

MANDEL, BRETT H. *Minor Players, Major Dreams*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Pp. xvi, 243. 16 b/w photographs. \$16.95 pb.

Brett Mandel, in his twenties, indulges the fantasy of many American males—take leave of one's job (in this case an assistant policy director for the Philadelphia Charter Commission) and seek your fortune in professional baseball. He convinces the administration of the short season Class A Ogden, Utah Raptors in the Pioneer League to give him a roster position for the season of summer 1994 and obtains subsidization for his publication, his first.

The author then sets about recording his experiences. The book's chapters cover (as reflected in chapter headings) an event, personage, or situation that analyzed or discussed by the writer. Titles include "The Prospect," "The Rejected," "The Neglected," "The Management," "The Executives," and "The Pennant Race." The author gives us the excitement, bewilderment, and anxiety of young men starting, and in some instances, restarting their hoped-for careers in professional baseball.

The experiences for the most part are nonglamorous or mundane—finding an apartment, irregular eating habits (read fast food), and hours of travel to the remote outposts of organized baseball, such as Butte, Montana, and Medicine Hat, Alberta. Young men squirreled tightly together day after day in a bus traveling to play a relentless schedule only somewhat relieved with several beers at the end of the line. Mandel poignantly discloses his teammates' meteoric rise and quick plummets in status. He notes their thrill (a home run, a pitching win, a strikeout), agony and disappointment (an error, a hitting slump), or desperation when each performance can signal advance or dismissal. There is a rush of excitement and a feeling of importance on opening day with one's name over the speaker, youngsters clamoring for autographs, lights, music, the play of the game. This is tempered on other days by long promotional appearances at shopping centers, senseless interviews, crowded locker rooms in tiny stadiums, interminable card games on buses, and ballgames that stretch to four hours. Mandel notes virtually every player believes he has the skills to get to the major leagues. In fact, only a very few advance even to the next level (full season, Class A). While all believe they belong in the majors, injury, discouragement, and plain lack of ability sort out players. Their frustration, excuses, and blame are the human responses to avoid admitting failure, and being cast out of baseball. These are recorded in abundance in this book.

The pressure to win is greater with an independent franchise because there is no subsidization from a parent major league club. Winning gains fans, sponsorship, and money. The independent teams cannot afford long-term developmental time for a player. This weighs on individuals' minds constantly. Relationships with management can be strained when players must appear at a civic function following a long road trip. Imposed cost cutting practices, such as accounting for all balls, grate upon players. The managers are under constant stress to win and yet at the same time players must be developed to sell their

contracts to organized baseball clubs. This in turn helps finance the club just as winning draws paying customers. Thus there is a continual, smoldering tension—friction to produce on a day-to-day basis.

Drawing together more than 20 disparate young men, each with individual career goals, into a team effort is a constant challenge. Yet this “team” aspect is highlighted throughout the book as team effort is a constant challenge. Yet this “team” aspect is highlighted throughout the book as team success lends confidence and hope to individual accomplishments. Highs and lows occur each day as the team pursues a pennant, only to drop out of contention the last week of the season. Immediately players think of their individual playing goals and to survive and continue on in baseball. This bringing together of people on a team and its dismemberment at the end of a season somewhat parallels David Storey’s stage play about rugby, “The Changing Room.”

These personal moments stand out as team members scatter immediately at the end of the season. Still young enough to savor playing the game, various individuals recognize their limitations, others will go kicking and screaming that they have been wronged when not retained. A small number will survive to play again.

Mandel is an interloper, appearing in less than a handful of games for Ogden. When he does (a great nervous excitement) he gives the reader what the other young men must feel in their quest for glory. He also gives us what dedication (read single-mindedness) it also takes, not to mention ability, to make even this level of professional baseball. He projects this male dream well (although single-mindedness is important in any highly competitive field from a rock band to an astronaut), but this game is a romanticized business that still appeals to the male ego.

Mandel writes clearly, tightly, and displays emotion without sentimentality, which makes for an enjoyable reading experience.

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