PERSPECTIVES

RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP, AND CREATIVE ACTIVITY AT OHIO UNIVERSITY

Hard Ball for Hard Times

A look at baseball's toughest era…
Will the game ever be that good again?

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NOW THAT WE'RE COMFY, and our national pastime is Shopping, baseball is simply too hard. It is too hard for our kids, who, if they dared to be players — players, that is, by the standards of 1930s America or today's Dominican Republic — would unplug the earphones and turn off the tube. Would hustle on down to the sandlot or pasture or schoolyard and play for the pleasure of playing the game. Play the skin off their knees and the covers off their baseballs. Play until every last inkling of twilight had sunk from the sky.

And we, their parents, would have to find something useful to do, such as planting a flowerbed or visiting the elderly. Because we wouldn't be driving our kids and their spanking new gear to the ballpark a few nights a week, a few weeks a year, watching the mess little darlings will make of this wickedly difficult game, appalled at their strikeouts and errors and rubber-kneed fears of the ball. The failures in baseball are painfully, unfashionably conspicuous. So this game is too hard for the parents.

And for goodness sake, the game is hard to *watch*. Too much dead air. Too much time for reflection, the perilous prospect of thought. We can try stuffing the gaps full of nachos and sodas and trips to the souvenir stand, but ne'er appease the restless beast of Time. Maybe that's fine for the grizzled old coot down the aisle, who is patiently tending a scorecard and tracking the fielding adjustments, guessing along with the hitter on slider or fastball or curve. But who wants to learn all that technical stuff? It is too hard, like chemistry or math. So forget it. Who needs it?

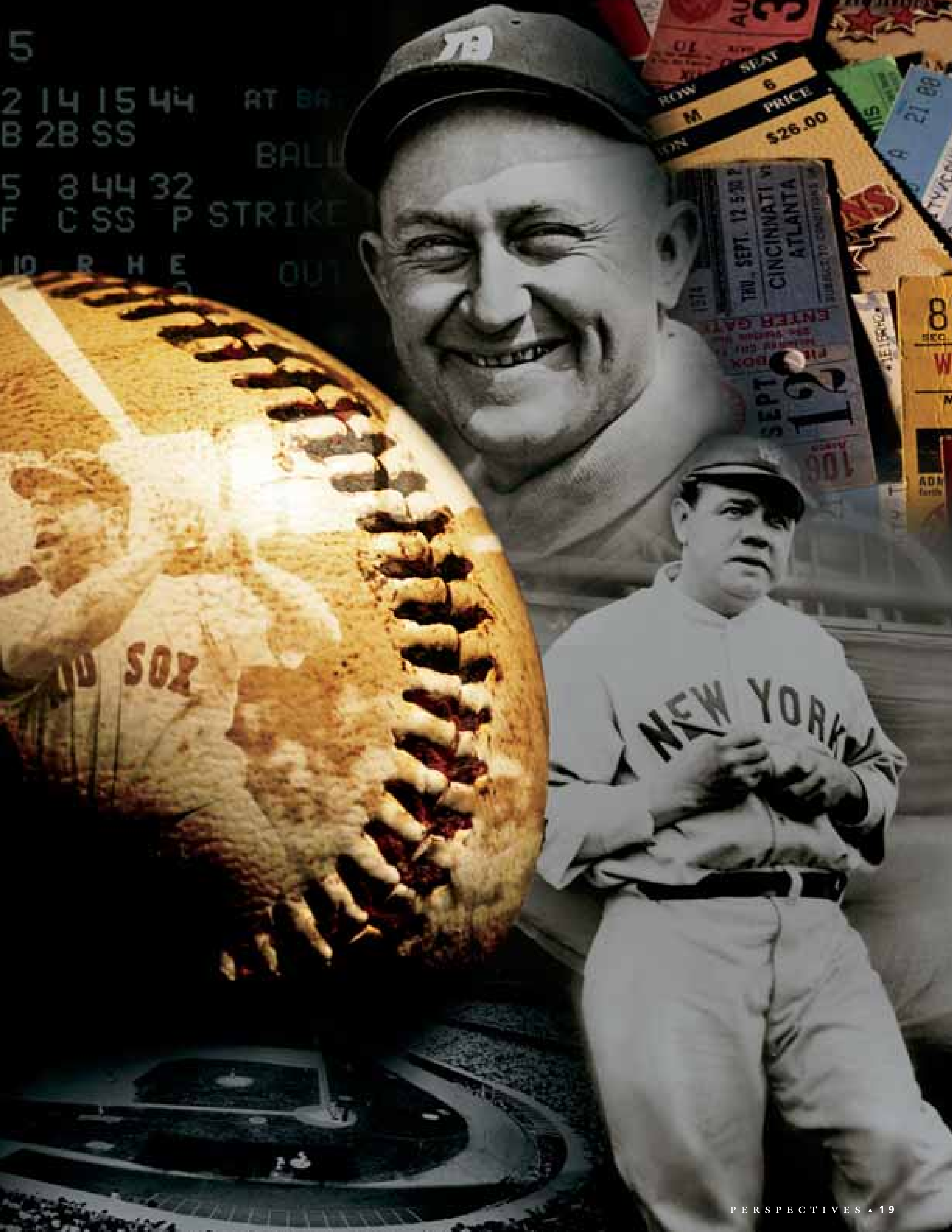
We do. We need it. Baseball isn't the Web or the spa or the mall. Baseball is Main Street. Baseball is so American that the French refuse to play it. Baseball is *ours*.

