

Baseball As America: Seeing Ourselves through Our National Game

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"Baseball As America: Seeing Ourselves through Our National Game"

The Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60605

Internet: summary of exhibition and travel schedule at <<http://baseballasamerica.org/>> [Feb. 11, 2004]

Early in the 1983 season, the Chicago Cubs manager Lee Elia lashed out at the Wrigley Field fans who daily berated his struggling team:

I'll tell you one fuckin' thing, I hope we get fuckin' hotter than shit, just to stuff it up them 3,000 fuckin' people that show up every fuckin' day. Because if they're the real Chicago fuckin' fans they can kiss my ass right downtown. . . . The motherfuckers don't even work. That's why they're out at the fuckin' game. They oughta to go out and get a fuckin' job and find out what it's like to go out and earn a fuckin' living. Eighty-five percent of the fuckin' world is working. The other fifteen come out here. It's a fuckin' playground for the cocksuckers.'

It should come as no surprise that Elia's words do not appear in "Baseball As America: Seeing Ourselves through our National Game," a traveling exhibit assembled by the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum and financed by the accounting firm Ernst & Young.

But Jacques Barzun's do: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball," declared the Columbia historian half a century ago. What did he mean? It sounds good, gives sports historians something to quote. But is baseball really a clearer window on America than, say, fashion, or cars, or popular music? Maybe what is most distinctive about baseball is how often we are assured of its distinctiveness, how frequently pundits—many of whom know little about the game—tell us that it is emblematic of America. In any event, I am having a difficult time reconciling Elia's words with Barzun's.

Before one enters the exhibit space itself, "Baseball As America" greets the visitor with a video assault designed to convince us of the game's cultural importance. Set against some great film clips, a litany of voices—from academics to literati to politicians—asserts baseball's

centrality. It feels like Ken Burns in overdrive. Yet every one of these voices is a broken-bat dribbler compared to the solid wock of Elia's clean shot. Or to put it more precisely, these syrupy, portentous, and pretentious mouthings are all metanarratives, far removed from the gritty reality of Elia's world.

The exhibit's oppressive self-importance continues inside. "Baseball As America" is divided into several sections. The first is titled "Our National Spirit." Here the exhibit wants it both ways. The words on the walls and the objects in the cases give some great examples of baseball's connections to American nationalism over more than one hundred years. We see images of players in their soldiers' outfits and program covers designed with wartime imagery. But the exhibit creators are not so much intent on exploring sport and patriotism as exploiting it. American flags are everywhere; a video shows presidents throwing out first pitches as the national anthem plays loudly in the background. And there is, of course, the now obligatory invocation of 9/11, where words and objects explain how baseball saved us in our darkest hour of emotional need. It all feels more than a little self-serving.

The next section is called "Ideals and Injustice," in which, I am sure the exhibit developers believe, baseball honestly confronts its history of sexism and racism. Sort of. We do learn of the game's segregation at the end of Reconstruction and the rise of the various Negro leagues. And we see wonderful images of women on nineteenth-century collegiate nines and the World War II era's All-American Girl's Baseball League teams. But once again, the dominant tone is triumphant. Either the past is reduced to something we feel superior to ("Thank God we don't have to live in that benighted era"), or baseball steps in to help us transcend our problems. Thus, we get the voices of Japanese Americans confined to internment camps telling us how much playing the game meant to them. Similarly, in order to reveal Hank Aaron's ordeal as he made his way towards breaking Babe Ruth's all-time home run record, we are presented with two fan letters, one scrawled by a semiliterate racist threatening Aaron, the other beautifully typed and of recent vintage telling the ballplayer that the writer's newborn son was Aaron's namesake. The effect is to marginalize racism to a dark corner of the past when Neanderthals crawled the earth, replacing it with the liberal ideal of free and equal competition. Baseball, the exhibit implies, did not always fulfill its democratic potential, but it was always there, and now we have reached the Promised Land.

