

January 2009 (09—1)

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Comments from the Chair

Andy McCue

Riverside, CA

For those of you who haven't heard, I'm sorry to report committee member John Pardon died late last year.

John was a founding member of SABR, and one of the first people to join this committee when Frank Phelps founded it. John was always full of interesting ideas for new projects this committee, and others in SABR, could take on. I was always frustrated I couldn't find the volunteers to bring John's ideas to fruition.

Still, John was always one of the pleasant conversations for me at the annual convention as he trotted out the latest of his ideas and recounted what he'd been working on over the past year.

Such annual renewals of friendship are one of the great features of the annual convention and I hope the convention's location in Washington, DC this year will allow me to meet or renew acquaintance with many of the committee members who live along the East Coast corridor. It's a good time to review our projects, consider new ideas, organize volunteers and talk about baseball books.

And, that's just our committee. The time spent catching up with friends in corridors and the lobby, the chance for long conversations over meals, the exposure to new research through the presentations all make the convention one of the highlights of my year. And I hope you all can join us this year.

The convention will run from Thursday, July 30, through Sunday, Aug. 2, at the J.W. Marriott on Pennsylvania Avenue within a block or so of the White House. Room rates are a bit high by SABR standards, but \$200 a day below the hotel's standard rate. There's more information on the convention, hotel reservations, etc. at www.sabr.org. (I don't have a time for the committee meeting yet, but will transmit it as soon as I hear.)

In my never-ending battle to keep up with baseball fiction (a battle being made very difficult by the avalanche of stuff coming from places such as PublishAmerica and iUniverse), I was pleased recently to find two examples of how SABR is insinuating itself into broader world. In the first instance, I was reading a rather pedestrian called *Forced Out* by Stephen Frey which has an involved plot involving loan-sharking, a disgraced scout, the Mafia, and a phenom who can't allow himself to play too well. At one point in the book, the main character gives us a click by click guide to

looking up a player's performance in Retrosheet. I passed that one along to Dave Smith and his crew.

A couple of weeks later, I was reading a better novel by Leslie Carroll called *Choosing Sophie*. The plot concerns a mother reconnecting with a daughter given up for adoption while the ownership of a minor league baseball team is decided. There is a section in which the wonders of Sabermetrics and their uses are explained to the main character, and to some old baseball diehards.

It got me to thinking about a 1990s phenomenon, which unfortunately seems to be disappearing. This was a trend I thought of as the SABR novel, a genre pioneered by Darryl Brock in his wonderful *If I Never Get Back*. These books combined a goodly amount of historical research with a baseball plot. Troy Soos, William Brashler (in the Crabbe Evers pseudonym), and Gail Rowe were excellent authors in the genre. Gail hasn't come out with a new one in a couple of years and he was the last one still doing it. Maybe Darryl has another in the works.

For those of you working on something, let me remind you of the upcoming Yoseloff Grants application. There's a notice elsewhere in the newsletter with all the details.

I'd also like to call your attention to something that gives me a great deal of satisfaction every year – making a donation to SABR. We are a tax-exempt organization and we do have a broad range of worthwhile projects. With Peter Garver on staff, we are poised to greatly expand the research assets we make available on www.sabr.org and in other forms. Such expansions of our capabilities are generally beyond the capacity of a budget based on dues. Again, more details are on the website.

Reviews

Harry Frazee, Ban Johnson, and the Feud That Nearly Destroyed the American League, by Michael T. Lynch, Jr.
Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2008.

In this book, Michael T. Lynch, Jr. has set out to tell a story nearly as complicated as his title is long. He's committed himself to the notion that at the heart of the tumultuous events on and off the field in major league baseball between 1913 and 1929 lies a feud between American League President Ban Johnson and Boston Red Sox owner Harry Frazee. I'm not sure he's correct about this, but his account of these events is certainly interesting nonetheless. Lynch relies

mainly on secondary sources, newspaper accounts, and internet sites in developing his thesis.

