

ROBERTS, ROBIN and C. PAUL ROGERS III. *The Whiz Kids and the 1950 Pennant*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Pp. 390.

ORODENKER, RICHARD, ed. *The Phillies Reader*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Pp. 302.

This pair of books offers potential readers a choice. But for those potential readers who happen to be actual Phillies fans, there is likely to be no choice. First the books, then the choice. Penn State professor of American studies (and actual Phillies fan) Richard Orodenger has rescued slices of wonderfully good writing about a series of mostly godawful Phillies teams. Two deans (Robin Roberts among Phillies pitchers and C. Paul Rogers III of Southern Methodist University law school) follow with a very ordinary account of the wonders of the “Whiz Kids” of 1950. So the choice is this: a superb book about an almost unending string of worse than mediocre baseball teams or a mediocre book about one of the few seasons that managed to break that string. Those who know Philadelphia fans as Jim Brosnan knows “those miserable fans” know which book they will choose. Faced with the prospect of either transcending their misery or reliving it, they’ll shout—no, make that jeer—“bring on Orodenger and others.”

Near the middle of the Phillies great depression (which lasted from 1915 to 1950, thereby surrounding what actual Phillies fans must regard as the lesser great depression) the call, no make that jeer, was for “Willoughby and others” instead. The year was 1930 and the Phillies were en route to finishing dead last by a mere forty games, despite scoring 6.8 runs (on 11.4 hits) per game. The problem, not surprisingly, was pitching. Phillies hurlers (?) surrendered a yet to be topped 7.7 runs per game.

Among the worst of the worst in 1930 was one Claude Willoughby, who won all of four games, while losing seventeen. Not even the once incomparable Grover Cleveland Alexander could do better, having returned to the Phillies for what would prove to be his final big league season. The result was an 0-3 record and an ERA of 9.14. At least Willoughby at 7.59 was under the staff average. Nonetheless, Phillies captain Fresco Thompson no doubt had it right when he handed umpire Bill Klem a slightly unusual lineup card before the start of one of those seventeen defeats. Pencilled ninth in the batting order was “Willoughby and others.”

Between the end of the Alexander era and the arrival of Robin Roberts, the Phillies paraded to the beleaguered mounds of the Baker Bowl and Shibe Park (later Connie Mack Stadium) innumerable Claude Willoughbys, not to mention the briefly mentionable Curt Schilling and others of the improbable Phillies of 1993.

Orodenger makes sure that all of the above are mentioned, sooner or later, including another Phillies pitcher named Curt Simmons, who by 1964 had resurrected his career with the St. Louis Cardinals. Had Simmons still been one of the Phillies, perhaps, but only perhaps, Gene Mauch would not have gone with the two-man rotation of Chris Short and Jim Bunning in the final days of

the unmentionable season that contributed more than its share to making Phillies fans as miserable as they have been and can only hope they will always be.

When it comes to 1964, Orodnenker the historian outvotes Orodnenker the fan. He mentions it. (In truth, he has to.) More than that, he wallows in it. (In truth, he wants to.) Most of a section titled "The Mauch Years" is given over to it. Most of the rest dwells on the 23-game Mauch losing streak of 1961. And most all of it inspired wonderful writing.

Poor Gene Mauch may be the best manager who ever over-managed a major league baseball team, if not necessarily the best ever-manager never to have won a pennant (division titles labeled "east," "west," or "central" don't qualify). Poor Gene Mauch?? How about those poor miserable Phillies fans? In either case he—and they—not only had to endure the double ignominy of a major league losing streak *and* the loss of a major league pennant, but they were then—and are now—subjected to the wonderfully cutting words of Orodnenker's chosen others.

Is it only Phillies beat writers who could capture the misery of defeat? Or does losing in general seem to inspire better writing than winning could ever hope to do? Winning everything, after all, left Frank Dolson of the Philadelphia Inquirer nearly wordless in 1980: "Hemingway would struggle over this one. Shakespeare would grope for words to describe it and give up in despair. Grantland Rice would be over his head. I don't have a chance."

Whatever the answer to the original questions, when it comes to the Phillies give me (as Richard Orodnenker does) Mr. Dolson of the *Inquirer* over Mr. Smith of the *Times*. As a matter of fact, Orodnenker *does* give us "Red" Smith, but this is the "redhead" reminiscing on his years recovering from the "Futile Phils," or the team "whose two pennants in 100 years continue a record that will never be broken on purpose." "The year was 1976, and the Phils were victorious in the NL East. Mr. Smith let that qualify as a pennant: "Bicentennials come once in 200 years. Pennants come oftener in Betsy Ross's town, but not much." Smith on the Phillies must have been better than Smith on the Yanks, even if not by much.

