothersome, Hornsby. Why did the greatest right-handed hitter in the history of the game turn out to be such a miserable human being? And why did this miserable human being never indicate the slightest degree of dissatisfaction with the course of his life? His biographer has two answers to the two questions, neither of which is finally satisfying. Eschewing the "realm of psychoanalysis," Alexander simply offers Hornsby's dual compulsions as Exhibits A and B: baseball and gambling. "Both gave him more excitement and pleasure than he could gain from anything

else” (including, apparently, his platooning of the various women in his limited life away from the already limited lives that he led on the diamond or at the race track).

Far less psychotic than Cobb, and somewhat less driven (and much less successful) than manager, or gambler, McGraw, Hornsby knew one thing above all else: the strike zone. With a baseball bat in his hands he was the “Rajah.” According to Alexander, he hit the ball “where it was pitched and to all fields, and frequently with power” to boot. Still, he was, by his own admission, “kind of cold-blooded.”

That very cold-bloodedness no doubt made Rogers Hornsby both a great hitter and a godawful manager. The man who trails only Ty Cobb in the category of lifetime batting average (.358 to .367) reached his summit when he was a twenty-eight-year-old St. Louis Cardinal. The year was 1924, and Rogers Hornsby hit .424. No modern player has matched it. A year later he hit .403, thus marking his third and last .400-plus season. In 1926, Hornsby was the Cardinal player-manager. He hit an unHornsbylike .317, but St. Louis finished first before besting the Yankees in a seven-game series. Baseball life (save for a .387 season with the Boston Braves in 1928) was mostly downhill from there.

But Rogers Hornsby kept plugging away. And so has Charles Alexander. Churning through teams, wives, racetracks, his own children, and acquaintances (friendships, real friendships, were rarer for Rogers Hornsby than his single managerial pennant), Alexander’s unlikable subject generated few people who bothered to feel sorry for him. Only his twice-burned employer, Bill Veeck, at least claimed to go through the motions (if not the full range of emotions): “I felt sorry for Rog,” the owner of the sorry St. Louis Browns conceded: “He goes from job to job in baseball, his lifetime batting average sitting upon his chest like a medal, and he is a stranger among his own kind.”

And he remains a stranger of sorts, despite biographer Charles Alexander’s considerable talents. Perhaps that’s just as well. If we could come to know Rogers Hornsby any better, we might be in a position to dislike him even more.

Some, but only some, of the same can be said for Jack Kavanaugh’s Walter Johnson. Do we really end up knowing the “Big Train”? Did someone of his talent and disposition ever really live among mere mortals? If so, how can we not at least like the pitcher whom Jack Kavanaugh worships? Even old Washington Senators fans who have memorized the story of his late (career and series) heroics in the 1924 Fall Classic against John McGraw’s New York Giants will find themselves rooting for him yet again. And they will be relieved all over again that Walter Johnson finally did win a world series game, if only in relief. Need it be added that this occasional reliever went nine innings in a Game Seven that turned out to be a twelve-inning affair—and that a starting pitcher by the name of Johnson had already dropped Games One and Five? Those same few believing fans will no doubt know the story of the 1925 World Series which saw the Senators blow a 3-1 lead to lose to the Pirates in seven. They will be near tears to read, yet again, of a starter named Walter Johnson, already twice

victorious, going the distance in a 9–7 loss in this Game Seven, Part II.

Yes, the Walter Johnson story can do that to even the most Hornsbylike of baseball aficionados. Both Rogers Hornsby and Walter Johnson are capable, though far from equally capable, of commanding compassion from those who might wish to know them. But a critical difference remains: Hornsby had only a Veeck to shed (crocodile?) tears over the wreck (?) of his life; while Johnson continues to have countless fans who glory in a life well led and shed a real tear or two over what might have been had he not been handed a lifetime sentence as a Washington Senator. But they needn't bother. Walter Johnson had a marvelous career—on both sides of the dead ball era.

Perhaps what can be said of Rogers Hornsby cannot be said of Walter Johnson, namely that he was the best at his craft when it came to unleashing his powerful right arm during the course of a baseball game. Cy Young, after all, did win nearly 100 more games. And Johnson's lifetime ERA of 2.17 ranks only seventh on the all-time list. But his posthumous promoter is not content to let the case rest there. In a biography with the marks of the SABRmician all over it, Jack Kavanaugh notes that the six hurlers who top him all finished their careers before 1920. Furthermore, if one looks only at Johnson's numbers between 1907 and 1919 the statistical story has a different ending. During those thirteen "dead ball" seasons, Johnson's ERA stood at an astounding 1.65. Suddenly, Ed Walsh's career-leading 1.82 (though Kavanaugh has him at 1.82 and 1.86—and on the same page no less) is a distant second.

Walter Johnson would probably have preferred to have pitched an entire career during the pre-Ruthian era. Then again, he might not have preferred an entire career of Ruth-Johnson pitching matchups. The left-handed Ruth took six of ten head-to-head confrontations with Johnson. He even edged out his Washington rival in the ERA category, 1.44 to 1.54. Switching roles, Johnson did lead all "dead ball" pitchers with sixteen home runs. (Ruth hit thirteen in less than half as many games.) Curiously, in his last at bat Walter Johnson flew out to, guess who? Babe Ruth. How did Babe Ruth, the batter, fare against Walter Johnson, the pitcher? If Jack Kavanaugh knows the answer, he is keeping it to himself.

If Walter Johnson would have preferred pitching during some other era and for some other team, he also kept that to himself. Never one to waste energy or time grousing about his fate, or the state of his game, Walter Johnson was no Rogers Hornsby in many more ways than one.

Surprisingly, the pitcher even managed to sustain his days of greatness well beyond those of the hitter. Between 1910 and 1919 Johnson won twenty or more games every season peaking in 1913 with thirty-six victories, twenty-nine of which were complete games. This Big Train was nothing if not consistent: he not only finished 80 percent of what he started during his greatest season, but he completed 531 of 666 starts (or 80 percent) over the course of his career. After four less than Johnsonian years, this Big Train was back on track in 1924 (23–7) and 1925 (20–7) and often under the watchful eye of a consummate

baseball fan by the name of Coolidge, First Lady Grace Coolidge, that is. Between 1920 and 1931, Rogers Hornsby had a similar decade of baseball excellence—and dominance. But once he started downward he never recaptured what had been.

Walter Johnson may be a cardboard figure in the hands of an admiring biographer. Then again, he may have been just this admirable on and off the field. If so, it's nice to know that this nice guy got his chance to finish first and to provide Washington with the only luster it deserved during 1924 when the Ku Klux Klan paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue or, for that matter, during the whole of the otherwise sleepy years of the presidency of Grace Coolidge's husband.

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