

HAYS, HOBE. *Take Two and Hit to Right: Golden Days on the Semi-Pro Diamond*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Pp. 239. Illustrated. Appendix. \$14.00 pb.

As an avid reader of baseball writing for over four decades, I have come to the point where it is difficult to imagine baseball literature declining to any lower point than it had in the 1990s. Most of baseball's worthwhile historical subjects had already been-written and rewritten-to exhaustion prior to the last decade; the game's literature of the 1990s thus has all too often consisted of more rehashes, endless entries from the "baseball as the meaning of life" school of writing, or topics so obscure as to suggest that there must be some readers for whom no baseball subject can possibly be too trivial.

I opened *Take Two and Hit to Right* expecting to encounter some of this current-day baseball "literature", but instead found a well-written book that is not only a baseball story, but a picture of 1950s small-town America. *Take Two and Hit to Right* tells us of the author's summers of playing top-level semi-professional baseball in Nebraska; much like Pat Jordan's *A False Spring*, it also turns out to be a tale of young adulthood, ending with the message that nothing ever stays the same.

The author, Hobe Hays, grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and then served two years in the US Navy during World War II. Always a good second baseman, Hays began to play semi-pro baseball in 1946 after his discharge. With the help of the G.I. Bill, that same fall he began attending the University of Nebraska to study art, and soon took his place as a regular on a varsity baseball team that eventually won two conference championships during his collegiate career.

The state of Nebraska had long been a hot-bed of semi-professional small-town baseball, but in the years after World War II the competition between the small communities rapidly escalated into what the author calls "the Golden Age of Nebraska semi-pro baseball" (37). After the war the state featured three top-flight semi-pro leagues, and in 1948 the author found himself, along with some other imported help, ready to play for the McCook Cats of the six-team Nebraska Independent League (NIL).

After the McCook team had struggled through last place finishes in 1946 and 1947, the town merchants and farmers banded together to raise enough money to hire "the kind of team that couldn't lose very often" (38). Until 1948 most NIL teams had been made up primarily of local players, but soon the rosters began to include ex-professional ballplayers and veteran college players.

McCook's efforts paid off with the league championship in 1948, but by the following spring nearly every town in the NIL had joined in the bidding wars for outside ballplayers. The Nebraska Independent League was transformed into a top-flight semi-pro circuit that easily was the equal of lower level minor league baseball; with the top players jumping from team to team each year, such a level of parity resulted that from 1948 to 1953 five different towns won regular-season NIL titles.

The author describes the NIL as a league of "former outstanding minor leaguers, who drift from here to there, who still could hit and field even if they had lost a step" (62). For some of the biggest games, the more aggressive towns would even import current professional players to boost their lineups. But ultimately the bidding wars

escalated beyond what these small towns could afford, and the NIL finally folded after the 1955 season.

Hays does a good job of taking us along on his travels around the league, as he tells us much about the rural towns, the players and the fans that made up the NIL. A summer job was part of the deal for each player, and Hays had the good fortune to be a writer for the local newspaper, which brought him into close contact with many of the local townspeople. But, at the age of 27, Hays finally decided to get on with his life after playing six summers in the NIL, at the end of the 1953 season he retired from baseball to pursue his career as an artist. *Take Two and Hit to Right* never tries to represent itself as a serious history of semi-professional baseball in Nebraska. Instead, it brings us a good baseball story and a nice tale of small town America in a much simpler time.

—RAY SCHMIDT  
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PIERSALL, JIM, AND AL HIRSHBERG. *Fear Strikes Out: The Jim Piersall Story*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Pp. 224. \$11.50 pb.

MANTLE, MICKEY, AND ROBERT W. CREAMER. *The Quality of Courage: Heroes In and Out of Baseball*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Pp. 185. \$9.95 pb.

Many Americans of the 1950s found ready heroes in the baseball stars of the era. The University of Nebraska Press has re-issued these books of baseball heroism in the tradition of John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*. These stories are part of a genre a generation removed from the revealing, highly critical, tell-all sport stories that have inundated bookstores since Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*. With the help of Al Hirshberg, Jimmy Piersall tells the story of his own mental breakdown and subsequent recovery during the 1952 season while playing for the Boston Red Sox. Mantle describes the attributes he finds heroic as he has seen them manifested in the people he has known.

The sexism in sport was not apparent to either of these authors. Both of these narratives reaffirm a masculine identity that is strong, courageous, hard working, and autonomous. Both of these books affirm sport as the exclusive domain of men. Mantle tells twenty-two stories of courage, which includes a story of a little boy facing the fear of the barber, and he ignores women altogether. The role of women as revealed in Piersall's book is strictly domestic.

Piersall's narrative began in his childhood. As a child he had to cope with the burden of his mother's psychiatric disorder and his father's heart disease. His overwhelming sense of responsibility at such a young age caused numerous anxieties, which eventually led to acute paranoia, culminating in a complete mental breakdown. The road back was a bumpy one, including encounters with cruel and intolerant fans. His story is not only one of courage, but also a story of tolerance, understanding, and forgiveness. Piersall found most people sympathetic and supportive. His final act of courage was to tell his story.

For Mantle, baseball provided a proving ground through which a person's courage could be tested. Courage was acted out in many situations, like when Freddie Fitzsimmons