
Book Reviews

WESTCOTT, RICH. *Philadelphia's Old Ballparks*. Baseball in America series, edited by Rich Westcott. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 206. Illustrations, index. \$29.95 cb.

Of all of America's national pastimes, baseball is surely the sport with the strongest sense of history and nostalgia. Traditions die hard—will night games at Wrigley Field ever seem natural?—and debates about technology and innovation—artificial turf and the designated hitter come to mind—rage endlessly among the fans who watch, the pundits who analyze, and the team owners who are motivated more by the imperatives of the bottom line than by images of the game as it used to be.

Nostalgia also drives discussions about old and new baseball palaces. We can speculate about whether the mid-1970s renovations of the House that Ruth Built made it a better place to watch a game, and we can wonder how much fans in the old Comiskey Park really objected to the structural poles in their line of vision, given the otherwise intimate and felicitous setting for baseball on Chicago's South Side. Indeed, the charm of the old parks has such a hold on our collective imagination that we now build new stadiums to emulate the old, without the warts or the poles. This phenomenon maybe an exercise in postmodernist architectural retrospection, but it is also a cultural reassertion of the idea that where our heroes pitch and field and hit reveals much about the national consciousness of a society in which the summer game plays such an important part.

Rich Westcott offers a glimpse of his city's past in *Philadelphia's Old Ballparks*. Today's fans who drive to cookie-cutter arenas just off the interstate and pay as much for parking and a hot dog as for the ticket itself have few points of reference with which to comprehend a ballpark that looked from the outside like a castle set in the midst of urban density. Baker Bowl, located at Fifteenth and Huntingdon Streets, was home to the Phillies for 51 years (1887-1938) and 3,764 games, 1,957 wins, 1,778 losses, and 29 ties.

Westcott chronicles not only the team's record but also changes to the park itself over the years. One constant, the much-maligned right field wall, was notable for its contribution to the batting averages of left-handed hitters and the anxiety level of both home and visiting pitchers. This tin monster was also the home of huge signs advertising Bull Durham tobacco and Schmidt's beer. During a dismal period for the club between 1928-1938, the wall carried the message "The Phillies Use Lifebuoy," to which a neighborhood commenter added, "And they still stink!" (p. 35).

Baker Bowl was home to assorted baseball people, including small-time gamblers, vendors, neighborhood kids, loyal fans, and the sometimes hapless Phillies themselves. But the spirit of the crowd could not mask the inadequacy of the structure itself, which suffered a serious collapse in the stands in 1927 and other structural problems in its last years. The feeling of decay inspired sportswriter Red Smith to comment that the park in its last days “bore a striking resemblance to a rundown men’s room” (p. 95). After the Phillies’ departure for Shibe Park (later named Connie Mack Stadium), Baker Bowl was used for football games, as an ice rink, and for midget auto racing. Fires and storms ravaged the site that remains today as marginal commercial property with no historical marker to remind residents where a colorful ballpark once stood.

Westcott pays homage to the city’s earliest baseball in the decades after the Civil War. The game was played by the National League Phillies in Philadelphia Park, the American Association Athletics in Jefferson Park, and the Quakers of the Players’ (or Brotherhood) League in Forepaugh Park. All three parks were in the northern part of the city, as was Columbia Park, home to the new Athletics of the new American League for eight seasons, starting in 1901. He devotes most of his attention to Philadelphia Park/Baker Bowl and Shibe Park/Connie Mack Stadium, ballparks which were also located in the northern part of the city. An urban historian might have explored the characteristics that made north Philadelphia such a popular location for America’s summer game.

Although Westcott provides colorful information about the qualities of the parks themselves and the people who attended games, this book does little to help us understand the growth and development of Philadelphia itself as seen through the lens of one of its major recreational activities. Who lived in the ballparks’ neighborhoods, and how did changing patterns of immigration and internal migration affect the ethnic makeup of the fans in the stands and the neighborhood kids who learned how to sneak into the ballpark? Who were the gamblers and what clientele did they serve? When did women become a presence in the stands, if only as part of larger family groups? And at what point in the troubled history of Philadelphia did Phillies management begin to feel that their investment in Connie Mack Stadium was undermined by the changing character of the neighborhood?

But Westcott’s purpose is more evocative than analytical. His anecdotes and game statistics remind us that baseball is a game of stories to treasure in the off season. Even in an era of television in which it can be difficult to tell whether the game on the screen is being played in Scranton, Yomiuri, or New York, for many fans the setting does contribute to the gestalt of the game. The nostalgia for the old-time ballparks was evoked by Rob Carpenter, the team president who decided to leave Connie Mack Stadium. “Progress,” he said, “I guess that’s what you’d have to call it. But damn, I hate to leave this place” (p. 194). Rich Westcott couldn’t agree more.

—BARBARA L. TISCHLER
Columbia University