Lynch has several purposes in writing his book. On the one hand he wants to correct the picture of Ban Johnson drawn by Eugene Murdock in his 1982 biography of Johnson. He says of Murdock's book "Eugene C. Murdock wrote a very flattering biography of Ban Johnson 25 years ago that glossed over Johnson's faults and blamed everyone else for his undoing."

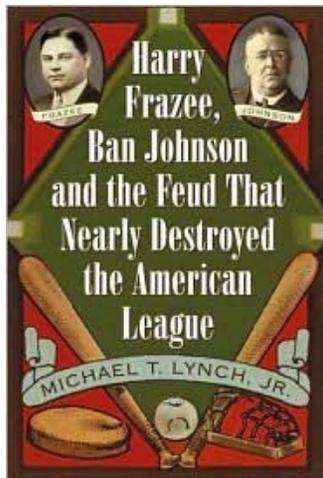
Lynch will present a less flattering portrait. The rest of the quote reveals two more purposes; it reads "but he barely scratched the surface of the feud Johnson had with Frazee." First, Lynch will present a more full portrait of Harry Frazee than has been previously available. Secondly, Lynch proposes to set their relationship at the center of events.

So one thing we get is a biographical sketch of the life of Ban Johnson. I must say that, given the information Lynch provides, I've not changed my understanding of Johnson that much. He may, as he says, portray Johnson less sympathetically than Murdock does, but Lynch's Johnson still seems the overbearing president, used to running things his way, who is in the process of losing his power. Lynch complicates this portrait, showing him acting both reasonably and unreasonably, but he doesn't change it. Lynch's Johnson is primarily a feuder. Before he runs into Harry Frazee he feuds with Indianapolis and New York Giants owner John T. Brush, then with Yankee owners Huston and Ruppert, then with Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis. And always he feuds with Charles Comiskey. Lynch's summary of this last on-and-off relationship is particularly good.

Lynch believes that Johnson's feud with Frazee is at the bottom of Johnson's decline from power. While it may seem from Lynch's account that Johnson's other feuds were more important than the one with Frazee, he is right to underline the fact that Frazee was the first American League owner to acquire his club without Johnson's blessing and thus become an object of his suspicion. Frazee's uneasiness with Johnson rekindled Johnson's feud with Comiskey and alienated Huston and Ruppert from Johnson.

Lynch's extensive treatment of Frazee's life, both before and after his time as the Red Sox owner, is, for this reader, the most important part of the book. He is at least an important part of the uproar that goes on in the American League in the 1910s and early 1920s.

The author develops a thesis about Frazee's ownership of the Red Sox that is closely related to that propounded by Glen Stout and Rickard Johnson in *Red Sox Century* (a book I have not read). Though there are differences, both Lynch and they argue that the idea that Frazee destroyed the Red Sox by selling players to the Yankees to gain funds for his Broadway plays is an unacceptable generalization. Lynch



looks at Frazee's life, his finances, his relationship with Johnson, and his sales and trades with the Yankees and succeeds in complicating that view. In looking at Frazee's finances, he provides much information about Frazee as a theatrical producer, including a chapter on the production of *No, No, Nanette*. He concludes that Frazee was a wealthy man and that he did not make the many deals with the New York Yankees simply to get needed cash for his theatrical productions.

Just as I was beginning Lynch's chapter on *No, No, Nanette*, the 2008 issue of *Baseball Research Journal* arrived, with its cover story "History versus Harry Frazee," by Daniel R. Levitt, Mark L. Armour, and Matthew Levitt. This essay seeks to discredit the view of Frazee developed by Stout and Johnson and to restore the notion that "Harry Frazee sold Babe Ruth and several other players . . . to the Yankees . . . because he needed the money" ("History versus Harry Frazee"). Both Lynch and the Levitts and Armour analyze Frazee's finances extensively, Lynch concluding that Frazee was rich, the Levitts and Armour that he was scrambling for money. Who is correct? I must confess to not being able to evaluate the two analyses; Frazee's finances are certainly complicated. One thing is clear: the Levitts and Armour use data that Lynch does not. They speak of "the Harry Frazee papers, recently available at the University of Texas." Lynch never refers to these, and perhaps they weren't available to him. Because of this, I'd guess the Levitts and Armour are closer to the truth of the matter.