HARD BALL FOR HARD TIMES

A look at baseball's toughest era…Will the game ever be that good again?

BY NEIL CAUDLE

ALL PHOTOS, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED: *Courtesy of Charles Alexander*
DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION: *Christina Ullman*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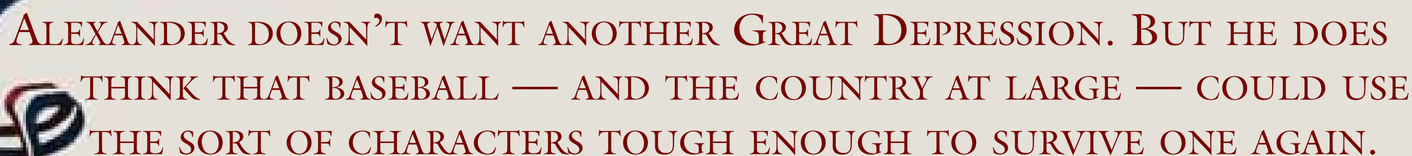


Alexander doesn't want another Great Depression. But he does think that baseball — and the country at large — could use the sort of characters tough enough to survive one again.

If you have any doubts on the subject, spend a few hours with Charles C. Alexander or any one of his five books about the history of American baseball. For several decades, Alexander has been writing and teaching history. And lately he's been doing this hard work about the hardest years of a very hard game — baseball during the Great Depression.

If that sounds perfectly dreary to you, then go catch the X games on ESPN. Because off and on for the next several pages, we will be tossing the ball with a man who is partial to players with grit in their craw, to pitchers who finished what they started, to hitters who could slap a single through the hole or drop a bunt down the line. Alexander doesn't want another Great Depression. But he does think that baseball — and the country at large — could use the sort of characters tough enough to survive one again.

Alexander is a self-described "moss-backed, stuck-in-the-mud baseball traditionalist." Unless you wish to provoke him, do not mention, in his presence, interleague play, the love fest we call an All Star Game, or the designated hitter.

And come to think of it, don't even mention the weather.

Let's say you're walking with him across campus under the bell-ringing blue of an early October sky. And there's just enough breeze to unsettle the yellows and reds in the trees. "Nice day," you'll say. But his eyes flash. "This is supposed to be World Series weather," he growls. "Imagine going to a World Series game on a day like today. Imagine sitting in the sun, and watching the afternoon shadows stretch out across the grass, and tasting that tang in the air. You would remember that feeling the rest of your life."

And he will. But the rascals have purloined this finest of weather from the finest of sporting occasions. Rascals who coveted the prime-time profits of televised night games. Rascals who padded the season with playoffs and shoved the Fall Classic deep into the frosty back pockets of late October.

I am making this Alexander fellow seem like a cranky, embittered old man. That would be wrong. For one thing, he doesn't seem old enough to have *emeritus* appended to the title *distinguished professor*. He claims to be 66, but this is only 49 in baseball years. Just ask Roger Clemens. Or Curt Schilling. Or Randy Johnson. All of them still flinging upper-90s heat. All of them deep in their 30s but pitching like strong 23s.

However you figure his age, Alexander is a solid and upright 5-foot-11, with a head full of iron-gray hair and a broadcast-quality baritone voice. His Texas-bred toughness has some air under it, like a Texas leaguer looped just out of reach. He can take a joke. He can answer a question, "I don't know." And he can even admit that he "gets a little misty" when he recalls playing catch with his dad. But this is not a gushy kind of guy.

He grew up in the small town of China, on the Cajun-spiced plain of southeast Texas, playing baseball "neither wisely nor well." He separated a shoulder on the high-school football field and never recovered the unfettered force of his swing. So he faced the hard fact that he'd never crack a lineup in the Show.

But the game was ingrained. He had learned it from his father, a school superintendent with the good sense to play catch with his son and take him the 15 miles to Stewart Field, a Texas League ballpark in the baseball hotbed of Beaumont. Growing up as he did in the 1940s and early '50s, Alexander and baseball converged just as the game reached its apogee of power and prestige. It was the era before television. The era of Jackie Robinson, when players of color strode into the majors and gave them a kick in the pants. An era when one could hate the mighty Yankees but admire the way they played the game. And there was so

much talent pent up in the minor leagues that even a boy down in Beaumont could feast on the game in its glory.

