

lack of formal training as a historian means that the larger social, economic, and political forces promoting change in baseball and American culture are often left unexplored. This history contains neither end notes nor a bibliography, relying instead primarily upon Koppett's in-depth knowledge of baseball gained during his reporting on the sport over the last sixty years. And it is these first-hand observations, along with a sincere love for baseball, which make this book a worthwhile read.

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Kelley, Brent. *Baseball's Biggest Blunder: The Bonus Rule of 1953–1957*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997. Pp. 232. \$38.50 cb.

What do Don Kaiser and Kenny Kuhn have in common with Sandy Koufax and Harmon Killebrew? Not much beyond the first letter of their last name, it would seem. Oh yes, Kaiser and Koufax were pitchers, two of the minor differences being career strikeout numbers of 108 and 2,396 respectively (en route to 6 and 165 victories respectively). And Kuhn and Killebrew were infielders, two of the minor differences being home run totals of 0 and 573 on at-bats of 81 and 8,147 (need I add respectively?). But one overriding similarity—and two more notes of alliteration—remain. All four were “bonus babies,” making all four co-conspirators in what Brent Kelley deems to have been “baseball’s biggest blunder.”

This was baseball’s *biggest* blunder? In all probability, such was not even the case as of the mid-1950s. And certainly such is not the case as of the late 1990s. Has Kelley (whose vocation is veterinary medicine and whose avocation is baseball history) forgotten the multiple strikes of recent decades and the multiple fiascos surrounding the events, not to mention the canceled events, of the seasons (?) of 1994 and 1995?

In the cases of Messrs. Koufax and Killebrew, the “bonus baby” rule proved to be anything but disastrous. And in the cases of Kaiser and Kuhn it may have given them a taste of the big leagues they might not otherwise have ever experienced. Who knows? In fact, if his history of the bonus rule proves anything, it’s that judging baseball talent is a crapshoot, albeit sometimes a very expensive one.

Injuries, of course, cannot be predicted. Eighteen-year-old Bob (“Hawk”) Taylor was a “can’t miss” catcher signed by the pennant-bound Milwaukee Braves in 1957. Only twice in eleven injury-riddled major league seasons did he have as many as 100 at bats—and most of those as a pinch hitter. In fact, he was playing that role on August 17, 1966, when he earned a brief footnote in baseball history by hitting the first pinch hit grand slam in New York Met history.

Most of the rest of the “bonus babies” played (or did not play) without Taylor’s recurring excuse. Sooner rather than later, they retired—minus even his minor claim to fame. Lacking the talent or the temperament, they took the money and spent the requisite two years somewhere on a big league bench before finding more productive, if more obscure, lines of work. Kelley hints that many of these prospects might have had solid big league

careers had they not been prematurely consigned to a big league roster. Therein lies much of the “bonus baby” controversy, part of the rationale for this book.

Of course bonuses were paid to players before 1953. The Paul Pettit story comes to mind and draws Kelley’s notice. Signed by the Pirates for \$100,000 in 1950, he developed arm trouble and finished with a record of 1–2 over parts of two seasons. Perhaps because of the Pettit story, baseball’s oft-blundering hierarchy sought to rein in bonus payments (which were seldom doled out in lump sums) by requiring that prospects signed for over \$4,000 serve two-year sentences with the big club before they could be dispatched to the minors. That rule, which remained in effect between 1953 and 1957, provides the time frame and story line for this book.

Though Kelley tries hard to make that general story a compelling one, he was forced to include too many little stories—and some contradictory evidence—along the way. This does not constitute a blunder on his part. Instead, it is the inevitable result of innumerable subplots among what seems to be a minority of “bonus babies” who would do the same thing all over again and a probable majority of often neglected, mercilessly taunted, generally resented, rapidly rust-laden, and otherwise abused “bonus babies” who would not.

Still, Kelley has done his homework. This is revealed by his knowledge of the ever-changing bonus rules, his interviews with the “babies” who sat and their reflections on managers and general managers who served as their sitters, his statistics on their performances (or lack thereof), and his report card on the performance (or luck thereof) of teams who entered what was then largely a day care baby-sitting business. At the top of his American League card are the Detroit Tigers (with not just Al Kaline, but the serviceable Reno Bertoia, Steve Boros and George Thomas) and the Washington Senators (for whom Killebrew was one of just three signed and delivered babies). At the bottom stand the New York Yankees. (Does anyone remember Frank Leja?) Leading the National League is Brooklyn, whose single “baby” was that fellow named Koufax. The cellar-dwelling Phillies doubled the Dodger total, but at last report pitcher Tom Qualters’s victory total is still zero and catcher Mack Burk has had no more than his original two at bats in his major league career.

In all, 59 “bonus babies” eagerly signed—and mostly sat—between 1953 and 1957. Among them are three Hall of Famers (Koufax, Killebrew and Kaline) and the more-than-credible likes of Clete Boyer, Mike McCormick, Dick Schofield, and Lindy McDaniel. Not a bad batting average for this chancy business. And the controversial “bonus rule” did reduce spending—for a time. As Kelley notes, an estimated \$6 million was paid out in post “rule” bonuses in 1958 alone, compared to approximately \$5 million over the course of the previous decade.

Every dime of that bonus money was paid out to prospects who had something else in common as well: every one of them was white. In a chapter titled “Who Wasn’t a Bonus Baby,” Kelley points out that between 1953 and 1957 not a single bonus dollar was given to a minority prospect. And that may have been the biggest blunder of this entire story, a story which, in the end, rates little more than a blip on the ever more crowded chart of all-time, off-field baseball blunders.

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