Perhaps oddly, they only refer once of Lynch's book in the course of their article. This reference, which underlines the value of Lynch's book, is to the doubt Lynch throws on the alleged anti-Semitism of Ban Johnson (another facet of Stout and Johnson's thesis: Frazee, having been incorrectly identified as Jewish, was the object of Johnson's anti-Semitism).

Lynch's book both enlarges and complicates our view of Harry Frazee and also offers an engaging picture of the events and personalities that together caused the collapse of the National Commission and the substitution of the single commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis.

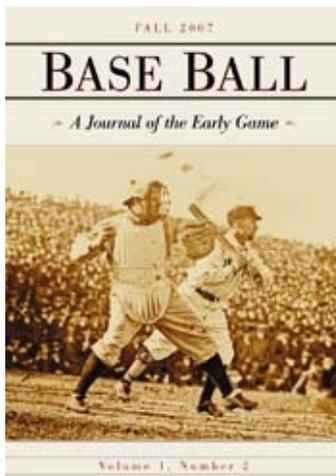
Leverett T. Smith, Jr.
Rocky Mount, NC



Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 2007 Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2008.

One of the most significant trends in the historiographical development of baseball literature is the increased attention and understanding of the origins of the game. Serious students of America's Pastime long abandoned the demonstrably false creation myths that involved Abner Doubleday

and Cooperstown in favor of complex and nuanced understandings of the deep roots of an evolving sport extending back at least as far as the 18th century but with progenitors in bat and ball games extending back centuries.



The establishment of the new McFarland journal, *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game*, thus represents a forum for the profusion of serious writing on baseball prior to the 1920s or so but also serves as a recognition of the ways in which writing and thinking about baseball has changed in recent years. The journal both embodies recent trends and provides a forum for expanding upon them.

Base Ball thus represents

an exciting and important contribution to literature on the sport.

The first issue, which appeared in spring 2007, reveals the myriad directions of current and future scholarship. John Thorn, a respected historian of early baseball history, is the journal's editor and *Base Ball* has a first-rate editorial board and, as a result, already appears poised to be among the finest journals dedicated to the history of sports. Philosophically, the journal appears determined to balance both scholarly history with the important work of writers from outside of the academy, a particularly wise move given the serious contributions that fans of the game from many walks of life have made to our understanding of the sport's development. Indeed, in few areas of scholarship is the so-called professional-amateur divide less meaningful.

The inaugural issue covers a host of topics and welcomes myriad approaches and articles of varying lengths from full scholarly treatments to what amounts to research notes. And as with most journals, the articles vary in quality even if, overall, the standard is quite high. As the journal gains a foothold, the quality and depth of contributions should continue to improve.

After a brief introduction from Thorn and another from publisher Robert Franklin, ten articles (from eleven contributors) follow. Angus Macfarlane moves away from the overwhelming focus on baseball as a game of the eastern cities as he focuses on the first organized baseball teams in San Francisco. Rob Edelman combines one area of cultural study, sport, with another, film, in his assessment of movies about baseball in the years leading up to 1920.

Most fans think of player trades as a particularly modern phenomenon. David Ball thoroughly debunks this misconception in his in-depth treatment of the early game's "sale system," with particular focus on an 1875 transaction. In a similar vein, Robert H. Schaefer explores the 1902 postseason, reminding us that, while 1903 introduced World Series play, it did not mark the first attempt to find out baseball's best team.