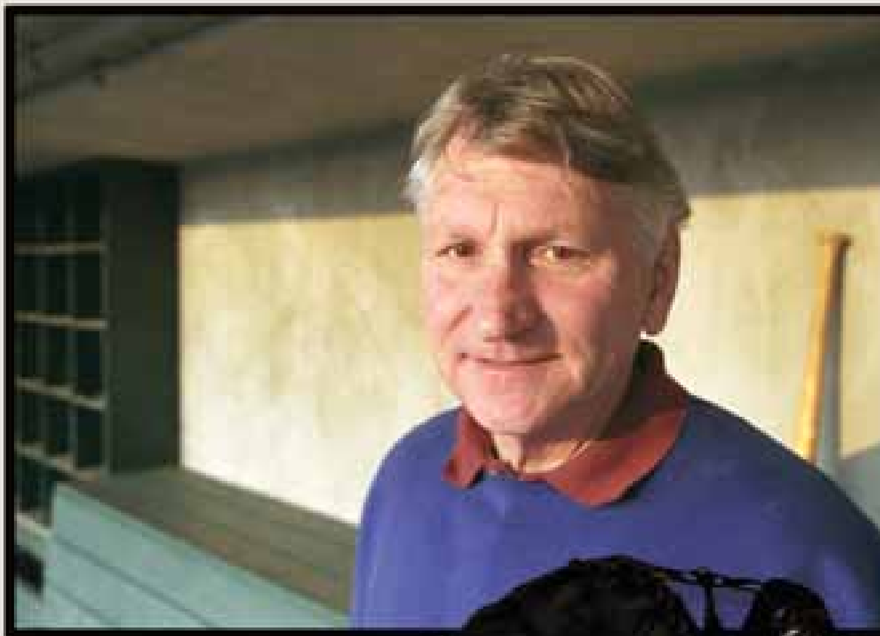
So Alexander grew up in the right place at the right time with the right sort of disciplined, literate dad and the smarts to be just what he is, a baseball historian. And all of those years he devoted to the scholarship of American intellectual history might be regarded as so much erudite forestalling, so much postponing the inevitable. The hints were all around him. All he had to do, for instance, was to step outside his office in Bentley Hall and read the date inscribed on its cornerstone: 1923, the same year Yankee Stadium opened.

And then, about two decades ago, Alexander yielded at last. "I had just finished *Here the Country Lies*," he recalls, "a book about nationalism and the arts in 20th century America. It was a complicated and difficult book to do, and I was really fed up with intellectuals and their discontents."

When Alexander turned away from those discontented intellectuals, there stood Ty Cobb, the perfect antidote to academic fuss and bother, and perhaps the toughest and most dominant baseball player of all time. Alexander's biography of Cobb, published by Oxford University Press, appeared in 1985. Since then, he's written four other baseball books: *John McGraw*, *Rogers Hornsby*, *Our Game: An American Baseball History*, and now, his most recent, *Breaking the Slump: Baseball in the Depression Era*, from Columbia University Press.

One of his students, Marah Eakin of Rocky River, Ohio, suggested the title, *Breaking the Slump*, after Alexander polled his classes for ideas. ("When in doubt," he says, "ask 150 people for advice.") Eakin's contribution is fitting, since Alexander has, at last count, intoned the cherished stanzas of baseball history into the ears of some 3,000 students. For Alexander, baseball history is not just a matter of recounting who did what in this or that pivotal season or game. The story of baseball, as he teaches it, is also the story of America.

"Baseball is interwoven with American life," Alexander says. "It has to do with the rise of cities and the development of transportation. It has to do with immigrants and their offspring — immigrants rising with social mobility. It has to do with race relations. It has to do with the long history of labor management and labor-management conflict. It has to do with the law. It has to do with small-town America, and small-city America. Just about anything significant in American life, baseball has related to it. And it's been like



▲ FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME Charles C. Alexander is a self-described "moss-backed, stuck-in-the-mud baseball traditionalist." PHOTO: *David Ahntholz*

▸ CATCH THIS George Sisler's first-baseman's mitt, 1920s.

◂ PLAYBALL Before Spud Chandler's opening pitch in the 1943 World Series, a B-17 bomber roars over Yankee Stadium. Note the wartime admonition printed on the second-deck railing: "See Score Card for Alert Instructions." (AP)

"THE OVERALL TALENT LEVEL IN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL, INCLUDING BOTH BLACK AND WHITE PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL, MAY HAVE BEEN HIGHER IN THE 1930S THAN IT HAS BEEN SINCE THAT TIME."
— CHARLES C. ALEXANDER

that for well over a hundred years. So that's why historians are more interested in baseball than they are in the other sports and why writing about baseball has attracted some of the best literary talent that the country has produced."

Alexander belongs in that company, not only for his careful scholarship and well-polished prose, but because he doesn't truck with slick and sappy, coffee-table kinds of books. And he doesn't think baseball is best when it's gummy with hugging and heartwarming tributes to over-hyped stars. So here is the man with the candor and credentials to say what's become of our game. Will it ever be our national pastime again?

Probably not, Alexander predicts, and his reasons are hard to dispute. More and more, easier diversions compete for our leisure. Television distorts not only the business of baseball but also the game on the field. And we, as a society, would never choose to relive the hard times that gave us the game at its toughest and best.

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

By the 1930s, baseball was the well-established pastime of choice in the United States. Boys played it by day and dreamed it by night. So the talent pool was huge and the available spots on professional squads very few. As the Great Depression swept across the nation, owners cut back, lopping two positions from each roster of the 16 major-league teams. Meanwhile, minor-league outfits in blighted towns shut down.

