

Society for American Baseball Research

BIBLIOGRAPHY COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

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Comments from the Chair

Andy McCue

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After more than a year's work by F.X. Flinn, a cadre of SABR volunteers, and Daniel Levine of DMLCo., SABR's Content Management System is in operation. For those of you whose eyes are rolling at yet another vague and new term, the Content Management System allows Research Committees, Chapters, and other SABR groups to put the results of its research up on the SABR Web site and make it readily available to other SABR researchers.

Some of the Bibliography Committee's projects are already on the Web. The Baseball Index (TBI) continues to expand its role as a major tool for baseball research. Joe Murphy's *Index to SABR Publications*, updated after the 2003 SABR Convention with the two publications we received there, is also on the SABR Web site: www.sabr.org/sabr.cfm?a=cms,c,344,36,0

But there is much other work the Committee has done or is doing that also deserves its place on the Web. We developed 15 Research Guides that can help SABR members find such things as profiles in *Current Biography*. We have placed many, but not all, of the reviews that have appeared in our newsletter on the Web. We do not have all the back issues of *Current Baseball Publications* or the newsletter on the Web site.

I hope that someone will step forward and volunteer to coordinate these activities. Some electronic expertise, and the ownership of a scanner, is useful, but not mandatory. What is more necessary is persistence, judgment, and the willingness to learn. SABR can do most of the actual "electronic" parts of posting the material on the Web, but we need somebody capable of getting it ready to be posted. If anyone is interested, please contact me.

Another project I'd like to revive is creating indexes for important baseball books that were published without them. We've done dozens of them so far, including all of the Putnam team histories, which are being printed in the new Southern Illinois University Press editions of those books. This past quarter, Bob McConnell produced an index for Jacob Morse's *Sphere and Ash* (1888), but that's the first new index we've had in a while. I hope some volunteers who are interested in preparing these indexes will come forward.

The Baseball Index (TBI) Third Quarter (2003) Report

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As of mid-October 2003, TBI has 195,796 entries. Usage of the database has been steady for some time now; roughly 1200 visitors per week. More than 1500 new records were recently added, consisting mainly of *The Sporting News* and *Newsweek* articles from the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to Brad Sullivan. Joe Murphy has been working on several baseball annuals from the 1960 and 1970s and has continued his work on *Baseball Magazine* from the 1920s. Terry Smith has also continued indexing *Baseball Magazine* from 1918. These will soon be added to the database. Thanks to all who have contributed to the database.

TBI Experimental Project

Andy McCue

On another TBI front, we have begun an experiment to see how effectively we can add "notes" columns to TBI. So far, we have avoided those columns, such as "Caught on the Fly" of *The Sporting News*, because we felt that more useful information could be entered by concentrating on larger articles and books.

However, with the advent of the SABR BioProject Committee, the perceived need for such tidbits became greater, especially as members of BioProject began working on more obscure players. There are nuggets of material in notes columns, especially decades ago, that are invaluable in writing about lesser-known players and other baseball personalities.

Mark Armour, chair of the BioProject Committee, strongly urged Ted Hathaway and me to consider entering the data from notes columns. Dan Ginsburg, a SABR Board member and 19th-century researcher, was also interested in the idea. Dan agreed to provide \$2000 to hire a student to do the data entry as a test of what could be accomplished. Dan, Mark, and I worked up some guidelines for the project.

Jules Tygiel of the History Dept at San Francisco State University put us in contact with one of his graduate students, Michael Mott. Mike was already a SABR member and interested in working on this project. He will index the "Caught on the Fly" columns beginning in 1892. At the end of the ex-

periment, Dan, Mark, and I will assess how much information was added to TBI, and whether it's worth making an effort to raise more money to continue the project.

Those of you who have worked with these columns know how frustrating they can be. Much of the information is elliptical. First names rarely appear. Teams and franchises are referred to ambiguously or incompletely. Common knowledge then is not common knowledge now, except among some SABR members. Thus, we have asked SABR members on SABR-L and the Nineteenth Century Committee list to provide e-mail aid when Mike has questions. He has been provided with *Total Baseball*, *The Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, and Harold Seymour's *Baseball* volumes. And, he's been pointed to several online sources. But, these will inevitably prove inadequate in some cases. For example, does anyone out there know who Irene Meridith is? She came up on our test column, from 1891.