Baseball may have been indisputably the American game in these early years, but it was not only an American

game, as Cesar Gonzalez Gomez shows in his article on Mexican baseball. But American and northeastern, the game certainly was. Joanne Hulbert, in one of the journal's best articles, shows how an opening day tradition emerged in Boston, a tradition that remains to this day in the form of Patriots Day when the Red Sox play the only morning game in the Major Leagues. And William A. Mann, in a piece the body of which is only tangentially related to baseball, reveals the origins of Hoboken, New Jersey's Elysian Fields.

While the early years of college football are quite well known to sports historians and fans, college baseball is a much better trod terrain, something Mike Huber and Jack Picciuto help correct in their look at the first Army-Navy baseball game. And while the history of professional baseball is relatively better established, Richard Hershberger still manages to fill in some important gaps on the early professionalization of the game that led to the establishment of the National League.

The final contribution to the journal comes from Thorn again, who presents a modified version of a speech he delivered at Pittsfield, Massachusetts' Berkshire Museum in June 2006. Thorn revisits his important discovery about Pittsfield's role in the development of baseball as we know it, augmenting what we know about the game's Berkshire roots, cautioning jingoistic locals about what we do not know, and reminding everyone that baseball does not have a creation myth, a moment of conception, but rather a long gestation and steady evolution. *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game* seeks to chronicle, analyze, and expand our understanding of the game during its long, and seemingly getting longer, pre-1920 phase. This first issue is a wonderful first step.

Derek Charles Catsam

University of Texas of the Permian Basin



Author profile: Howard Megdal

In 2003, Martin Abramowitz created JewishMajorLeaguers.org with the "mission" to create a set of cards that included every "member of the tribe" to play big-league baseball.

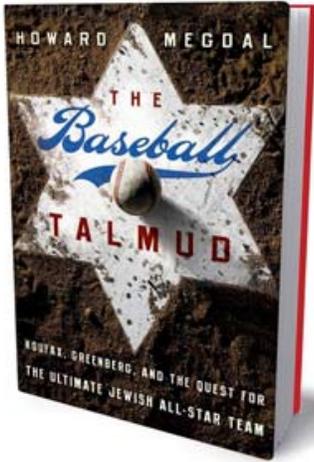
To mix sports metaphors, Howard Megdal has taken this idea and run with it.

His new book, *The Baseball Talmud: The Definitive Position-by-Position Ranking of Baseball's Chosen Players*, analyzes the performances of each of the approximately 160 Jews in the majors. Well, all but one. Josh Whitesell, a late season call-up for the Arizona Diamondbacks, missed the cut.

"I'm very upset about that," said Megdal in a telephone interview from his home in Rockland County, NY.

Baseball Talmud, which will be published in April by Collins, is classified as baseball/humor.

“I wanted it to be a fun read. I wanted it to be entertaining for people and I feel confident that it is,” said Megdal, who writes about baseball and lesser sports for *The New York Observer*. “At the same time, I wanted to add to the scholarship and I feel I’ve achieved that balance.”



There are a few books on the general topic — including *The Big Book of Jewish Baseball* by Peter and Joachim Horvitz and *Jews and Baseball: Volume 1* by Burton and Bonita Boxerman — but they tend to be more scholarly and/or anecdotal. The author blends commentary (it is a Talmud, after all)

with statistical analysis to put every player in his place.

Megdal, 28, used several statistical sources to come to his conclusions, including baseball-reference.com, Baseball Prospectus, and *The Hardball Times*. He also poured over decades-old issues of *The Sporting News*, long considered “the bible of baseball.” Among other things, he learned that Sid Gordon, Cal Abrams, and Saul Rogovin were adjudged as their respective teams’ “Most Conceited” in a 1954 poll of baseball writers.

“Better than ever before, you’re able to rank players. Not only can you adjust [the figures] by park and era, you can do it in several different ways with a number of different metrics so you don’t have to rely on just one for the answer.” This allowed him to “equalize” the athletes’ accomplishments across the years as well as compare those with lengthy careers with their baseball brethren who had the proverbial cup of coffee.