"A young man would have had very few options for making a decent living in the '30s," Alexander says. "If you were sufficiently talented to become a professional athlete, baseball was the direction you turned. You weren't going to make any money in professional football. Professional basketball was decentralized, haphazard. And boxing was a terrible way to make a living. So the overall talent level in professional baseball, including both black and white professional baseball, may have been higher in the 1930s than it has been since that time."

For some fans, the players of the 1930s were almost *too* good, too uniformly professional. Where were the hell-bent, high-spiking pugilists like Ty Cobb? In a time when every job seemed at risk, when the nation was facing domestic upheaval and the rumblings of war machines abroad, players bore down on their work with a serious purpose. But if the model for the 1930s was a durable stoic like Lou Gehrig, plenty of wildness remained in the game. Dizzy Dean and the Gashouse Gang of St. Louis, among others, supplied swagger and daring and comic relief. So the game was sufficient to vent a nation's anxieties and aggressions at the same time it offered a comforting order and form.

Teams imposed the sort of discipline impossible today. When a player signed a professional contract in the 1930s, he surrendered control over much of what mattered, including his health. In *Breaking the Slump*, Alexander recounts such tales: Physicians for the 1934 Red Sox looked into Lefty Grove's mouth and concluded that three abscessed teeth were causing his arm trouble, so out came the teeth and his tonsils, for good measure. The arm trouble persisted. In 1935, Joe McCarthy, manager of the Yankees, blamed Lou Gehrig's ailing back on the newfangled air conditioning in Pullman coaches, and so decreed that his players would turn off the cooling and open their windows. The onslaught of coal smoke and heat did nothing to relieve Gehrig's pain, a symptom of the rare, progressive degenerative illness that would come to be known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

But the most onerous of contract provisions was the infamous reserve clause, which bound a professional player to his owner as long as the owner wanted to re-sign the player.

Some of the more daring and desperate, risking the blacklists of major-league owners, took jobs as ringers on various pro or semipro outfits that thrived in the shadows of organized ball. These "outlaws," as they were known in North Carolina's independent leagues, played a fierce, combative game that inflamed local rivalries in the mill towns of the South.

Seduced by the Tube

We won't detail the struggles of baseball as the Depression gave way to war. You can find the story in Alexander's book, *Our Game*. What we're after, at the moment, is a sense of when and why the game began losing ground. As marquee veterans like Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio came home from the war, as Jackie Robinson and the best players from the Negro leagues infused the game with talent and verve, as a new generation of players and fans shook off the pain of hard times, why did the game lose its grip on America's heart?

"Post World War II America brought a period of unprecedented prosperity," Alexander explains, "which means unprecedented diversification of entertainments, recreational opportunities, and travel." For people who had endured the terrible sacrifices and insecurity of economic depression and war, America of the 1950s was "a wonderland," he says. "There were so many ways to have fun."

Television, for one. From 1950 forward, TV seduced us away from the ballparks, depriving the minor leagues and semipro teams of paying customers. "By the end of the 1950s, about 85 percent of the homes had a television," Alexander says. "More than any other single factor — and there were a lot of factors — television undermined the attraction of baseball as a live form of entertainment."

Television and baseball, Alexander will tell you, were from the beginning an unfortunate match.

"Baseball is, and always will be, a lousy thing on television," Alexander says. "Most of the time you look at four people — the pitcher, batter, catcher, and umpire. You can't get the distances. You can't get the flight of the ball. You can't get the positioning of the players."

At about the same time television began to enthrall us, Little League was also competing for our evenings at the ballpark — not so much to help children compete (they had been playing the game on their own), but so that their parents could get into the act. Baseball, and childhood, would never be the same.

Missing the Grit

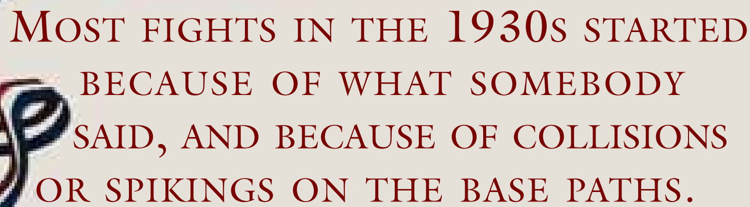
Last fall, we celebrated a World Series that Tom Boswell of the *Washington Post* called the best of all time. Even though Alexander can rattle off 10 Fall Classics that he says were at least as good (1924, 1926, 1946, 1947, 1955, 1960, 1968, 1979, 1987, and 1991), he agrees that the series was "splendid," with memorable, unprecedented events. Never, not even during World War II, has baseball displayed its patriotism with so much ardor, Alexander says. And never have we seen the likes of the Yankees' back-to-back, come-from-behind wins in games four and five, when the same thunderstruck Diamondback relief pitcher, Byung-Hyun Kim, twice surrendered the lead with two outs in the bottom of the ninth.

It was a storybook series at the end of a storybook season. Baseball rarely has produced more superlatives in the press, more record-setting performances on the field. This was the year, after all, when Barry Bonds broke Mark McGwire's single-season home run record and Babe Ruth's single-season records for slugging percentage and bases on balls. It was the year when Ricky Henderson broke Ty Cobb's record for runs scored in a career.