Book Review

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MONEYBALL: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game

Michael Lewis. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. 288p. \$24.95

A bestseller with the influence sabermetricians have had on big league baseball as one subject! Golly! There's been a good lot of talk about this one, some of it appearing on SABR-L, which I monitored. For the most part, I'll let those folks talk here.

The first question about the book to appear on SABR-L was quite specific. What was the source of Oakland A's assistant general manager Paul DePodesta's determination (p. 127-128, 170) that on-base percentage (OBP) is three times more important than slugging percentage (SP)? Cyril Morong first wondered about this. A day or two later, Ted Lukacs wasn't sure that "the statement that OBP is worth three times SP is referring strictly to their comparative value in producing runs". He pointed out that, for Oakland, "going deep in the count and working walks ... makes the starter reach his pitch count much faster". Consequently "OBP, to Oakland, has two values: getting guys on base, and wearing out the starter." This comment seemed to remove the discussion from the realm of the quantifiable, but it didn't. Subsequent comments by Peter Ridges and Bob Harris took the discussion into mathematical realms where I could not follow. I gathered, though, that there was reason to doubt the accuracy of DePodesta's determination. At the same time, the book makes it clear that Oakland valued OBP highly in part because it was a quality undervalued by others and consequently one they could afford.

In general, here, we are talking about one main subject of the book: the use of ideas developed by sabermetricians by the front offices of major-league baseball clubs. Lewis devotes a whole chapter to the writings of Bill James (whom, oddly, he does not seem to have interviewed). And we learn particularly of those who have joined the front offices of the Oakland A's, Toronto Blue Jays, and Boston Red Sox. There is also a rather sketchy history of efforts to understand the meaning of official

baseball statistics and to evaluate their relation to team success.

There's plenty more in the book, though. David Black's response to Morong's initial query opened other dimensions of *Moneyball*. "I'm still amazed," Black wrote, "that Billy Beane gave such ample access to the work of him and his staff." Lewis acknowledges this (p.288): "Looking through my notes it's clear that the book arose from what amounts to a year long open-ended conversation with Billy Beane, Paul DePodesta, and David Forst. And yet not once did any of them seek to control or dilute what I might write." The book is in part organized around the A's 2002 season, with special emphasis on the amateur draft, the trade deadline, the 20-game winning streak, and the playoff failure. (About this last, Morong delivered an analysis that seemed to contradict Joe Morgan's assertion [see p.271 ff] that teams that could "manufacture" runs were more successful in the postseason.) The book begins with the story of Beane's recruitment by the New York Mets and his major-league career as a necessary prelude to his career as a general manager.

Black was also "intrigued by the notion of character and 'makeup' in a player", which he contrasted with "looking at players for what they are and for what they can be measured objectively". This produced a couple of good points about methods of scouting and evaluating players. First, Warren Corbett mentioned that *Moneyball* might be read in conjunction with Kevin Kerrane's *Dollar Sign on the Muscle* (1984), as they "document how scouting has changed, and how it has not, since the 1930s". Rod Nelson had another, even more interesting, response: "It's far too early to suggest that Beane's emphasis on the sabermetric approach will be any more successful [than traditional methods]." He finds as "ludicrous" the tendency to regard the competing scouting philosophies as a "black and white issue". Nelson concludes: "Much of the A's recent success has everything to do with traditional scouting principals." He clearly has a point.

I enjoyed other parts of the book, too. Particularly interesting are the chapters on Scott Hatteberg and Chad Bradford, players, Lewis argues, whose virtues only the Oakland A's could discover. And then there's the voice of A's coach Ron Washington, of whom Lewis says: "[He] can't open his mouth without saying something that belongs in *Bartlett's*." No one should miss any of this.

"Like life, baseball depends on mediocrity. Mediocrity is the base on which brilliant records are achieved, the performances of lasting fame. There's an average man, statistically, that establishes a scale. Those who rise above, we can see how, and by how many degrees. The great man is above average. His feat is extraordinary. He lives in the undying record book. He's unburied, and lives in the human mind. Never mind how long ago he did it: he'll survive.

"That's how classics live, in literature. And baseball is the bold parallel."

Marvin Cohen. *Baseball the Beautiful: Decoding the Diamond*. New York: Links Books, 1974. page 5. (appeared originally as part of a review in *The Village Voice*, 5 Feb. 1970)