Howard Megdal, second from left, during a game in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Photos courtesy Howard Megdal

“Look at Si Rosenthal and Harry Rosenberg in center-field,” he said. “They were guys who combined for a very small number of games.... [But] both were tremendous

players in the high minor leagues. There’s little doubt that even though they didn’t have the major league career as the four centerfielders above them [Elliott Maddox, Lipman Pike, Goody Rosen, and Gabe Kapler], they were right there in the mix had they had the chance.”

Megdal — who hosts a companion blog, Baseball Talmud.com — attributed the lack of opportunity to the paucity of major league jobs. Prior to 1961, there were only 16 major league teams, a total of 400 jobs on any given day. “You also had a situation of more minor league teams, so if a young player didn’t make an impression quickly, he could get buried in the system.”

There was also a “more nefarious reason” why a Jewish player might be held back, Megdal said. For example, Cy Block, an infielder with the Chicago Cubs in the mid-1940s, didn’t get much playing time under manager Jimmy Dykes, who the author characterized as “not a friend of the Jewish people” and said other Jewish players in the early-to-middle part of the 20th century fell victim to the similar treatment.

On the other hand, there was at least one instance in which a player’s heritage might have been an advantage. John McGraw, the feisty manager of the New York Giants, was always on the lookout for a good Jewish player to bring more Jewish fans to the ballpark. He found one in Andy Cohen, a member of the ball club in the late 1920s who lasted just two full seasons despite a career batting average of .281. Cohen’s statistics seem pretty good until you put them in context: his mark of .294 in his final season put him in sixth place among Giants’ regulars.

Numbers aside, *The Baseball Talmud* is certain to invite discussion because of Megdal’s criteria in determining a player’s religious identity.

“The fairest to do was to have as inclusive a definition as possible. Not being a Jewish scholar —and even among Jewish scholars there’s a lot of discrepancy — I thought it would be easier and fairer to include everyone and let more discriminating people cross people out of the book.” That explains why Lou Boudreau is ranked the top Jewish short-stop, even though Megdal rates David Newhan the fourth-best second baseman even though most Jewish sources omit him from the list because he’s a Jew for Jesus.

Megdal, a passionate Mets fan, said he goes through withdrawal at the end of every season. To ease his pain, he participates in WhatIfSports.com, an on-line fantasy game for which he has created several all-Jewish teams. “You’re looking for your fix in some way,” he said.

There are worse addictions.

Ron Kaplan
Montclair, NJ

(A version of this article appeared in *New Jersey Jewish News*.)

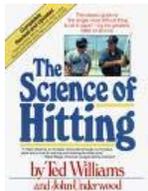


What's on your tops list?

Every once in awhile, SABR members get a little cabin fever and start up "threads" of discussion via email. Here with one of those discussions: lists of "top 10" baseball books. This on-line discussion was started by Ron Antonucci, Head of Literature at the Cleveland Public Library

Mark Armour:

A Day in the Bleachers, Arnold Hano
The Hot Stove League, Lee Allen
Champagne and Baloney, Tom Clark
The Long Season, Jim Brosnan
Who's Who in Major League Baseball (1933), Speed Johnson
The Science of Hitting, Ted Williams
This Great Game, Doris Townsend et al
Once Upon the Polo Grounds, Leonard Schecter
I Never Had it Made, Jackie Robinson
Veeck as in Wreck, Bill Veeck



Patrick C. Hajovsky:

The Soul of Baseball, Joe Posnanski
Baseball and the Game of Life,
A Stitch in Time, Gene Elston
I Was Right on Time, Buck O'Neill
Opening Day, Jonathan Eig
Stepping Up: The Story of Curt Flood, Alex Belth
Anything by Roger Angell, but particularly *Game Time*
Red Legs and Black Sox, Susan Dellinger
The Old Ball Game, and *Entitled*, Frank Deford



Richard Lally:

