
FIREOVID, STEVE, AND WINEGARDNER, MARK. *The 26th Man: One Minor League Pitcher's Pursuit of a Dream*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. Pp. xxv, 219. Epilogue, afterword, index. \$12.95 pb.

Steve Fireovid's account of his 1990 season pitching for the Indianapolis Indians, a farm-team of the Montreal Expos, was first published in 1991 by MacMillan, and to our good fortune has been reprinted as a University of Nebraska Bison Books edition, part of its extensive reprinting of quality out-of-print baseball books. As has been the case with many players over the years, Fireovid kept a daily account of his season and Mark Winegardner, who is listed as the co-author, put the work into publishable form.

The words and thoughts are clearly those of Fireovid, who has enough scar tissue from the disappointments of his career to bring a maturity and thoughtfulness to his writing that many others might not be able to muster. One is struck frequently by the maturity of this man, who is caught out of time playing with younger men who have considerably less understanding of the game and the business than he.

Steve Fireovid pitched his high school team in Bryan, Ohio, to a state championship, played college ball at Miami University of Ohio, and was drafted out of college by the San Diego Padres, beginning his minor league career in 1978. He was virtually a career minor leaguer, pitching a total of 6.5 innings in the major leagues spread over five seasons. For the most part, his career was spent as the 26th man on a 25-man active major league roster.

The 1990 season with the Indianapolis Indians in the American Association was a particularly dramatic one for Fireovid, as he regarded it as likely to be his last chance to make the majors, and perhaps his last season in baseball. It was also a season when his third child and third son would be born, and when he would be able to get a bit more time at home with his family in Bryan, only a three-hour drive from Indianapolis.

If "Fire," as his teammates call him, has an agenda in writing his book, it is self-understanding, and this makes *The 26th Man* a study of the interior of Steve Fireovid more than a study of this team or its personnel. The richness of the account comes from the fact that "Fire" has an understanding of the baseball business and this gives him a perspective of his own situation. It also enriches the reflective passages on his career and the various twists and turns it has taken.

Most fascinating to some will be Fireovid's struggle between his understanding and his dreams. On one hand, he knew he was good enough to pitch in the major leagues, but on the other hand, he knew that because of age, circumstances, and the fortunes of baseball he was no longer likely to be returning

to the majors. But there was always that outside chance, and as long as it remained, Steve Fireovid's heart would override his brain.

Also of interest, this book offers insight into the workings of major league baseball, especially the player personnel decisions. It is not a "fair" system, in the sense that hard work and success do not guarantee advancement through the system and arrival at the major league destination.

Fireovid's account of life as a minor-leaguer strips the veneer of glamour from professional baseball as a career for both the player and his family. Certainly the financial rewards are great, but unless major league duty is achieved, the money is not nearly adequate compensation for the sacrifices by all members of the family. Fireovid reveals a great deal of guilt over his absence from the family, although at times one feels that it is a bit disingenuous.

This is an excellent document for the historian and a worthy addition to the baseball documentary literature that already includes Jim Brosnan's two books, Jim Bouton's raucous account of the game, and Pat Jordan's similar reflection on the vicissitudes of baseball.

The afterword written for the Bison Books edition reveals further that the grip baseball had on Steve Fireovid has not left him, as he has continued to play in overseas venues when opportunities have arisen. He approaches these opportunities instrumentally, using them as an opportunity to see other parts of the world. Equally interesting was his willingness to become a "scab," or replacement player in the spring of 1995, and to regard this as no more than a chance for a paid vacation. One would have thought that someone as thoughtful and reflective as Steve Fireovid would have approached this issue with a bit more contemplative examination of the situation than he showed under the circumstances.

In the end, *The 26th Man* serves as a document of professional baseball and a reflective examination of one athlete's life in an unsuccessful struggle to achieve the "pro dream." It contributes to the knowledge and understanding of fans, students, historians, and athletes. For that reason we are grateful to Bison Books for reprinting this fine book.

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