



THE NATIONAL PASTIME

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Legends

HARRISON FORD plays fabled Brooklyn Dodgers manager Branch Rickey and knocks it out of the park

TWICE MONTHLY

A Perfect Game

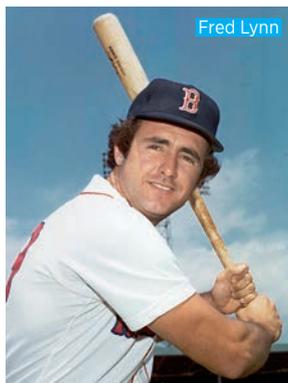
EVEN TODAY, in this fast-paced, multitasking, optimize-production, if-you're-not-first-you're-last day and age, it's nice to see that at least one sport continues to be slow and steady. It's also nice to know that even today, in our multiplatform, surf-the-Web-with-your-phone, call-your-mom-with-your-tablet, take-a-picture-with-just-about-anything society, a simple game of catch with your mom or dad is still the most satisfying activity.

Professional sports seem to be in constant flux. The rules always seem to be getting tweaked, the players always seem to be changing shape, the fans always seem to be pushing the envelope of proper stadium/arena etiquette. Baseball's not completely impervious to these athletic agitations, but they are decidedly less pronounced in America's pastime. Perhaps it's because the game is played at a slower pace. Or maybe it's because in baseball, the fans and the players — especially in the post-steroid era — are so thoroughly committed to preserving the sport as a true bastion of American culture and recreation that trivial problems are not as amplified. Or maybe it's because, regardless of the congressional-testimony steroid sideshow, baseball was, is, and will always be, the perfect game.

That's my thesis, and I'm sticking to it. But I don't just want to privately think that baseball is the greatest game ever invented. I want to proselytize it; and I want you to believe me. To make my case, I checked in with two individuals who not only have definitive knowledge of the game, but who also can offer two perspectives that the casual fan can't: the sage professor and the former player.

Leading off is Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism professor Michael Shapiro, author of *Bottom of the Ninth* and *The Last Good Season*. Shapiro is a baseball historian, which also makes him a truly dedicated, passionate fan. I start with a simple question: Is baseball still our national pastime? In true professorial fashion, Shapiro begins his lecture with a measurement:

In 1960, Gallup conducted a survey to determine the most popular spectator sports in the country. Baseball was No. 1. Ten years later, baseball was second to the NFL. Back then, people said that baseball was finished — that its golden years were behind it. "Absolute nonsense," Shapiro says. "Attendance around the league is higher now than it's ever been. Look at Wrigley, for example."



The Chicago Cubs' Wrigley Field (page 54), the second-oldest ballpark in baseball (1914), routinely attracted fewer than 12,000 people for home games in the mid-1950s, mid-'60s, mid-'70s and early '80s. To wit, the Cubbies ranked either worst or close to worst in National League attendance during baseball's "golden years." These days, home games regularly are sold out, and the Cubs aren't exactly doing any better than they were back then. They finished the 2012 season 61-101, second-worst in MLB. Yet they're selling out home games.

"My theory is that baseball, which is different than any other American sport because there's a game virtually every day of the season, is always giving you something to talk about," Shapiro says. "What we love about baseball is the conversation. It's never a stale conversation. You can talk about yesterday's game; you can talk about your favorite player from the night before; you can talk statistics until you're blue in the face. It offers a chance for strangers to talk about something that matters to them."

Shapiro points out that everything about the rules of professional baseball, which are virtually unchanged after more than a century, is elegant. For instance, when a ground ball is hit to an infielder, he has to field it cleanly, and he'll generally get the runner out by a step. Every time. One step. That's not a lot of time. "It turns out that 90 feet is the perfect distance," he says. "If it was 91 feet between the bases instead of 90, it's a different game. Look at pitching: A curveball will break at 60 feet, 6 inches. It's elegant and it's scientific. Forget about fathers and sons playing catch. That's a beautiful thing. But baseball is about the conversation, and that conversation helps define who we are as a society. It's the perfect game."

The perfect game. For a spectator, it certainly is. What's better than spending a lazy summer afternoon at the ballpark, wearing the jersey of your favorite player (for me, these days, it's Ian Kinsler of the Texas Rangers), eating some gourmet food (page 32) and producing a consistently high energy level with 42,000 like-minded fans? Or what's better than buying a plane ticket and flying to, say, Los Angeles to watch Ian Kinsler play against former teammates Josh Hamilton and C.J. Wilson, and AL Rookie of the Year Mike Trout of the Angels (page 30)? But it's also the perfect

game from the player's perspective, says nine-time All-Star and four-time Gold Glove winner Fred Lynn, who played center field for five major league teams from 1974 to 1990.

"Baseball is more personal than any other sport because you can see the players up close," says Lynn, who was also the first player in history to win Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player in the same year (1975). "In fact, if you want to, you can watch your favorite guy for nine innings and not miss the rest of the game. You can't do that in football or basketball. This creates a bond with the fans, which is why you hear some fans say, 'My guy had a good game today.' There is no place to hide on a baseball field. We are very exposed, and I think that's just the way the fans like it. I know that's the way I liked it when I was playing.

"I loved playing in front of the hometown fans, especially when I was with the Red Sox. And I loved playing against the hostile New York fans at Yankee Stadium. In baseball, you can feel the ebb and flow of the game. It's not a sudden rush. When we're down by three in the eighth inning, and the first guy gets on, and then the second guy, and the fans get involved, you can feel the emotion start to factor in. It makes you a better player. That's a strong force.

"On the other side, when I'm playing center field, I can hear individual fans cheering me on, or in New York, heckling me. Do you know how many times I have heard, 'Come on! I could have caught that ball! What were you doing out there?'

"Personal."

Welcome to the first baseball issue of *American Way* in our 47-year history. We take you around the league like no other magazine, highlighting the best players, stadiums, food ... even one of the best announcers in the game (page 18). And we have Harrison Ford on the cover, playing one of the toughest roles of his storied acting career (page 42). We think it's the perfect read to get you ready for the 2013 season of the perfect game.


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