After such glories, what could be missing? What did the 1930s have that we haven't got?

Toughness, for one thing. "The players of the 1930s were tougher than they are today," Alexander says. "They had to be. The times were tougher, and so was the game." Without

BOYS OF SUMMER (Above, from left to right) Stan Musial at bat, 1952; Joe DiMaggio sliding into third base under Washington's Eddie Yost in 1949, with the home-plate umpire covering the play (AP); Lefty Grove (left) and Dizzy Dean, starting pitchers for the 1936 All-Star Game, Braves Field, Boston; Hank Greenberg batting at Briggs Stadium, Detroit, shortly after returning from military service in 1945. The catcher is Boston's Bob Garbark.



MOST FIGHTS IN THE 1930S STARTED BECAUSE OF WHAT SOMEBODY SAID, AND BECAUSE OF COLLISIONS OR SPIKINGS ON THE BASE PATHS.

a squad of well-paid relievers behind him, a starting pitcher bore down for his eighth-inning gut check to finish the game. Collisions on the base paths were frequent and violent; injuries came with the territory. After all, if baseball was your best shot at a paycheck, playing hurt didn't seem nearly so risky as surrendering your spot in the lineup to a hotshot even hungrier than you.

Today, teams have too much money invested in players to risk so much as a hangnail. The pampering of players, on and off the field, tends to make it easier for superstars to put up big numbers, Alexander says. Despite the Rawlings Company's insistence that its baseballs remain unchanged from a generation ago, many observers (and pitchers) believe that today's version is "juiced" to travel farther and yield more home runs. Lightweight bats, a smaller strike zone, and the dilution of pitching talent may also favor the sluggers of today. But these factors aside, Alexander says, hitting is easier today because batters have less to fear from their opponents on the mound.

Consider, he says, the demise of the brush-back pitch, otherwise known as the purpose pitch, the bean ball, the up-and-in, the high-and-tight, or, more whimsically, chin music. The idea is to throw a pitch sufficiently close to the chin that the batter bails out of the way. Is a hitter leaning into the zone, looking for the outside pitch? Dust him. Is he digging in for leverage? Flip him.

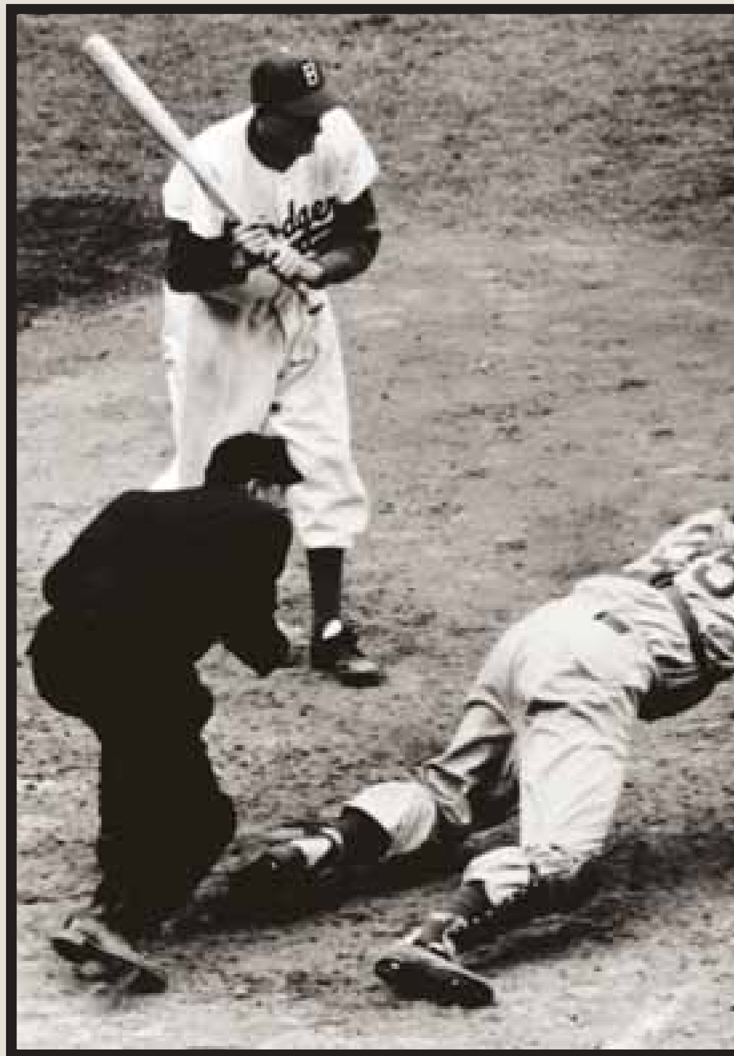
In a 1934 exhibition game in Norfolk, Virginia, a minor-league pitcher bounced a pitch off Lou Gehrig's skull, knocking him unconscious. The next day, Gehrig checked himself out of the hospital and made it to Washington to face the Senators in another exhibition game. In that game Gehrig hit three straight triples, headache and all.

Today, players wear helmets, but brush-backs are rare. Umpires eject offending pitchers, and officials levy fines. As a result, pitchers have lost a significant weapon, Alexander says, and the game has lost some of its risk and intrigue.

