

BASEBALL DIGEST



ALL STAR EDITION



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“Question and Answers”

By Abe J. Shear
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For those of you who thought there would be an interview in this edition of The Baseball Digest, I assure you that more are on the way. After twelve years and over fifty interviews, however, I wanted the opportunity to sort of interview myself, to answer a few questions that are routinely asked about this series and, in addition, to provide a few reflections on the undertaking.

How did the series get started? The answer is actually a wonderful story. In late 1999, I was finishing my lunch when my partner, Joe Haas (then a young 89), walked into the room. One never left Joe to eat by himself so I stayed and, given that Joe was a great baseball fan (actually someone who knew a great deal about so many things), I was happy to listen to his opinions.

I said that Greg Maddux was maybe the best pitcher ever without a signature pitch. Joe thought for a minute and then explained in great detail that while my thought was worthy, Carl Hubbell was equally adept in the 1930's and on and on he went with stories of Willie Mays and the World Series, of stick ball in Atlanta, of his love for baseball. What Joe was telling me, in addition to these wonderful stories, was that people (clients and friends) want to read and hear about what they want, not what I wanted, and that baseball was far more interesting, and memorable, to most than law. This is, in fact, a great lesson for us all; it is difficult to communicate if the listener is not sufficiently engaged.

Some months later I interviewed Joe and, even though Joe's health had begun to fail, we were able to stitch together a beginner's interview. I've always wished that I had been more skilled at the time (for example, I interrupted him more than necessary). I can vividly see Joe across from me wistfully looking out his window. Now, whenever I finish an interview, I think of Joe and hope that he would be happy with the result. I also let interviewees talk without interruption knowing I can clean up the text later if needed.

Which is your favorite interview? I am asked all the time which has been my favorite and that, honestly, is like picking your favorite child. All but one of the interviews have been a lot of fun and interesting – one was tedious and, honestly, not very good. Many moments have been extra special, such as:

- Early on in the process, I spent an hour with Norman Lumpkin, a fine Negro League ballplayer, and a wonderfully special man. He played for the Atlanta Black Crackers in the late 30's and through the 40's, never having a chance to play in the big leagues – and never being bitter about his experience. His house in Southwest Atlanta was immaculately neat and he was, quite rightfully, ever so proud that he and his wife had put their three children through college. I think about Norman often as he understood what was important in life and remained without an

ounce of bitterness about the game he truly loved and his misfortune of being born in an unfair time. He suggested that these hurdles were but weeds in a garden, that they could be dealt with so as to enjoy the garden itself. Norman had an incredible value system and I was honored to be in his kitchen.

- My editor and much better half has been with me for three interviews, all just wonderful, and nearly hyperventilated when she met her childhood hero, Bobby Richardson. Remarkably, she followed my only rule - guests cannot talk at all during an interview. One beautiful afternoon with Linda joining me, I spoke with Jimmy Lanier who had been, at the age of twelve or so, Ty Cobb's bat boy. Jimmy's experience with Ty Cobb was unique and his memories were ever so vivid, memories that told an entirely different story about Ty Cobb than the negative ones we hear. Near the end of the interview, all in the room were in tears as Jimmy talked about his last visit with Cobb at Emory Hospital. Jimmy's stories reminded me to be extra careful in my criticism and to be sure that my

I Remember When, a book which includes the first 35 interviews in this series, is available for \$20. A check should be made payable to Abe Shear and mailed to him at Arnall Golden Gregory.

thoughts are carefully placed, as in Cobb's case, in historical context. Yes, by today's standards, Ty Cobb was likely quite prejudiced, however, being in Augusta, GA not long after World War I, it is also possible that Ty Cobb was more liberal than the rest of his extremely biased community. At a minimum, Ty Cobb was the product of his environment and, while this does not forgive his feelings, it perhaps helps to explain them. It is a good example that prejudice is something that is taught.

- And then there is the time I spent with Judge Griffin Bell, a great baseball fan and great lawyer. I asked Judge Bell my favorite question "What are your first baseball memories?" Judge Bell paused (for long enough that the silence caused my tapes to go off) and then Judge Bell started talking ever so eloquently about Babe Ruth and 1925. Judge Bell so enjoyed transporting us to the past and his stories really danced across the interview page. That, of course,

and more. I can't encourage you enough to place your family history in some sort of recordable medium as these stories are uniquely yours.

Have you collected anything along with the interviews? I am often asked if I have collected anything from the series of interviews, a relatively insightful question actually. The answer is yes – for sure, leading off with one of the most eclectic collections of signed baseballs you can imagine. Nearly every interviewee has signed a ball, some personalized, some illegible, some the only ball they've ever signed. They are all stacked together and without question they amuse me. I have a Sam Massell and a Zell Miller, a Jeff Foxworthy and a Skip Caray, a Monica Kaufman and a Herman Russell. It is quite a wonderful collection and brings back joyous memories whenever I set my eyes on it.