Ball Four, Jim Bouton and Leonard Schecter
Babe: The Legend Comes to Life, Robert Creamer
Baseball's Great Experiment, Jules Tygiel
The Hidden Game of Baseball, John Thorn and Peter Palmer
Veeck as in Wreck, Bill Veeck and Ed Linn
Eight Men Out, Eliot Asinoff
Lords of the Realm, John Helyar
Pafko at the Wall, Don DeLillo (novella extracted from
Underworld)
Stengel: His Life and Times, Robert Creamer
Win Shares, Bill James



Eric Hanauer

The Iowa Baseball Confederacy, W.P. Kinsella
Wrigleyville, Peter Golenbock
The Last Pennant Before Armageddon, Kinsella
The Best Team Ever, Alop and Noel
Ring Around the Bases, Ring Lardner
More than Merkle, David Anderson
Unforgettable Season, Fleming
I was Right on Time, O'Neil
Crazy '08, Cait Murphy
Wrigley Field, Green and Jacob



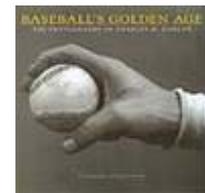
Maxwell Kates

Ball Four
October 1964, David Halberstam
The Boys of Summer, Roger Kahn
Lords of the Realm, John Helyar
Shut Out: A Story of Race and Baseball in Boston, Howard Bryant
A Well Paid Slave, Brad Snyder
Detroit Tigers: Club and Community, by Patrick Harrigan
Insert random Thomas Boswell Book, how about *How Life Imitates the World Series*
Clemente, David Maraniss
Seasons in Hell, Mike Shropshire



Mark Fimoff

"For those of us who don't read so well and just look at pictures":
Baseball Memories 1900-1909 and
The Federal League of 1914-1915, Okkonen
Baseball's Golden Age: The Photographs of Charles M. Conlon, McCabe and McCabe
The National League and The American League, Honig
Nationals on Parade, Mark Stang (and any of his six other awesome books)
Baseball in St. Louis 1900-1925, Steve Steinberg (great pictures and great writing)
Smithsonian Baseball, Stephen Wong
Grand Old Game, Joe Wallace



The SABR-Yoseloff Research Grant

Do you have a research idea that's been kicking around in your head? If a lack of funds for travel, photocopying, or other research-related expenses has stopped you from pursuing a pet project, consider applying for a SABR-Yoseloff research grant. Through the generosity of the Anthony A. Yoseloff Foundation, SABR is able to award baseball research grants to its members with the intention of later publishing that research. A minimum of \$4,000 is allocated for awards annually, but distribution is dependent upon the quality of the proposal pool. The maximum grant award is \$1,000, and individuals are limited to one grant per year. The Yoseloff Grant Program is not restricted to any single area of baseball research, thus most projects are eligible for full or partial grant funding.

The final work product of the proposed research must be suitable to be published by SABR, although copyright will remain with the author. For clarification, publication does not necessarily mean print publication. The final work product may be something that SABR can publish on its web site in electronic format, such as an article, a database, or other media product. Only SABR members are eligible to be considered for a Yoseloff-SABR Baseball Research Grant.

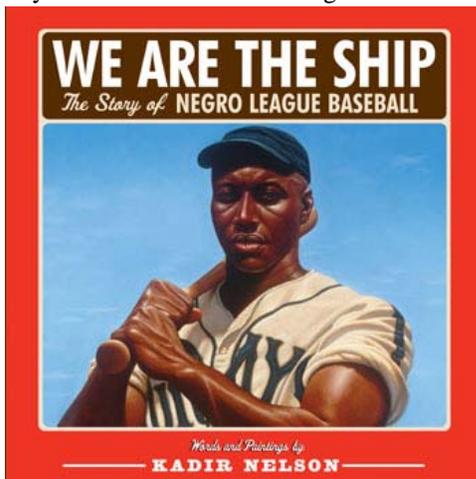
Proposals are currently being accepted for the 2009 calendar year. Application forms are available on the SABR website.

Congratulations to Kadir Nelson

Spitball Magazine has announced that *We Are the Ship* is the 2008 winner of its Casey Award as best baseball book of the year.