"Barry Bonds would not have hit 73 home runs this year if he'd been knocked down on a regular basis," he speculates. "Batters these days can dig in, and they can crowd the plate, and they really don't have any fear of being thrown at intentionally."

Wouldn't a return to chin music set off more fights? Alexander's studies of baseball during the 1930s found that most fights didn't start with batters being knocked down or hit. They started because of what somebody said, and because of collisions or spikings on the base paths.

"In the 1930s, getting knocked down with a pitch was part of the game," Alexander says. "You would dust yourself off and get back up again. Now, if somebody gets moved off the plate a little bit, he charges the mound, and the dugouts empty, and you go through this dance that passes for a baseball fight."



THE IMPERIAL UMP

As leagues tried to civilize the game for television, umpires gained the power to prohibit all kinds of overt aggression, especially that directed toward themselves. In fact, Alexander says, umpires now have become more confrontational than the players and managers. After Roberto Alomar spit in the face of umpire John Hirschbeck on September 27, 1996, a heat-of-the-moment blunder that continues to tarnish Alomar's otherwise brilliant career, umpires claimed victim status. No more managers storming out of the dugouts. No more Lou Pinella kicking dirt. Player begs to differ on that outside strike? Toss him. Manager disputes a close call at the plate? Run him.

Umpires tightened their grip on the game. The strike zone was *theirs*, and batters and pitchers would have to adjust. For most umpires, the top of the strike zone sagged to the belt and then bulged, obscenely, 6 inches off the outside corner. Batters could lay off the letter-high heat or a big-breaking curve. Sliders and sinkers and cutters and splitters prevailed, because these were the pitches that bored into the lower strata of the zone.

Never mind that the tipped-over strike zone fundamentally altered the game. The umpires were boss, and the umpires liked a low zone, partly because they were setting up down in the "slot" between catcher and hitter, where they

A TOUGH CALL Jackie Robinson tries to avoid catcher Harry Chiti while stealing home plate at Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, 1952, as batter Preacher Roe looks on. (UPI)

saw the lower pitches best. To reach the low-and-outside pitches, batters crowded the plate, encrusting their elbows and forearms with padding, taking bases on pitches that hit them but should have been strikes.

The lopsided strike zone prevailed until last year, when Major League Baseball called the umpires' union's bluff on a mass resignation and the commissioner's office took the supervision of umpires away from the leagues. Organized baseball began enforcing, with modest success, the rule-book strike zone. The game regained some of its balance. Batting averages returned to the realm of reason, and pitchers who could throw the high heat — Schilling and Clemens among them — had sensational years.

But even if umpires eased up even further, the public may never be ready for the sort of hot-headed warriors and rogues who once ignited the game. Modern tastes run to paragons like Cal Ripken, Jr., or dreamboats like Derek Jeter, or gentle giants like Mark McGwire. Players today are not permitted to be who they were in the '20s or '30s or even the '50s: unfinished men in the unabashed wildness of youth.

For one thing, big-money contracts and commercial endorsements favor presentable guys, guys who can maintain a show of civility under pressure, even with cameras and microphones constantly pointed their way. For another, Alexander says, baseball, like American society in general, "is on terminal political correctness."

Where Have All the Pitchers Gone?

But the real crime, Alexander maintains, is that pitching has gotten so woefully thin that a guy with a 10-cent head and a tendency to leave his fastball up in a hitter's happy zone can ascend to a major-league roster where his backside, when he shows it, is out there for millions to see.

Without defense and pitching, hitting and scoring don't have the power to thrill. Pitching yields dramatic tension, a tension that mounts, through the course of a well-pitched game, pitch by pitch, inning by inning. Without this tension, the action of hitting is flaccid and boring.

Having just last fall enjoyed a World Series resplendent with pitching, it's easy to forget that for most teams today a good arm is hard to find. Before his death a couple of years ago, Hall of Famer Jim "Catfish" Hunter blamed this problem on pitching's extreme difficulty, and on the lack of young pitchers who are willing to learn.

"It takes a lot of time and effort to learn how to pitch the right way," Hunter said. "It's a process that you have to start as a kid and stick with for several years."

Nine-year-olds clamor to pitch, but volunteer coaches generally have neither the time nor the expertise to teach those scrawny hopefuls what they need to know. So the coach picks out a couple of kids who, by virtue of early growth spurts, are big enough to throw the ball hard. Out of earshot of mommies and daddies, the coaches call these kids their "studs."

So the studs pitch, and the rest mope. By tournament time, the studs are getting too much work and, all too often, strained ligaments, fractured growth plates, or disfiguring stiffness. The wear and tear on young arms — arms especially vulnerable because the joints are not fully formed until after puberty — is so pervasive that some pro scouts will tell you that they prefer pitchers who never took the mound in youth leagues at all.