As a huge surprise, someone at the Baseball Hall of Fame heard about my interviews and has asked for my source materials, particularly as I have video and/or audio of every interview. While that is, for sure, quite flattering,

the interviewee. Be it with President Carter or Commissioner Vincent, with Leo Mazzone or with Ralph Terry or George Vecsey, each of the sessions has been different and memorable. I could never have guessed that the series would be so enduring, or that the advent of the internet would greatly increase the distribution. The unknown and unexpected turns of the road have been a great part of the fun.

Is there anything you'd change about the game? I am regularly asked my opinions about baseball, what I embrace and what I'd change. Everyone has an opinion, I suppose, and mine is just as likely to be as wrong as the next person's. I grew up well before free agency and knew just about all of the players listed in the box scores of every game. Today, between large market teams and plays of the day, the difference between large and small markets is really exaggerated, certainly much more than in football and arguably more than basketball. It is hard to imagine how small market teams can compete unless, like the NFL, the teams are able to protect a player or two (perhaps a pitcher and a position player). It is imperative that teams be able to retain their stars (think about Seattle losing A. Rod, Ken Griffey and Randy Johnson). Situations like this do nothing to marry the players to the community and produce a corresponding lack of loyalty of the fans to the team.

“Change the rules for substitution to allow players to come back into the game.”

is what these interviews are meant to accomplish, bringing to life memories of the past, feelings of long ago.

About ten (10) years ago, I took my tapes and a few questions, mounted my movie camera, and interviewed my parents – on baseball. At the time, my father's health was failing and he had virtually no short term memory. He did, however, remember the games he went to with my mother in the 1940's, the street cars and the players. He lit up when telling these small stories, stories we all have (about baseball or something akin), and now I have these stories on DVD, preserving his memories and allowing him to forever share this audible history with his grandchildren

I have thus far rejected the request. Perhaps someday I will change my mind, however, it won't be anytime soon, and, certainly will be years after the interviews have been completed. The interviews began with nothing in mind more than becoming a quirky and enjoyable periodic newsletter, one which provided ten (10) minutes of enjoyment a few times a year. There was no other goal but, I must admit, I sure do have a pile of tapes and DVD's. I'm not sure who else would want to own and treasure them.

Most importantly, I have collected great memories, not just meeting people I've read about, but doing so in a casual environment, one in which I get to spend a special one on one hour or so, with

The NBA and NFL have enhanced the fan's experience more than baseball. Yes, the game is played at a different speed than others but games which were the normal at 2:25 are now a glorified exception. Baseball needs to figure out ways to hold the fan's attention. A few thoughts that have occurred to me over the last few years:

- Change the rules for substitution and allow players, within some framework, to come back into the game. Each team could have perhaps three extra substitutions. This would allow the better pitchers to stay in the game, defensive players to excel, speed to transform

games. Sure, this changes the way we've always played, but fans do not come to the park to see the worst players on the team. Allowing a relief pitcher to come in a second time would enhance the excitement. Allowing a pinch runner for a slow player adds excitement and retains one's interest. This is hardly any bigger change than allowing for the designated hitter (whose statistics are hardly segregated).

of each would be awarded a point and, of course, the winning team would receive multiple points. This would, hopefully, change the linear substitution pattern (think free substitution) and, in addition, keep the fan's attention as the 8th inning might really matter, even if your team was way behind. A fan who lost interest in third inning might continue to watch. Baseball must figure out a way to keep the fan in the seat, at the game or at home,

- Baseball has done a wonderful job marketing its Hall of Fame and many, many people know that it is in Cooperstown (even if they don't know where that is). A few people know where the NFL Hall of Fame is and it seems only friends and family know about the NBA Hall of Fame. Sure it would be nice to finish your career and be in the Hall of Fame but you'd think that the Hall of Fame was a way station to heaven, particularly when we monotonously bring up Pete Rose and all of the steroid users with the same gravity as if we, for a second, thought that these fellows were going to finish their careers and go on immediately to win the Nobel Prize.

“If the All Star game is to matter, let it matter with the best players on the field.”

