

The Final Three Innings

The Seventh Inning, "The Capital of Baseball," is, in my view, *Baseball's* finest two hours in terms of the quality and integrity of script and overall cinematic execution. An excellent introduction to the decade on and off the field effectively establishes what will be covered in the inning and sets the stage for what will transpire in the next frame. Internally, there is a clear plot line—the rise and fall of the game in New York City—and drama aplenty with stirring pennant races and World Series; epochal heroics ranging from Bobby Thomson's shot to Don Larsen's perfect game; historic milestones in the debuts of future icons Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays and the retirements of legends Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson, and Ted Williams; and unspeakable tragedy—to wit, the heart-breaking, World Series-saving catch by Sandy F. Amoros in 1955. In no other canto does Burns so effectively capture the drama and excitement and rhythm and historicity of the game.

In contrast, the film deteriorates badly in the next two innings: the Eighth, covering the 1960s and the Ninth, treating the 1970s and 1980s, are idiosyncratic and, on balance, are the weakest portion of the entire documentary. Perhaps this is because the endemic weaknesses of the film are magnified in the final three stanzas.

The film's most conspicuous and consistent defect is a multitude of errors. The box scores for the final three innings are filled with errors of omission and commission minor and major, excusable and inexcusable. Many people have compiled extensive lists of "mistakes" in the film; I have documented more than 100 and my sense is that there are upwards of 150 for the entire series. While I do not want to dwell on this point by citing numerous examples of miscues, neither should the gaffs be dismissed in passing. First, the errors are so numerous as to be distracting—one begins to look for errors instead focusing on the content of the film itself. Second, if a work of prose history were marred by as many "honest" errors as *Baseball*, the credibility of the author and product would be seriously questioned; and if there were as many "dishonest" (i.e., deliberate and knowing) errors, there would be serious questions of professional ethics. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the kinds of errors that mar the film:

Poor fact-checking led Burns to kick a lot of easy ones, many being especially conspicuous given his preoccupation with New York-Boston teams:

—Sandy Koufax is credited with 11 shutouts in 1966 when he had 5.

—We are told that "the 1986 Series was the first Series between teams from Boston and New York since 1912." Ooops! The Red Sox played Brooklyn in the 1916 Series.

—We are told "On April 20, 1912, Fenway Park opened its doors. The Red Sox beat the New York Highlanders that afternoon 7–6 in 11 innings, thus beginning one of the most intense rivalries in baseball." Say what? The Highlanders, later Yankees, and Boston had been American League rivals since 1903 and battled to the wire in the 1904 pennant race.

Numerous uncorrectable errors are allowed to stand because of the overuse of “talking heads.” The “talking heads” appear more often in the final innings, presumably because their knowledge is firsthand, but they talk more nonsense than ever before. The film’s credibility suffers greatly when the “designated experts” consistently impart falsehoods and foolishness.

—Daniel Okrent, the worst offender, says that in 1962 Cleveland traded Harry Chiti to the Mets “for a player to be named later” and was “so incompetent” that he was returned to the Indians, thus becoming “the first player in major league history to be traded for himself.” Not true. He was *sold* by the Indians to the Mets on April 26, 1962 for cash; besides, the belittling of his skills—it was his last year in the majors—nastily denigrates a 10-year career in the Show.

—George Will says Pete Rose didn’t have “great physical talents,” but “willed himself to greatness.”

More numerous than factual errors are visual inaccuracies. Some are attributable to technical difficulties—e.g., a reversed negative shows right-handed Dennis Eckersley as a left-hander in set position (his name is spelled backwards on the uniform). But the vast majority of the visual inaccuracies are deliberate, with the result that what we see does not square with what we hear.

—The narrator tells us in game six of the 1953 World Series, Mickey Mantle homered in the bottom of the eight thereby “tying the score at 3–3” as prelude to Billy Martin’s Series-winning hit in the 9th. But Mantle did not hit a homer in game six; the footage is from game two.