Brad Woodall, a lefthander who pitched for the Braves, Brewers, and Cubs before he became a pitching coach with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, was one of those scrawny Little Leaguers who didn't get to pitch until high school. He says that the failure to develop pitchers in youth baseball translates into a shortage of pitching in the majors. "It seems paradoxical to say that kids today are pitching too much and throwing too little," Woodall says. "But there's a difference between throwing a baseball on flat ground and pitching off a mound. The leverage you get from the mound applies extra stress to the arm. You have to build up to that stress gradually with a lot of conditioning and a lot of throwing on flat ground. This means playing catch almost every day, for years and years. Most kids just don't do that kind of throwing any more."

The Omnipresent Adult

Why not? Alexander blames the "tragic domination of adults." His father played catch with him in the backyard, but he didn't shout instructions through a chain-link fence at a Little League field, or bribe him with $250 scandium-alloy bats. In the China, Texas, of the 1940s and early 1950s, boys

chose up sides and played whenever they could. And boys of that era threw whatever came to hand — snowballs, wormy apples, rocks. Throwing expressed all manner of yearning.

But for most kids today, throwing anything riskier than a Frisbee without adult supervision and sanction is a punishable offense. So it's hard to develop an arm. It's also hard, without playing almost daily, to build up the wrist snap to swing a quick bat, or the "soft hands" to field a hot grounder. Baseball is a scary and dangerous game for the weak and unskilled. Add to this what Alexander calls "the omnipresent factor of adult interference," and it's easy to understand why most kids have abandoned the game by the ages of 13 or 14, turning to another sport or to no sport at all.

The loss to baseball is significant, but the loss to families and communities is what saddens Alexander most. In our zeal to organize and control, to live vicariously through our children, we are losing the casual pleasures of parent and child. One of these pleasures is playing catch, a communion that joins us at levels mere talk cannot reach.

"Fathers passing the football to sons? No, that doesn't work," Alexander says. "Fathers shooting baskets with sons? That may work a little better. But fathers playing catch with sons — you know, the late afternoon, the rhythm of the catch back and forth…" This is where his toughness mellows, his gaze turns inward. Even that most sobering of disciplines, the study of history, cannot entirely separate emotion from the game. Its memories. Its places.

"When I go back to Beaumont from time to time," he says, "I'll drive out to Avenue A where Stuart Stadium stood. There's a tacky little shopping center there now, and a plaque in the parking lot saying this is where home plate was. And it's sad."

The Shape of Things to Come

Millions will feel a similar sadness if New York decides to tear down the most storied ballpark of all, Yankee Stadium. Before he left office, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, negotiated a deal to build, at an estimated cost of $1.6 billion, fancy new digs for the Yankees and Mets. At this writing, the city's budget crisis has put those plans on hold. But when the facilities are built, they almost certainly will resemble other new parks around the country — fields in a shopping-mall wrapper, with plenty of sealed luxury boxes for the corporate elite and with just enough retro architecture and museum-style exhibits to inspire pangs of nostalgia in the shoppers. No doubt, the teams will continue to put "good product" on the field. And, as products go, baseball returns as much value as most.

But the game can be more than a product. It was more in the 1930s, when baseball helped a nation muster its resolve for the test of hard times. Will it do so again? As we wake from the shock of September 11 to the long siege of war and recession and lingering grief, will baseball be part of the bedrock we'll need to survive?

Alexander declines to indulge in prediction. History, he says, teaches the folly of forecasts. It also teaches a healthy skepticism for those owners who would have us believe that players and agents are driving professional baseball into bankruptcy.

"The old saying goes that baseball must be a great thing to survive the people in it," Alexander says. "I think that still applies — and it will survive." ▲

Five Reasons to

Not long ago, I spent some time with a CEO who doesn't like baseball at all, but thinks the movie *A League of Their Own* was just terrific. In motivational speeches, he quotes Tom Hanks' character, who says, after his catcher has complained that baseball is too hard, "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. That's what makes it great." The trouble is, the real game of baseball really is too hard. But why should we ever admit it, when so many familiar objections come so readily to mind? Here are five of those objections, and why they don't wash.

1 There's not enough action.

This is true only if (a) you don't know the game, (b) you watch it only on TV, or (c) your attention span has shriveled up short as a punch line. With its peephole-sized view of the action, television creates the misimpression that offense, specifically the home run, is the measure of the game. It is not. And neither is a photogenic face. Mike Piazza, of course, is more than a hunk. He's a terrific hitter. But he couldn't have played catcher in the Major Leagues before the age of television, says Ohio University baseball historian Charles Alexander. In those days, teams could not afford to sacrifice defense, especially at the crucial position of catcher, for a little more pop at the plate.

But despite its distortions, the game on the field is still very good — probably better than we deserve. In his introduction to *Men at Work*, George Will wrote, "Being a serious baseball fan, meaning an informed and attentive and observant fan, is more like carving than whittling. It is doing something that makes demands on the mind of the doer." If you can't do the carving, you're missing the game.

2 Baseball players aren't athletes.

The action in baseball is not the back-and-forth running of basketball, but it's just as demanding. A third baseman goes nine nervous innings on his toes, never knowing when a lined shot will come for his head. A left fielder prowls his turf, flexing and breathing, tuning his muscles and mind for that instant when the ball will rocket off the bat, when he'll sprint for the gap or the foul line, looking into the sun for a speck of a ball that will bound back and forth with each shock of his stride.

