

Majoring on the Minors: Baseball in the Bush Leagues

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David Lamb, *Stolen Season: A Journey Through America and Baseball's Minor Leagues*. Warner Books, New York, 1991. pp. xiv + 283. paper.

Arthur T Johnson, *Minor League Baseball and Local Economic Development*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1995. pp. xvi + 273. \$US15.95 paper.

Richard Panek, *Waterloo Diamonds: A Midwestern Town and its Minor League Team*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995. pp. x + 373. \$US22.95.

Baseball, as we all know, has been the United States of America's most popular team sport. A game developed in the nineteenth century, to while away the summer months, baseball became regarded as America's national pastime. Most interest and writing on American baseball is concerned with the exploits, both on and off the field, of various players, teams, clubs, owners and officials associated with the operation of the major leagues. Income generated in the majors runs into billions of dollars annually, with players, at least in the last two decades, earning substantial salaries—in 1994 they averaged \$US1.2 million.

Below the majors there is another level of professional, or what is usually referred to as minor or bush league, baseball. In various smaller cities across the length and breadth of the United States teams have been formed which provide local communities with the chance to watch young hopefuls, and the odd fallen star, to display their talents. Traditionally, minor league teams have been controlled or owned by major league teams and used as a vehicle to train and groom young talent (for an earlier history of the minors see Robert Obojski, *Bush League: A Colorful, factual Account of Minor League Baseball from 1877 to the Present*, Macmillan, New York, 1975).

Immediately after World War II the minors attracted large crowds. In 1949, 448 teams in fifty-nine leagues achieved a combined attendance

of 42 million. In these years the majors made money on their minor league operations. With the televising the majors from the 1950s, the movement of major league teams into minor strongholds and the growth of interest in other leisure activities, witnessed a marked decline in attendance. By 1960 attendance had fallen to approximately ten million, and the number of leagues declined to twenty-two. For the next two decades spectator interest in the minors hovered around ten to twelve million, with further declines in the number of leagues.

The majors, tired of losing money, sold teams, or franchises, to independent operators in the 1970s. Notwithstanding this however, the majors supplied franchises with players, on-field managers, coaching staff and other support including income. The franchises were responsible for front office staff, promotions and such and entitled to income so generated. Given the lowly state of the minors their financial operation was subsidised by the majors. Such expenditure was seen as being necessary in the development and training of young players.

In the 1980s, and continuing into the 1990s, there occurred a marked transformation in the lot of the minors. Attendances have steadily grown, reaching twenty-seven million in 1992 (with nineteen leagues), and, in what can only be described as a dramatic increase in the value of franchises. Operations which originally sold for paltry amounts have increased in value to amounts ranging up to \$8 million. Aware of these changed circumstances, the majors, negotiated in 1990, or more correctly forced the minors to assume more financial responsibility for their own operations, thereby reducing levels of subsidisation (the majors still pay players' salaries). In addition, the minors have been required to improve the standard of playing fields and stadiums.

The fortunes of minor league baseball in this second golden age have been linked to improvements in stadium quality, in terms of both seating capacity and fan comfort. Such stadiums are erected and owned by local communities. Franchises have placed pressure on cities to fund improvements, or build new ones in more favourable locations. The minors have invariably maintained that baseball will be a boon to local economic development. They have used competition between cities and/or the threat to move elsewhere as a lever to extract improved stadiums from city hall. In the period 1987 to 1992 thirty-five franchises moved to new cities. Local communities and tax payers have found themselves subsidising the national pastime.

These three books highlight various issues associated with both the romance and reality of minor league baseball. David Lamb is a newspaper reporter who spends his time visiting and writing about the world's trouble spots. While sheltering from bomb blasts in Beirut he thought it would be nice to write about something more pleasant—like baseball. Some years later he decided to take a sabbatical and tour the minor leagues. He wanted to escape the harsh realities he encountered in his working life and revisit the innocence of his childhood when he lived and breathed baseball.