The exhibit is at its best when it is least concerned with its subject's importance. In the section called "Rooting for the Team," we see some great objects—the San Diego Chicken as well as the painting "Night Game, 1979" by that great artist of working-class life, Ralph Fasanella. The next section, "Baseball and Opportunity," is filled with goods, along with advertisements for cereal, cigarettes, cars. In one case is a tiny 1909 Honus Wagner baseball card, purportedly the most valuable card in existence. So few were produced because Wagner forced the manufacturer to stop printing them when he learned that the cards were used to promote tobacco consumption. All of these sporting goods, declares one of the labels, creates a market that engenders a "communion of fans with the game." The contradiction here is a wonder to behold—the exhibit creators invoke the religious metaphor of communion to describe marketplace transactions, whereas Honus Wagner had too much conscience, too much of a sense of himself as a role model, to push tobacco on children.

And on it goes. "Common Culture" instructs us on how the language of baseball pervades life. But instead of invoking the poetry of Lee Elia, or of Roger Kahn's famous head counselor Charlie Dressen, or even Mark Harris's sanitized cadences, we get the banal kinds of phrases that Crash Davis told Nuke LaLoosh to say in an interview. Also in this section is Norman Rockwell's famous painting of the umpires detecting those first drops of rain, a video of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello's "Whose on First" routine, the sounds of Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days," and one of the most pretentious and embarrassing baseball scenes ever filmed, James Earl Jones's sermon in *Field of Dreams* on how the game made America great. "Invention and Ingenuity" focuses on the technology and physics of baseball—livelier balls, better bats, safer catcher's gear—while "The Competitive Edge" emphasizes how humans continually adapt to the game with new training techniques, advanced knowledge of physiology, and improved treatment for player injuries.

Why do I feel like I was being sold a bill of goods? Because I was. As is typical today, everything was for sale in the last section of the exhibit, not just books and prints but the sorts of cheap fan gear available at stores near any stadium. I saw the exhibit, after all, at Chicago's Field Museum, formerly the Grande Dame of the city's cultural institutions, now a much more promiscuous lady, whose exhibit space is readily available to the highest bidder, regardless of content.

But "Baseball As America" is selling much more than sporting goods. Along with each ticket comes a particular view of American life, one pervasive in this oppressively conservative twenty-first century. It makes perfect sense that images of our current president, a former team owner, appears three times in the opening display. All of his grand themes—shameless nationalism, the holiness of markets, progress through technology, the beneficence of competition, and a prissiness that passes for "family values"—are cut from the same ideological cloth as the exhibit. And all of it is packaged as good wholesome fun, with an occasional grudging acknowledgment that, yes, in the past there have been racial, labor, and substance abuse problems.

Which brings us back to Lee Elia. His rant represents what might be called the savage side of baseball. No banal homilies here, just the blistering words and sharp cadences that give life to the game. More than any of our sports, baseball is about language. Each inning, each game, each season is a story, and some fine novelists have captured baseball's narrative art. The game is also about how words sound—think of the voices of such great artists as Red Barber, Ernie Harwell, and Vin Scully, but also of the conversations of strangers in a bar or at the ballpark. More, Elia's words were spoken in defense of ballplayers who live in a gritty world of bluster and courage, of fierce will and exquisite skill. Because "Baseball As America" is so respectful, we never get a glimpse of that players' world, of who they are and where they come from. They become icons, not men. Put another way, by focusing on the consumers' perspective, the exhibit makes it hard to see the game's producers. Above all, "Baseball As America" is cloyingly elegiac. Nostalgia, Yogi Berra allegedly said, is not what it used to be. Certainly that is true of "Baseball As America." Instead of a full gallery evoking the complexity and richness of our great national pastime, we get a sentimental little portrait.



*See <<http://quote.webcircle.com/cgi-bin/features.cgi?idFeature=4>> [11 February 2004].