—Mantle hit his famous 565-ft. homer righthanded off lefty Chuck Stobbs while the video shows him homering lefty off right-handed Camilo Pascual.

—Several times when discussing the career of right-handed Curt Flood, the film clips are of left-handed Lou Brock.

—In the 1971 World Series, Pittsburgh v. Baltimore, the narrator describes a “great” catch by Roberto Clemente—in Wrigley Field!

Much of the image/text juxtaposition is disconcerting, but relatively harmless as most viewers won’t catch it. (I am reminded of Chico Marx’s line when caught by his wife with a blonde on his arm: Who are you going to believe—me, or your eyes?) But what about outrageous gaffs? The narration speaks of New York Yankee Gil McDougald, who wore No. 12 and batted righthanded, beating out a bunt to spark a rally in game seven of the 1955 World Series. But we see a left-handed hitting Brooklyn Dodger wearing No. 4 (Duke Snider) being retired on a sacrifice bunt!

All histories incorporate poetic or artistic license. Historians must use supposition, inference, and speculation in writing prose histories; and documentary film makers must compensate for the absence of specific images. But at what point does artistic license contravene professional ethics? When writing prose history, historians can’t make up evidence, combine aspects of different events to form a desired happening, or substitute the deeds of one person for another. But Burns does this repeatedly. Had he received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts instead of the National Endowment for the Humanities and

produced a personalized “film essay” about baseball, I would not be so concerned. What troubles me is that Burns insists on referring to himself as an “historian,” calling his film a “documentary,” and dismissing errors as “poetic license.” Ken Burns is not an historian: He is a filmmaker. He has not produced a photo-documentary history of baseball, but an illustrated history of baseball geared to the sensory imperatives of television entertainment.

The film’s larger failing is, however, less execution than conceptualization. Burns embraces a baseball version of the “great man” theory of history—that is, the game turns on succeeding generations of elite athletes who do remarkable and memorable things on the diamond. The result is more cinematic scrapbook than documentary film history. Save for two persistent themes (race and labor-management relations), the film exhibits no overriding sense of baseball or a discerning appreciation for what is important within the historical development of the game. As in previous innings, one must accept the fact that the film is not really about baseball, but instead is about major league baseball, primarily as played in Boston and New York City. Even at that, one cannot cover everything, but one can reasonably expect a “documentary” to treat adequately that which is included. Alas, Burns’s treatment is, save for racial integration and Jackie Robinson’s career, invariably episodic and superficial.

From the earliest innings, Burns emphasizes that major league baseball is a business and that the owners of ball clubs conspired to maximize profits and minimize player compensation. Although he doesn’t understand that the real economic division in baseball is not between owners and players, but between the Haves and Have-Nots in the ranks of ownership, the treatment of the business of baseball is satisfactory until the final three innings when he is unable to come to grips with the transformation of major league baseball from a business to an industry. League expansion and franchise relocation are given passing notice, and the one “case study” is one-sided and simplistic. More than five minutes are devoted to Walter O’Malley’s decision to move the Brooklyn Dodgers to California and promulgates uncritically Neil Sullivan’s pro-O’Malley interpretation. But nothing is said about the political and economic machinations in Los Angeles that brought the Dodgers to Los Angeles. The onset of unionization, the most important development in the last 30 years, is handled well in terms of the MLPA’s hiring of Marvin Miller and the ultimately successful challenge to the “reserve clause,” but mere mention is accorded the 1981 strike that closed baseball for 55 days and 706 games and produced a split season. And no mention is made of the formation of the MLUA; Joe Cronin’s arbitrary firing of Bill Valentine and Al Salerno in 1969 for trying to unionize American League umpires; the umpire strikes of 1970, 1979, and 1984; or the impact of the MLUA on the job security and role of umpires in the game.