In his youth Lamb had been a fan of the Boston Braves, and was somewhat upset by their move to Milwaukee. Nonetheless, he religiously followed the fortunes of his favourite team and players. In 1955, at the age of fourteen, he wrote to the sports editor of the *Milwaukee Journal* requesting that he could write pieces on the Braves 'through teen-age eyes'. The editor agreed and throughout 1955 he wrote a regular column. A Milwaukee couple funded a trip for him to visit the city and meet the players he wrote about. At the season's end the editor terminated his services to ensure that he didn't get a 'swelled-head', and advised him to obtain a college degree.

In his tour of the minors in 1989 Lamb introduces the world of clubs with such wondrous names as the Chattanooga Lookouts, El Paso Diablos, Memphis Chicks, Miami Miracle, Erie Sailors, Asheville Tourists, Billings Mustangs, Wichita Wranglers, Zebulon Mudcats and (my favourite) Toledo Mud Hens. He is under no illusion that he is escaping reality, that his *Stolen Season* represents a re-charging of batteries.

In the process he ruminates on the changed nature of baseball, and America; of how people have lost the sense of community and common purpose they seemed to have in his youth. At times his writing borders on sentiments associated with the Depression writings of John Steinbeck. He sees in the minors a closer affiliation between players and fans than occurs in the majors with highly paid players. If nothing else, smaller stadiums in the minors enable fans to be close to the play, and the associated highs and lows experienced by players. His travels also enabled him to catch up with many Braves' players he wrote about, and followed, in his youth. He was able to speak one-to-one with stars he had previously idolised.

Lamb is fully aware of the cut-throat nature of the life of minor league players. Their lot is one of either up or out. Moreover, failure may

lead to a one-way ticket to skid-row, while others may find a career in the minors as a manager or coach. Lamb contrasts former players who still love baseball, and those that could not care less if they never saw another game. *Stolen Season* explores the bond between fans and the game and aspects of life in small town America.

In Minor League Baseball and Local Economic Development Arthur Johnson explores the political economy of local communities and cities improving and/or building new stadiums to keep or attract minor league franchises. A minor league baseball team may be viewed as the means to enhance economic growth and promote civic pride. The book is mainly organised around fifteen case studies of various communities grappling with issues associated with the use of public funds to finance private pursuits.

Johnson maintains that the benefits associated with stadium construction for local communities are minimal to non-existent, or negative, in the sense of returns being less than outlays. Such decisions should be based on a cost-benefit analysis, with consideration of the opportunity cost (the next best alternative) of using such funds. A methodological basis for conducting such evaluations is provided in a case study on Fort Wayne, Indiana written by Mark Rosentraub and David Swindell (five of the case studies were conducted by others, and one jointly with another author). Decisions concerning baseball stadiums are linked to broader literature concerned with economic geography and local and regional development.

Insofar that communities find themselves involved in such exercises Johnson highlights the need for a 'sports development strategy'. The refurbishment, construction and location of stadiums needs to be linked to an overall development strategy. Local communities, Johnson argues, need to focus on the use of the stadium as a community resource, not just a place for the playing of baseball during warmer months. Moreover, they need to ensure that they are not left out of pocket following such exercises. The major strength of Johnson's book is how he clearly explains the three-way relationship between local communities, minor league and major league baseball.

Richard Panek's *Waterloo Diamonds* provides an extensive case study of issues similar to those canvassed by Johnson. Panek, a journalist, spent 1992 in Waterloo, Iowa gathering information on the town and its minor league team, the Diamonds. Waterloo is a town in decline with an

eroding tax base and a city struggling to maintain even a minimum level of services. The Diamonds are under pressure from the majors—they are affiliated to the San Diego Padres—to upgrade their stadium. The team's owners, a group of aging civic-minded persons, are determined to keep the Diamonds in Waterloo. Panek documents in agonising detail the inevitable sale of the franchise and its movement out of Waterloo. Unable to convince the city to allocate necessary funds, or to find alternative sources of funding, and facing the major's deadline the owners find that they have little choice but to sell.

Waterloo Diamonds takes readers into the small 'p' politics of baseball, of the minors and local politics. More than anything it provides a stark portrayal of a city in decline and struggles between rival groups over an ever-diminishing pie.

These three books provide perspectives on small town, community-based politics. In examining minor league baseball they highlight issues associated with the use of public funds for the benefit of private interests. The issues raised are of interest to both government and sporting officials who are involved in the production of modern sport.