

Rounding the bases

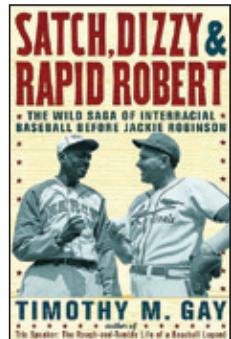
New books celebrate baseball's storied past

FEATURE BY JOHN C. WILLIAMS

Baseball is sick of scandal, and the publishing world seems to know it. This year we have no A-Rod exposé, no Daryl Strawberry confessional, no Pete Rose complaining about his prison without bars. Instead, authors have turned to the stalwarts of baseball history. Several big stars, like Roger Maris (see sidebar), get major biographies. Other titles avoid current headlines to revel in the joy of the game itself. Judging from the books we've seen so far, baseball literature is all the better for the shift.

Breaking down barriers

Exemplary of this year's glance to the past is *Satch, Dizzy & Rapid Robert: The Wild Saga of Interracial Baseball Before Jackie Robinson* (Simon & Schuster, \$26, 368 pages, ISBN 9781416547983). Author Timothy M. Gay, who has previously breathed life into dead-ball star Tris Speaker, looks to an aspect of the game almost unthinkable today: a system in which major league stars not only arranged their own for-profit exhibition tours, but sometimes did so *while the World Series was being played*. More importantly, these

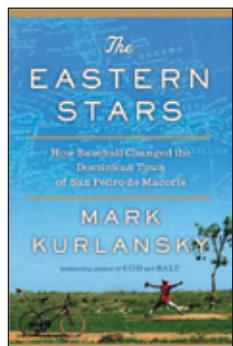


games broke the great taboo. Whites not only competed against blacks, but occasionally played with them on the same team. (Not surprisingly, these barnstormers generally avoided the South.) This setup didn't mean equality—black players suffered substandard accommodations, and the quality of the teams often depended on how much organizers were able to pay. Nevertheless,

the games proved that blacks could take on whites any day, not a mainstream concept at the time. Gay relies mainly on newspaper sources—many of the participants are dead—and his narrative can grow tedious when it resorts to a blow-by-blow of every game on a particular tour. But baseball completists will be thrilled, as will anyone interested in the exploits of the great Satchel Paige, daffy Dizzy Dean, the troubling Bob Feller and a host of Negro League stars born a few decades too early.

The new face of baseball

Mark Kurlansky examines a different sort of amateur baseball in *The Eastern Stars* (Riverhead, \$25.95, 288 pages, ISBN 9781594487507).



Kurlansky is best known for his histories *Cod* and *Salt*, and he hints at a similar single-commodity approach by showing how the sugar industry helped turn the small Dominican town of San Pedro de Macorís into a baseball factory that has produced 79 major leaguers. For

many years, chopping sugarcane by hand was about the only thing the town's people could do for a living; baseball eventually provided a second option. But the game turned out to be a curse as much as a blessing. After the major leagues opened to Dominican players, big-league dollars became a mirage that lured many. (Though 79 players may seem like a lot from a small town, even more aspired to make it.) If a player was lucky, he might get a decent signing bonus and a trip to the States before being summarily released back to a life of hard work; if he was entrepreneurial, he might become a *buscón*, a talent scout who takes a fat chunk of his teenage prodigy's signing bonus.

Hardcore baseball fans should note that the book is not really aimed at them. Though it is peppered with obscure anecdotes of Dominican stars, it also informs us that a grand slam is a homer with the bases loaded; most confounding is its assertion that Detroit Tigers reliever José Valverde won back-to-back National League MVP awards in 2007 and 2008. (He finished 14th in MVP voting in 2007 and 24th in 2008.) These flaws aside, Kurlansky does a wonderful job bringing to life a side of baseball—and indeed, an entire country—that few Americans consider while watching the newest Dominican star dominate the major leagues.