There is no consideration of the larger issue of major league baseball as part of a national professional sports industry competing for publicity and entertainment dollars. The owners’ response to declining attendance is covered in *a single sentence* limited to the advent of mascots, exploding scoreboards,

and “endless, endless promotions.” Manipulation of the game’s structure—the dual All-Star games, the advent of postseason LSC play, and wild card playoffs—are not mentioned. While acknowledging that financially “baseball was in trouble” from the 1960s on, there is no mention that since WWII baseball’s economic woes are attributable primarily to the fact that its leaders have been remarkably unenlightened compared with their counterparts in other professional sports—particularly the NBA and NFL—in sharing revenue to ensure health of leagues instead of the welfare of individual franchises, in licensing products, in promoting its stars, and in marketing the game at home and abroad. And, contrary to his earlier emphasis and the evidence of post-WWII baseball, Burns turns from criticizing owners to chastizing “greedy” players who receive exorbitant salaries through arbitration and free-agency, sell autographs, and are disloyal for forsaking fans in one community for another team and higher salaries. He does not explain that the owners, not the players, insisted on arbitration and restricted free-agency or that owners have both extorted money from communities and in relocated franchises in pursuit of filthy lucre. As with other issues covered in the final three innings, Burns became political in his treatment of “current” economic issues to avoid alienating the Lords of Baseball.

What Burns does not include in the film is important because it reveals his sense of baseball and shows that he doesn’t really understand the enduring appeal of the game.

—Burns’s *Baseball* has no rules. The lone reference to rules in the final three stanzas is the statement that the strike zone was “widened” in the late 1960s to counter the dominance of pitchers. Actually, it was “lowered,” not widened; there is no mention of the fact that the strike zone had been heightened in the early 1960s or the more critical matter of lowering the height of the pitcher’s mound. He mentions advent of DH in 1972, but does not explore its impact on the game. There are no controversies over balks, doctored baseballs, corked bats, or changes in scoring rules and statistical categories.

—Burns’s *Baseball* has no officials. He continues to exclude umpires, and thus imparts no sense of their growing role as “performers” or how the abandonment of the outside chest-protector and adoption of the scissors-stance altered the strike zone.

—Burns’s *Baseball* has no administrators. General managers, league presidents, and commissioners do not exist—the latter omission another example of Burns avoiding a politically sensitive subject.

—Burns’s *Baseball* has no publicists. There is no Game of the Week or Dizzy Dean, no Vin Scully or Bob Prince or Ernie Harwell, no Jerry Holtzman or Murray Chass.

—Burns’s *Baseball* has no innovations in strategies and tactics or mental dimensions. It simply depicts throwing, hitting, and catching balls. Passed by are numerous opportunities to show the subtleties, nuances and complexities that are the games primary attractions. Where is the emphasis on base-stealing of the 1960s. the big-inning philosophy of the 1970s that reduced bunting to a

lost art, the advent of the obligatory closer, the onset of multiple substitutions, the fork-ball and split-finger fastballs?

Because Burns is not really a historian of baseball or America, he often misses the importance of what he mentions. It is noted that new ballparks replaced vintage structures, but there is no discussion of how the multiple-abuse architecture of the new (sometimes domed and usually artificial-turfed) stadia affected the way the game was played and watched or how the location of the stadia reflected the flight from city to suburb and the shift from mass transit to automobiles. He posits baseball as a cultural mirror, but connections are never made between sociocultural issues and the game—not even the popularity of the hapless Mets as heroes of the growing sport counterculture of the 1960s or the World Series battles between the decorous, clean-shaven Cincinnati Reds and rowdy, hirsute Oakland A's as clashes of cultural symbols of the 1970s.

Of course, Burns couldn't include everything, and omissions are acceptable, if regrettable, provided they are consistent with the film's stated purpose and consonant with its internal plot lines. In most cases, Burns fails to deliver what he promises.

