

Alexander, Charles C. Breaking the Slump: Baseball in the Depression Era. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 337. Notes, photographs, select bibliography, index. \$17.95 (paper), \$29.95 (cloth).

Historian Charles Alexander demonstrates an affinity for leavening engaging storytelling with insightful analysis in this chronicle of Depression-era baseball. Save for an introductory overview, commentary on the lifestyles of players, and a sojourn in black baseball, the chapters follow chronologically. Sequential descriptions of baseball seasons from 1930 thru 1941 include game accounts of pennant races and World Series competition as well as detailed portraits of individual player performance. Treatment of Joe McCarthy's Yankee dynasty, Dizzy Dean's rambunctious Gashouse Gang, the exploits and farewells of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, ethnic standard bearers Joe DiMaggio and Hank Greenberg, nonpareil pitchers Lefty Grove and Carl Hubbell, "phenoms" Bob Feller and Ted Williams, and "shadowball" legends Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson juxtapose narrative drama with telling interpretation. Attention is also given to the machinations of club owners and general managers, league officials, and Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Although Negro and minor leagues, barnstorming, and exhibition games are not neglected, the focus is on Major League Baseball. Alexander's thesis, threaded throughout the volume, is that the hard times of the Great Depression dictated the contours of baseball as both business and sport.

For over a decade, the Depression devastated the American economy, impacting upon every aspect of life. Although President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal brought hope and relief, the pre-war journey to recovery was jagged and incomplete. Examining the expenses, income, and attendance of major league teams, Alexander convincingly demonstrates that baseball was a microcosm of Depression-era America. Baseball

descended from prosperity to a series of lean years, rebounded somewhat amidst New Deal spending, and then confronted the Roosevelt Recession before defense contracts fueled the economy anew. Alexander sets the baseball trends and innovations of the 1930s—reduction of player salaries, tinkering with the seams on baseballs to alter the balance between pitchers and hitters, emulation of Branch Rickey’s farm system, expansion of radio broadcasts and advertising, establishment of an annual All-Star game, proliferation of player-managers, reduction of coaching staffs, and codification of the Doubleday Myth through the creation of a National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown—within the context of the game’s struggle with economic crisis. And, in 1935, New Deal activism and Cincinnati general manager Larry MacPhail’s pursuit of increased attendance were symbolically intertwined when Roosevelt, ensconced 450 miles away, threw the light switch that inaugurated night baseball in the major leagues.

Alexander’s rendering of player lives possesses a grittiness that evokes the writings of novelist John Steinbeck. Unlike the scions of comfortable suburbs who predominate in today’s game, major leaguers of the 1930s frequently came “from rugged working –class backgrounds” (p.188), and possessed circumscribed educations, experience with hard manual labor, and a weakness for alcohol, tobacco, and “baseball Annies” (p. 186). Despite the formidable growth of the labor movement in the larger society, ballplayers of the 1930s lacked union and pension protections: the reserve clause remained inviolate. Most needed to supplement their baseball salaries with off-season employment. And road accommodations prior to air conditioning posed problems on the hot, humid days of summer.

Despite its evocative portrayal of baseball past, the volume elicits some minor caveats. There are a few errors of fact. Alexander states that Hank Greenberg batted .317 in 1933 (p.92) and .334 in 1937 (p.142) and that Joe DiMaggio hit in 63 consecutive Pacific Coast League games in 1933 (p. 100): the correct figures are .301, .337, and 61. Moreover, Alexander's treatment of the Negro leagues may underestimate the overall quality of play and the importance of black entrepreneurship. And his suggestion that 1930s Major League Baseball may have "featured more good players and more good play than at any time before or since in the sport's long history" (p. 6) eschews evidence related to subsequent racial integration, demographic growth, improvements in training and sports medicine, and internationalization of the game.

Make no mistake, however: Breaking the Slump, the first book-length study of Depression-era baseball as a distinct entity, is an important work of synthesis. Demonstrating mastery of relevant primary and secondary sources, Alexander's treatment of Depression-era baseball moves well beyond team histories, biographies of the game's notables, and survey treatment of the sport. General readers, undergraduate students of sport and/or the Great Depression, and baseball specialists will find Breaking the Slump entertaining, revealing, and erudite.

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