Most of Orodnenker's selections are Philadelphia writers, but sprinkled among them are Pete Axthelm, Roy Blount, Jr., Pat Jordan, Wilfrid Sheed, James Michener, and Roger Angell. Phillies fans can read them and weep—and then, of course, enjoy. The rest of us can skip straight to the enjoyment part, which includes Orodnenker's endearingly loopy introductions, most of which are gems all their own.

Robin Roberts should have teamed with a "Red" Smith, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, if not to relieve him, then at least to cut down on the CCP clichés per page) quotient. Though not an actual Phillies fan, I happened to turn to Orodnenker . . . and others first. Roberts and Rogers inevitably suffer by comparison.

Still, there is value to be had in this combination memoir of the 1950 season and history of the building of the "Whiz Kids" (not all of whom were whizzes and only some of whom were kids). Roberts and Rogers briefly sketch the grim pre-1950 past of the rusted-out Baker Bowl and the nonexistent Phillies farm system. This era of empty stands and empty pockets no doubt would have ended

as early as 1943 had Bill Veeck been able to buy the team and integrate it. Instead the Phillies were sold to one Bob Carpenter. A former DuPont vice president who also happened to be married to a DuPont, Carpenter was not reluctant to spend money on player development, so long as those players were white. It's not that Carpenter's Phillies should have led the way in breaking the color line (though Veeck's Phillies surely would have) but that the Phillies under manager Ben Chapman led the way in brutalizing Jackie Robinson and that the post-1950 "Whiz Kid" Phillies almost matched the Red Sox in remaining a whites-only operation. Come 1964, there was more than a little poetic justice involved when the Phils were overtaken by a Cardinal team that featured not only Curt Simmons but Lou Brock and Bob Gibson.

The R and R boys are at their best when recounting the years prior to 1950 when the "Whiz Kids" were being assembled. The 1950 Phillies may have taken the baseball world by surprise. Or at the very least they might be wrongly remembered for having done so. Seventh in 1947, sixth in 1948, and third in 1949, the fortunes of the Phillies of Del Ennis and Andy Seminick (who arrived to stay in 1946) and Granny Hamner and Richie Ashburn (Phillies class of 1948) were clearly on the rise.

Robin Roberts also joined the team in 1948 but not until 1950 would he win 20 games. This was the first of six consecutive 20-win seasons for Roberts, who would remain at the top of his game through 1955 even as his team rediscovered mediocrity on its way to returning to oblivion.

But the Philadelphia Phillies of 1964 nearly blew a huge lead. As of September 19, the Phils (now minus Curt Simmons whose guard unit had been called into active duty) led the Dodgers by nine games. Eleven days later, Dick Sisler had to hit a three-run homer in the top of the tenth to save the season—and prevent a dreaded (by the Phillies) three-game playoff with the Dodgers.

Actually, it was the always self-effacing Roberts who saved the game by shutting down the Dodgers in the bottom of the tenth (having surrendered only a tainted home run to Pee Wee Reese over the course of the previous nine). Whether as pitcher or as author, Robin Roberts strikes a modest pose. The difference is that Roberts, the author, has plenty to be modest about. Is a "dissipated" pitching staff the same as a "depleted" one?

Still, there are wonderfully human stories to be told, whether centering on the gritty Seminick, who down the stretch played more than hurt by catching on a broken ankle; the Nebraska flash Ashburn, whose parents moved to Philadelphia to run a rooming house of sorts for his single teammates; the ill-starred Eddie Waitkus, who could not say, as Winston Churchill once did, that the most exhilarating experience in life is to be shot at . . . and missed; the aloof Jim Konstanty, the relief pitcher who had his year of years in 1950 but who was the surprise choice of his manager to start the series opener against the Yanks; or manager Eddie Sawyer, who, unlike his series opposite number, the "old pefessor," Casey Stengel, actually *was* a college professor.

If Roberts credits any one man for the success of the "Whiz Kids" in 1950, it would be Eddie Sawyer, the same Eddie Sawyer who, on his second tour of duty

as the Phillies manager, would resign one game into the 1960 season, thereby opening the way for the Mauch era. That success did not include a World Series victory in 1950, as the Phillies were quickly swept by Casey Stengel's vaunted Yankees. But Roberts gently reminds us that the first three games provided great drama before the Phillies went down by scores of 1-0, 2-1, and 3-2.

Roberts would never win so much as one World Series game. For that matter, neither would under-manager Eddie Sawyer, whose genius may have been that he simply let his players play, nor Gene Mauch, who was not above letting others label him a genius because he didn't.

Whatever the formula, the Phillies have generally figured out a way to lose. But losing doesn't have to produce formulaic writing. At least we now have Richard Orodnenker . . . and others to remind us of that.

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