Secrets of the game

From the pathos of Dominican baseball we descend into the cesspool of a major league player's daily life, depicted with verve in *The Baseball Codes* (Pantheon, \$25, 304 pages, ISBN 9780375424694) by Jason Turbow

and Michael Duca. How does a pitcher know when to hit a batter? How does a runner know when it's acceptable to bulldog the catcher? Should a ballplayer bring his wife to the bar at the team's hotel? The answers help us understand the unwritten rules of the game, the code that all players are expected to learn and abide by. Turbow has a little problem with his task: One key tenet of the code is that players do not talk to the media about it. But he gets around this by providing ample anecdotal evidence, gathered from game accounts and the words of players who have loosened their tongues over the years. The result is a delightfully profane work that is awfully fun to read. (The reader should be prepared to confront this question: Is there any difference between a chickenshit play, a horseshit play and a bullshit play?) In contrast to common sepia-toned depictions of baseball's past, this book reminds us that players were mortal way back when: Lou Gehrig, for example, only kept his famous consecutive-game streak alive because Yankees management called a sunny-day rainout when Gehrig was home with the flu. But the code's popularity has recently waned, a fact Turbow blames on inflated salaries and egos. Could it be that the entire steroid era was enabled by unwritten rules that allow cheating until you're caught and keep clubhouse happenings in the clubhouse?

A dream lineup

Finally, we're back in the bleachers for *Top of the Order* (Da Capo, \$15.95, 240 pages, ISBN 9780306818554), an anthology of 25 essays, each about a writer's favorite player. The book is a mixed bag, where success is linked to creativity of subject choice. (Do we really need another paean to Albert Pujols or Lou Gehrig?) One of the best essays is about someone whose stats you won't find in the major league record book: Yutaka Enatsu, the Japanese pitcher who struck out 401 batters in a single

season and who smoked 100 cigarettes every single day. Robert Whiting's essay portrays the pitcher as he was, without attempting to make the author part of the story. Most writers, though, assert a personal connection to the subject. Notable are Matt Taibbi, who pokes the sabermetricians with his love of their great pariah, Jim Rice, and Scott Raab, who tells of his heartbreaking bit role in

the suicide attempt of Tony Horton, an Indians first baseman who couldn't quite cut it in the bigs. Best of all is novelist Christopher Sorrentino's thoughtful piece on Dave Kingman, the mysterious masher who could do little but belt homers. Sorrentino remembers his father classifying every baseball player as "bush" or "class"—even the 114-win 1998 New York Yankees were "bush." But Kingman was neither: "Some people and things were just sui generis or ambiguous enough to wind up outside these two categories."

At their best, these books likewise defy categorization. Readers will find few ham-fisted depictions of heroes and villains here—just a love of the game and the people who play it. ♦

John C. Williams has written for the Oxford American, PopMatters and the Arkansas Times.

Story of a slugger

Great baseball biographies are best served by great subjects, but good writing doesn't hurt either; *Roger Maris: Baseball's Reluctant Hero* (Touchstone, \$26.99, 432 pages, ISBN 9781416589280) has both. Maris, who broke Babe Ruth's single-season home run record in 1961, emerges as a complex, inscrutable

individual, and co-authors Tom Clavin and Danny Peary never miss chances to account for the complications in his family life, including his humble origins in Minnesota and North Dakota and the squabbling among his Serbian and Croatian relatives. Maris was a youthful athlete of uncommon ability, and after turning down a college football scholarship, he signed with the Cleveland Indians and worked his way through their minor league chain. A solid hitter with

left-handed power, Maris was also an excellent outfielder with speed and a strong arm, and after joining the New York Yankees in 1960 he became a huge star, winning the American League MVP Award twice. Yet his noted assault on Ruth's record turned into a PR nightmare, due in part to his own taciturn ways and the obnoxious, at times simply vile cruelties of New York reporters, many of whom wanted more "show-biz" out of him or simply resented that his achievements overshadowed those of Gotham's Mickey Mantle. Maris the man ultimately comes off as an incredibly misunderstood jock, and his early death at age 51 from lymphoma poignantly caps off a tale that is equal parts professional determination and personal sadness. Yet the testimony gathered here from Maris' ball-playing colleagues also offers a portrait of a decent and well-respected individual who always played the game to the max. ♦

—MARTIN BRADY