Nelson will receive the award the 26th annual Casey Awards Banquet on March 8 at Sawyer Point in downtown Cincinnati. For more information, contact Mike Shannon at spitball5@hotmail.com.

"I'm quite honored to receive the Casey Award for *We Are the Ship* and thrilled to be recognized by avid baseball fans and authorities who cherish the game of baseball as I do" wrote Nelson in an email. "I spent quite a long time working on this project and I'm so happy to see it recognized in such a wonderful way. I feel as if I've been anointed by the aficionados of all things baseball!"



* * *

Wait, Wait, tell me the truth

In keeping with the policy NPR seems to have about replaying its best bits during the week between Christmas and New Years, *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me* featured a few prominent guests from the "Not My Job" segment, including former baseball great Bill "Moose" Skowron.

Now Skowron was a good player — an eight time all-star with eight World Series appearances, a fact he took great pains to remind host Peter Sagal several times during the conversation.

Judging solely from that interview, Skowron, now 78, seems to be one of those old-timers who loves to compare the lack of "sand" in modern players, afraid to pitch inside, afraid to slide. He spoke of an episode in his career that reminded me of Rob Neyer's *Big Book of Baseball Legends: The Truth, The Lies, and Everything Else*.

Every time I hear one of these gentlemen relating an anecdote about the good old days, I find I've become fairly cynical (damn you, Neyer!). So when Skowron talked about getting hit in the head after hitting a home run against the Red Sox and talking it out on second baseman Gene Mauch with a career-ending hard slide, well, I just had to see if that was indeed the case.

Skowron's tale goes like this:

After hitting the homer off of Ike Delock, the pitcher swore revenge, telling Ted Williams that he would hit Skowron right between the eyes in the next at bat, which he did (actually, it was Skowron's head Delock hit, but that's close enough for jazz).

It must not have been a very hard pitch because Skowron was able to stay in the game. As he took first base, he prayed for his roommate Bob Cerv to hit a ground ball to the shortstop so Skowron could break up the double play.

"Gene Mauch was at second at the time," Skowron told Sagal and his audience. "I broke his leg and he never played another game in the Major Leagues. I didn't do it on purpose...., we were taught to break up double plays."

So I went to Baseball Reference to see if I could verify the story.

According to the BR Home Run Log, Delock gave up 141 home runs in his 11-year career, but none of them were hit by Skowron. Strike one.

Mauch, who would go on to manage the Phillies, Expos, and Angels, did play his last major league game against the Yankees on Sept. 28, 1957, so one would expect this was the contest to which Skowron referred. He singled as a pinch hitter in the ninth inning, so he couldn't have played the field. Strike two.

The Yankees beat the Red Sox, 2-0. No home runs were hit that day. That's okay, because Skowron wasn't in the game at all; in fact, his last game of the year came on Sept. 13; strike three and then some.

Skowron was hit by a pitch three times that season. One came in an April 28, 3-2 win over Boston, in which Mauch played second. Gil MacDougal followed the HBP with a strikeout and Billy Martin (not Cerv, who was on the Kansas City Athletics in 1957) grounded to short for the force at second. Perhaps Skowron went in hard, but is no indication of a violent injury; Mauch was lifted for a pinch hitter in the ninth and played another 50+ games before calling it quits at the end of the year.

So what did we learn by this exercise, other than the fact that I have way too much time on my hands? Was Skowron lying or is this just the way he remembers the incident? No one can say for sure, perhaps not even the Moose. Look, I'm considerably younger and according to my wife I completely mis-told an anecdote from our honeymoon in Aruba that involved a goat skull, a scorpion, and hotel housekeeping. I wasn't lying; that's how I recalled the event. So you have to give Skowron the benefit of the doubt.

Ron Kaplan

Please send articles, reviews, and suggestions to Ron Kaplan at Ronk23@aol.com. Please put "SABR Newsletter" in the subject line.

