

Baseball: Beyond the Field of Dreams

Braham Dabscheck
School of Industrial Relations
University of New South Wales

Andrew Zimbalist, *Baseball and Billions*. **Basic Books**, New York, 1992. pp. xviii + 270. \$US20.

John Helyar, *Lords of the Realm: The Real History of Baseball*. **Ballantine Books**, New York, 1995. pp. viii + 632. \$US6.99 (paper).

In the baseball movie *Field of Dreams* the voice says ‘Build it, they will come’. Early in the film this translates into constructing a baseball diamond in the middle of cornfields, to enable players in the after-life, to return to earth and (re)play the good old game of baseball. By the film’s end, fans are heading to the cornfield diamond to watch these mythical players play ball. ‘Build it, they will come’.

Field of Dreams is a cinematic depiction of the hold that baseball has on the United States of America—of an activity which is said to be the national pastime. While there is more to the film than this *Field of Dreams*, it is based on the proposition that if you put on a game of baseball Americans will part with their hard earned cash to watch it. Or to stretch the point further, no matter what happens concerning the game’s organisation, and the hi-jinks and shenanigans associated with the game’s production, Americans will still watch and follow baseball. Americans love baseball. ‘Build it, they will come’.

In recent years American baseball, or more correctly Major League Baseball, has been embroiled in controversy after controversy. The opening sentence of Andrew Zimbalist’s Introduction in *Baseball and Billions* is a February 1991 quote from former baseball commissioner, Fay Vincent, that ‘Baseball is poised for a catastrophe and it might not be far off’ (p. xviii). Well, Vincent was certainly headed for a catastrophe—within a few years he was deposed as baseball’s commissioner. In the middle of the 1994 season—a season which all commentators agreed saw the most enthralling play in decades—owners and players decided

to bring proceedings to a halt over the former's desire to institute a salary cap. The work stoppage lasted 234 days.

These two books are designed to investigate the catastrophe that is the business of American baseball. Zimbalist's *Baseball and Billions* was published in 1992. It was written in response to a question by his eleven-year-old son to explain why owners locked out players during the 1990 season. Zimbalist, an expert in comparative economic systems and development economics, turned his hand to baseball economics. In the preface Zimbalist stated that 'anyone who has tried to inquire into the business of baseball knows that the industry is run like covert operations at the CIA, or perhaps as the CIA would like them to be run. Almost all the franchises are privately held and do not publicly issue income statements or other financial reports. One must dig, scrape or beg for information.' He went on to say that 'one important exception to this generalisation is that the Players' Association was very open and helpful to me' (pp. x, xi).

John Heylar's *Lords of the Realm: The Real History of Baseball* was published in 1995—in the middle of the baseball stoppage. In his acknowledgments he says his motivation for writing was to inquire into 'Why was the grace of the game between the lines so precisely matched by the gracelessness of its off-field conduct?' Heylar, being a journalist, was more able to gain access to baseball's powers that be, than Zimbalist. *Lords of the Realm* is mainly based on interviews with over 200 people, many of whom were interviewed on multiple occasions (pp. vi + vii).

Whereas Zimbalist's book is based on hard data that is bread-and-butter to the economist—numbers, documents and extensive primary and secondary sources—Heylar mainly relies on the oral tradition. The two books combined provide illuminating insights into American baseball.

Baseball and Billions is organised in the fashion that one would expect from an economist—it examines various markets which constitute the baseball industry. After an introductory historical chapter, which introduces readers to various issues to be explored, he examines the structure and ownership of clubs, the role of the baseball commissioner, franchise finances, the labour market and players' earnings, minor leagues and pay for such players, baseball's relationship with cities and the media—especially broadcasting rights—and presents policy recommendations.

Zimbalist provides a wealth of statistical data concerning various financial aspects of baseball. His basic message is baseball's problems are self-inflicted, stemming from the greed and avarice of owners. Baseball is a monopoly which abuses its power. In 1922 the Supreme Court granted baseball an exemption from the *Sherman Antitrust Act* of 1890. This decision was upheld in 1953 and again in 1972. On both occasions the Supreme Court said if the 1922 decision was anomalous it was up to Congress to rectify this by legislation. Congress has always found other things to do. Because of their 'legal' monopoly baseball has been able to restrict the supply of major league teams across the continent, and use the threat of moving a franchise elsewhere, to extract city and state tax dollars to finance stadia and operations.

For Zimbalist the solution to this is a combination of ending the antitrust exemption and creating a Federal regulatory body to oversee the affairs of baseball. This latter proposal has as much chance of success as America adopting cricket as its major summer sport. Zimbalist also advocates a substantial expansion in the number of Major League franchises, coupled with a rationalisation of minor league teams. This would provide more fans with access to Major League play, and additional employment (at higher salaries) for more players. He also wishes to ensure that major games in the baseball calendar are provided on free to air television.

With the exception of minor league baseball Helyar examines the same period and same issues as Zimbalist. The uniqueness, if not brilliance of his book, is how he employs his journalist skills and attendant interviews to take readers into the various discussions, meetings and conferences which have occurred in baseball. If he does not provide almost verbatim reports of meetings, he presents recollections of discussions between protagonists, concerning the various times of high dudgeon experienced by baseball over the last thirty years.

While Helyar is seemingly critical of all concerned, *Lords of the Realm: The Real History of Baseball* is a story of unrelenting greed and double-dealing on the part of owners, or whom he refers to as 'Lords of the Realm'. In contrast to the Major League Baseball Players' Association, which has essentially had stable leadership over the last three decades in the form of Marvin Miller followed by Don Fehr, the Lords have been nothing short of a rabble. Not only have there been divisions between National and American league franchises, there have also been disputes

between the 'haves' (big-city teams with high gates and high pay and cable television revenues) and 'have-nots' (small-city teams). In addition, clubs have clashed with various baseball commissioners and various persons in the Player Relations Committee responsible for negotiation with the Players' Association. Moreover, with the buying and selling of franchises baseball has had a continual influx of self-made men (and the odd women) who have found in baseball the path to immortality. More often than not these self-made men have made their fortunes *sans* unions, or in union busting, and have not been sanguine about having to deal with a cohesive and well-lead players' body.

It is a truism of sport that a unified team will defeat a disunited team. This dictum certainly applies to baseball's industrial relations in the last thirty years. In a sense *The Real History of Baseball* is how the Major League Baseball Players' Association has lifted players from positions of virtual serfdom and helped provide them with substantial increases in income. At the time of writing the average income of players is \$US1.2 million per annum. Despite the huffing and puffing of the owners the players have stayed solid and (so far) won at every turn.

Moreover, given the inability of the owners to get on with each other is hardly surprising to report that they find it difficult to develop a relationship, short of protagonists before World War III, with the Major League Baseball Players' Association. At one stage Heylar quotes Marvin Miller who in a statement to his employers—that is players—said 'The owners ... are out to control themselves through you' (p. 237).

Near the end of *Lords of the Realm* Heylar stated that:

The Lords and the agents, the lawyers and the czars, had done their best to kill baseball. There was something about the national pastime that made the people in it behave badly. They were, perhaps, blinded by the light of what it represented—a glowing distillate of America. Men fought to control it as though they could own it. They wallowed in dubious battle, locked in ugly trench warfare for dominion over the green fields. The money poured into the game and men gorged and gorged over it—made damned fools of themselves over it.

He then goes on to say 'And the fans, ever forgiving were still there' (p. 590). Or as the voice said in *Field of Dreams* 'Build it, they will come'.