The physicist Robert Adair has analyzed the complex kinetics and split-second timing of hitting a baseball and declared them right at the limits of human facility. When Michael Jordan, the most celebrated athlete of his generation, tried his hand at baseball, he quickly discovered his limits. He could buy his minor-league team a bus but, alas, could not procure a decent swing. This is no knock against Jordan, who was brave to attempt the game at all.

For ordinary athletes, the terrors of baseball must be surmounted gradually, in tiny increments from childhood. Other than, say, soldiers or firemen or policemen, how many men would have the cajones to face a 97-mile-per-hour fastball, knowing that it could dart off course and fracture their ribs or their jaws or their skulls? And, knowing this, how many could calmly wag their bats with a predatory twitch, then whip 33 ounces of maple or ash into that menacing blur of a ball?

If there were a skill more difficult than hitting, it would have to be pitching, which requires a human being to throw a baseball

Dislike Baseball
(and why they are bogus)

PHOTO: *Rick Fatica*

90-plus miles per hour, with varying spins and from varying angles, so that the ball can dip and dive and swerve and then reliably hit a 5-inch target from 60 feet away. In 1996, Jan Zelezny, a native of the Czech Republic who earned the label "world's strongest arm" for his world-record performances in the javelin, had a pitching tryout with the Atlanta Braves. Despite some practice and instruction, Zelezny topped out in the mid-70s in miles per hour on the radar gun — good enough for junior high.

3 MONEY HAS RUINED THE GAME.

"Nobody seems to mind if Tom Cruise gets $13 million per picture," Alexander says, "but we have to figure out how much money per time at bat Alex Rodriguez is making. Free-market economists would tell you that baseball players cannot possibly be overpaid. You're worth what anybody's willing to pay."

It's a popular myth that money has only recently sullied professional baseball, and that players of old would have played for the love of the game. "One of the silliest things I think anybody can say," Alexander says, "is 'I would have done whatever it is I did for free because I loved it so much.' To which I say, 'Bullshit.' Old ballplayers were just as money-hungry as these guys are now. There was just less money to be hungry about, that's all."

Even Lou Gehrig, that model of loyalty and self sacrifice, held out for higher pay. And there were many others. "By definition, somebody who is a professional baseball player is trying to make a living from baseball, and make the best living he possibly can. Ty Cobb held out. Why wouldn't he?"

Lest we think that baseball as a business is on the whole more commercial than it was in the good old days, Alexander reminds us that Fenway Park's Green Monster in 1934 wasn't yet green. It was plastered with ads. The problem, he says, is not baseball's profit motive but its blunders in business. Take the case of television money, for example.

"The pro football owners and the president of the National Football League, Pete Rozelle, saw the potential in television," Alexander says. "They had the wisdom, as of 1960, to begin sharing revenues equally from television with all of the franchises in the league. Which meant basically that within a few years you couldn't lose money with the National Football League, no matter how bad your team was. Whereas baseball, in its halting, faltering, uncertain way of trying to deal with television, used the model of radio, which is local contracts for broadcasting rights. Which means that the large-market teams of course got a lot of money from television, and the small market teams got very little. Montreal, for example, is getting none right now. They don't even have a radio contract."

This long-standing inequity has contributed to baseball's latest crisis, the proposal to eliminate several money-losing teams. Naturally, the players' association resists losing dozens of major-league jobs, and the collective-bargaining agreement is expiring, as well. So baseball fans, who are just now beginning to forget the strike of 1994, are bracing for another bout of labor troubles in the major leagues.

4 THERE'S TOO MUCH SCRATCHING AND SPITTING.

For that golden time when a young man is on the playing field, he is free to cuss and sweat and spit for all he's worth. It's not as though he'll revert to unregulated beast.

Baseball has its own set of conventions, at least as rigorous and functional as the pinkies-out, buttoned-down versions. And dugout banter is, on the whole, a richer medium for social negotiation than the stylish repartee at an uptown dinner party. Funnier, too. The scratching and spitting, and dozens of other less obvious habits, are not just an absence of manners.

As Alexander puts it, they are "basic to baseball's uniquely stylized movement." There is, he says, a sort of baseball choreography: "The bat knocking the mud off the spikes. Pulling at the cap, pulling at the belt. The swing of the bat. It is part of the movement, this movement in pause, that I don't think you find in other sports."

5 BASEBALL IS DYING.

Pundits wring their hands if TV telecasts of the World Series decline a few points in the ratings. But the choices on cable have cut into everyone's share, and the World Series hasn't lost as many rating points as the NBA finals over the last 10 years. But who says that network TV is the measure of health in a sport, anyway? What about all of those people who actually show up at the ballpark?

In 1941, the year Ted Williams hit .400 and Joe DiMaggio went on his hitting streak, the average attendance at major-league baseball games was 7,852. Last year, it was just over 30,000. Attendance at minor-league games has been rising, as well.

The truth is, more people are paying to watch baseball games than ever before. And players, by a number of measures, are playing better than ever before. Yes, affluent white boys are dropping the game for their skateboards and video games, but many more Latinos and African Americans and young women are taking it up, ensuring a new generation of players and fans. Baseball is dying? Don't bank on it. — NC