- Allow the teams to have 28 players, a situation which would allow for a third catcher and specialty players, defensive and otherwise. This would make the games less predictable and, hopefully, retain the excitement for the fan.
- Coupling free substitution with the larger team would also help the absolutely ridiculous All Star game, a game which now determines the home field advantage the World Series, the most ridiculous fact in all of sport. If (and I don't like the concept at all) the All Star game is to matter, let it matter with the best players in the league on the field, not three innings and then to the airport. Having the third string (!!!) all stars in at the end of the game is plainly absurd if the game matters. Major League Baseball should decide if this is a game or an exhibition and, if the latter, let's get rid of the meaningful consequences. If the former, let's play to win and forget about the best players only getting one at bat. It should be honor enough to be on the team.
- Given the disparity in talent, so many games which are effectively over after three innings, let's change the scoring and divide the games into thirds (i.e., innings 1-3 and 4-6, 7 – conclusion). The winner

regardless of the score. Surely, changing the scoring from “games behind” to points scored would be easy to understand and, hopefully, keep the interest of the fan. Think of baseball as a business – didn't Coca Cola used to have Coke and Diet Coke only? Embrace rational change.

- Allow the teams to use a short term disabled list, perhaps seven days. This could, as with other rules, be used but not in an unlimited manner. Again, the idea is to allow the best players to play, not sit on the bench being unable to perform, or being on the disabled list longer than necessary. If the team size was expanded, this would likely be a good way to retain players, improve the game and strengthen the competitive nature of the contests.
- How many throws are needed to first base? It seems that three (3) is enough for any at bat. The game has to speed up a bit. Other sports have delay of game penalties (surely basketball and football do), however, the ways in which baseball languishes need to be addressed. For instance, a relief pitcher who has been warming up for many minutes still gets eight pitches when he gets to the mound. I'd say 4 pitches are more than enough. Speed it up.

Every time baseball discusses those who are not in the Hall of Fame, it (i) points out problems in the game; and (ii) undercuts the fun in visiting the Hall of Fame itself as fans want to see the best of the players and their artifacts, their head first slides, their mega home runs, their on the field achievements. Baseball needs to move forward, not remain stuck in the dialog. Regarding Rose, letting him in without allowing him to participate would recognize his on the field achievements. Making sluggers like McGuire and Bonds and Sosa wait an extra five years is more than enough penalty. At the end of the day, fans will come to the Hall of Fame if what they want to see is there – they want to see their favorite players and relive their most vivid memories. Baseball's current failure to include these players will ultimately hurt the Hall of Fame and, unintentionally, glorify some players who hardly deserve the attention. It is, of course, amazing that you'd think that those in the Hall of Fame were only the non-sinners. Some are better than others, some playing at times when they were wonderfully shielded from the media and internet, in a far less invasive society.

- And then there is the strike zone.

Last I knew, the pitcher had the right to the entire plate, not just the outside half, and the attitude of today's player, when hit, is just laughable. Pitchers have to be allowed to pitch inside. Pitchers like Drysdale and Gibson owned both halves of the plate and Greg Maddux, with all his control, hit over 120 batters (most intentionally I'd guess).

I am reminded of a senior division championship game some years ago. I was catching and the other team's clean-up hitter leaned his fat belly

than ever and the field has hardly adapted. It might be worthwhile to move the batter's box an inch or two further off of the plate, allowing the pitcher to more effectively use the inside of the plate while still being able to attack the outside half. The batters are more than capable of covering both halves. And remember, baseball has changed the height of the pitching mound.

Baseball remains a special game. It is played at a speed that allows the viewer to remember play after play. We can take time to talk, to visit, to share stories,

budget. The attention span of the viewer is much shorter, the willingness to sit through tediously slow games is much reduced. Baseball must do all it can to keep the attention of the fans, to not just make the ball park experience more pleasant but, so too, the game itself.

Sure, it would be a break to some extent with the game of decades ago but, and as much as I'd like to live in the past, we live in a world much different. Baseball was a radio game – not a Sports Center game. We loved the announcers – now I can't even remember who they are. We knew that pitchers were fast – now we know how fast. We knew that the umpire missed the call – now we see the blown call from five (5) camera angles.

Embracing technology and modifying certain pieces of the baseball environment, without fooling too much with the game itself, would hopefully make the game much better, the experience more pleasant and the fans more connected to the industry.

In sum, this series has provided me a wonderful hobby and I look forward to many, many more interviews. If anything, the interviews have made me love the people as much as the games – a doubleheader win for sure. Thank you for your continued encouragement.

“Baseball needs to change if it wants to continue to attract the best athletes.”

over the plate. I called for an inside pitch and we hit him. The exact same thing happened his second at bat. I told the umpire that the batter should not get first base as he did not attempt to avert the ball and, in addition, I told one and all we would hit his sorry ass every time he batted unless he moved off of the plate (which he did and we struck him out the next two times, winning the championship in the process).

That said, today's players are bigger

to drink a beer. It is a game, unlike so many others, which welcomes families, is comfortable for both men and women, is a game which is relatively inexpensive to play, a game which fosters great debate over the smallest of plays. It is a game you can totally follow in the car as plays evolve with predictability. And, of course, it is the game where the offense does not have the ball.

That said, baseball needs to change if it wants to continue to attract the best athletes and its share of the entertainment

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