

ABRAMS, ROGER I. *The Money Pitch: Baseball, Free Agency, and Salary Arbitration*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 218. Illustrated. Bibliography, index. \$27.50 pb.

Ten years ago, commissioner Fay Vincent took a long look at the economic health of the game and concluded, "Baseball is poised for a catastrophe and it might not be far off." Although Vincent's prediction seemed plausible during the Great Strike of 1994, the game's rebound in 1998 sparked by the Sammy Sosa-Mark McGwire home run duel has resulted in the game enjoying arguably its best of times. Yet a heavy dose of doom and gloom, reminiscent of Vincent's warning, is constantly being fed to the American public. The more baseball thrives, the more its critics predict terrible futures. Within the past year such noteworthy figures as journalist Bob Costas, political pundit George Will, and economist Andrew Zimbalist have weighed in with varied observations spinning off of the time-honored theme that the national pastime needs a massive overhaul. At the heart of these opinions are to be found the interrelated issues of escalating salaries and the disparity in income between the major market and small market teams.

Unfortunately attorney Roger Abrams does not directly address such larger questions, and so the impact of his book is much less than it might have been. Nonetheless, his detailed explanation of how the contemporary salary system works is a useful book and should be placed beside his *Legal Bases: Baseball and the Law* on the bookshelf of serious students of the game. Abrams states that his intent is to make sense of the complex salary issue of modern baseball for "the average fan," and he brings to this task impressive credentials as Dean of the Northwestern University School of Law. Of special note, he has served as arbiter in several major salary standoffs.

When free agency and arbitration replaced the Reserve Clause in 1976, it was widely predicted that a few wealthy teams would soon horde all of the top players and thereby destroy the competitive balance of the two major leagues. Although all the participants in the World Series following the debacle of 1994 have ranked in the top 50% of salaries, the logic that pennants would naturally follow the money has not necessarily been borne out. Consider the plight of three teams: the Chicago Cubs, Los Angeles Dodgers, and Baltimore Orioles. These teams, and many others over the years, have demonstrated that inept management can overcome the advantages of vast financial resources and produce disappointing, if not abysmal, teams. Significantly, in the quarter century since the end of the Reserve Clause, twenty teams (ten from each league) have won a pennant at least once, and fifteen different teams have captured the World Series. Through 1999 no team has won the World Series more than twice in a row. Despite the seemingly bottomless pot of money he is willing to draw upon to field a championship team, media mogul Ted Turner's Atlanta Braves have earned him only one World Series ring in two decades to show for his largesse. Clearly, although they have major advantages, high-salaried teams are not automatically doomed to success.

During the first century of professional baseball, owners were able to systematically depress player salaries thanks to the Reserve Clause (except for two short-lived periods

when rival leagues competed for players). Nonetheless, player earnings for a five-month season ranged between four and eight times the annual earnings of the average American working man. Like today, only a few superstars earned the big bucks. Even the top salaries in the 1960s hovered around the \$100,000 figure; in 1976 the average salary in the major leagues was \$52,000, while many players received the \$12,000 minimum. By 1998 (the last year Abrams covers), the minimum major league salary had jumped to \$200,000 and the average salary, due to a relative handful of multi-million dollar contracts, stood at \$1,400,000, with a median income of \$437,000. In the quarter century since free agency and arbitration were introduced, major league salaries have jumped an astounding 2633%.

Abrams approaches his subject from the perspective of labor law. Some readers may conclude that his largely uncritical narrative may stem from the fees he collects as an arbitrator, although his narrative provides adequate evidence that he has been guided by his legal training and his faith in the efficiency of free economic markets. Simply put, "The collective bargaining agreement resolves the legal issues, and thus the salaries are perfectly legal. The free market determines the economic issues, and the factors of supply and demand command those salaries" (xix). Are such 1998 salaries as commanded by Gary Sheffield of the Los Angeles Dodgers (a hair under \$15 million), Mike Piazza of the New York Mets (\$13 million), Albert Belle of the Chicago White Sox (\$10 million), Greg Maddox of the Atlanta Braves (\$9.6 million) or Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants (not quite \$9 million) justified from either a business or ethical viewpoint? Or more recently, how can anyone justify as "fair" the \$12.4 million-per-year deal Ken Griffey, Jr. pried out of the "small market" Cincinnati Reds, the multi-year \$16 million contract issued to Atlanta's Chipper Jones, or the \$15 million, seven-year offer that the Dodgers used to lure pitcher Kevin Brown away from the San Diego Padres in December of 1998?