Essentially, in the final three innings, Burns is simply overwhelmed by major league baseball. He doesn't know what to make of it, doesn't really understand it, doesn't know how to package it, and doesn't want to offend the Lords. Like the film as a whole, the final stanzas have no core, no plot, no unifying theme(s). He goes "Extra Innings," but still can't affect a satisfying ending. There is only more of the same stuff—"Plays-of-the-Week" style highlights, superficial homilies, and banal flights of metaphoric excess. As a result, the series abruptly ends as Burns simply calls the game. And because Burns could not bring himself to connect the recent labor-management disputes to an impending crisis or project the historical stages of the game to an uncertain future where baseball is but one component of an international sports entertainment industry, he takes a called third strike and walks away.

At first, I was troubled by the abrupt and unsatisfying closure. But maybe Burns, unknowingly, got it right—maybe baseball is/has been adrift, no longer has a clear sociocultural role. And perhaps his emphasis on New York and Boston baseball, however distorted from the perspective of baseball history, was apropos inasmuch as New York represents in recent years both the passing of the Good Old Days and the emergence of ownership (Yankees) and modern players (Mets) symptomatic of the ills plaguing the game, while the Red Sox continue to personify the dashed expectations and disappointment.

In the end, *Baseball* is disappointing. Had Burns opted for a pictorial essay, a personal, and, by definition, idiosyncratic look at the game and some of its salient features, it would have been more satisfying. But a documentary history demands standards of inclusion, execution, and accuracy that Burns has not met. His is not a history of baseball or even of the game's major league version. The product is not true to his professed purpose of employing the game of baseball as sociocultural mirror of America. At the end of a brief and wholly uncritical

account of the Pete Rose affair, Bart Giamatti points out that because of human temptations, no institution will always fulfill its highest aspirations. "No institution is perfect," he says. "But this one [baseball], because it is so much a part of the history of our people and because it has a purchase on our national soul, has an obligation to the people for whom it is played—fans and well-wishers in the millions—to strive for excellence in all things." Would that Burns had risen to the occasion.

After 18 hours of watching *Baseball*, I was tired—tired of the superficiality: tired of the insipid clichés and hype; tired of the facile metaphors connecting baseball with All That Is Good; tired of the factual mistakes; tired of the discrepancies between narrative and visual image; tired of unkept promises and missed opportunities; tired of an endless parade of highlights; tired of an exciting, complex and unpredictable game rendered routine; tired of indiscriminate "greatness" (is "good" no longer part of the American lexicon?); and tired of the depiction of baseball fans as hopelessly sentimental cultists. Still, I was pleasantly satisfied and had to admit that I liked Burns's film. It was visually and emotionally satisfying. And I thought of Woody Allen's immortal line: "I never had an orgasm I didn't enjoy." Eighteen hours of beautifully illustrated baseball history—what's not to like?

Baseball generated an immediate outpouring of criticism from baseball aficionadoes, who not only blasted the film but found it vastly inferior to Burns's earlier documentary, *The Civil War*. But I found there to be a huge discrepancy between the reaction of baseball "experts" and that of the viewing public ranging from the uninitiated and casual fans to college baseball coaches and minor league administrators. They loved it and were excited and informed by it. Interestingly, from my other life, I knew that Civil War historians had found plenty of nits to pick, errors to exorcise, and distortions to disavow in Burns's previous film, while general viewers, including the now hypercritical baseball fans, were laudatory, enthralled, and came away much more aware of, interested in, and better informed about the Civil War and related historical issues than they previously had been. In fact, the two "documentaries" are remarkably similar in content and execution as well as in importance. For all his shortcomings, Ken Burns accomplished what legions of baseball historians have failed to do—impart to millions an appreciation for and understanding of baseball as the National Pastime and the ways in which sport is an integral part of American history. Yet in so doing, he reminds us of a truism: Pictures are worth a thousand words, but not if you want to explain history.

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