Abrams refuses to pursue the ethical or fairness issue, instead merely stating that these figures are a reflection of the marketplace and *ipso facto* justified. "I do not think that baseball players contribute as much to the national welfare as others in American society, yet few people are harmed by the salary levels of this very small cadre of high-priced talent" (xix). Will such salaries destroy baseball? Obviously not, given the rising market values of teams, rising attendance rates (over 2.2 million per team in 1998) despite hefty increases in ticket and concessions prices, and steadily increasing television and radio revenues. Abrams contends that baseball salaries, high or low, are the product of a complex economic and labor market in which management has to pay for the best talent in order to field competitive teams that put people in the seats. No one is holding a pistol to the heads of management, and their salary offers are merely the price of doing business. "The last time I checked," Abrams quotes New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner with approval, "we were still a democracy, a free-market system. We aren't Socialists in baseball" (18 1). Indeed not, although Abrams does concede that at times "the dynamics of the baseball salary system have caused otherwise sensible businessmen to make some irrational decisions" (xvi). Abrams provides a detailed analysis of how the salary system works, drawing upon his own arbitration experiences as well as many interviews and standard published sources. Although the enormous salaries paid to a handful of players attract the public's attention, owners largely follow a formula of balancing those few large ticket players with a substantial number paid the league minimum. One superstar may make 80 times the salary of several of his teammates.

The major game within the game of baseball is salary negotiations at the time an outstanding player becomes eligible for free agency. Then, Abrams says, “tricks, bluffs, and clever play are part of the game” (xiv). Free agency has made the salary negotiating game all that more difficult for owners, who no longer bargain from a position of absolute power. The introduction of agents, a natural evolutionary result of the advent of free agency and arbitration, has formalized and made more adversarial the relationship between owner and player. Worse, from a management perspective, even the best of players might go in the tank once a huge salary has been negotiated—any megasized contract is a calculated gamble that may or may not pay off. The system does not always achieve “fairness,” Abrams concludes, but it is “the result of an efficient exchange between the owner and his players” (44).

Despite his stated intent, Abrams has not provided an easy read, especially when he delves into complex analysis using strategic planning, auction theory, and game theory. His approach is often anecdotal, if not episodic, and the absence of a strong chronological framework is unfortunate. Even the logic of the chapter sequence is not readily apparent, and curious distracting digressions are interjected into chapters. The book particularly suffers from the absence of a controlling central thesis. His narrative, in the end, is not blessed with the interpretive insights of the professional historian, or the statistical analysis of the social scientist. Journalists will wince at his lackluster prose. The lengthy chapter that creates a fictional negotiation between the New York Knights and Roy Hobbs (the central figure in Bernard Malamud’s novel *The Natural*) provides insights into the process, but it is also a major distraction because it is mere speculation. That said, *The Money Pitch* provides the best word to date on this complex issue and should serve as a useful reference work for years to come.

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BRASHLER, WILLIAM. *Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000. Pp. xiv + 193. Illustrated. Index. \$14.95 pb.

This reprint is still an important book for anyone interested in the career of this great catcher. Though originally published in 1978, much of what the author has to say has not been recaptured in other works. Brashler states in his introduction that he is not attempting to right a wrong by writing this book because that can never be done. Instead, he is simply trying to tell the reader about Gibson—the man and the ball player. He wants to explain his achievements in a different era while also illuminating who Josh Gibson was. Brashler accomplishes his goal in a variety of ways. He retells many of the great stories of Gibson’s mammoth home runs, but also includes stories from Sam Bankhead, Jimmie Crutchfield, and others who knew Josh well.

Brashler tries to break down some of the myths that surround Gibson’s career. This is not done to lessen the greatness of the catcher, but instead to show how some of these stories came about. Brashler wants to be as accurate and objective as possible, but ac-