

Baseball in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching the National Pastime

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Experiential Learning

*Journal of a Journey—Teaching
Baseball on the Road*

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In the summer of 1996 the University of Southern Maine launched a course that aimed, while traveling by motor coach, to teach baseball and

its relationship to American culture. "Baseball and American Society: A Journey" attracted 40 students, some taking the course for three undergraduate credits and others auditing. Locations visited that inaugural year included Norwich, Utica, Cooperstown, Scranton, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City, and Pawtucket. Along the way, our group read and discussed baseball literature, viewed and debriefed films, discussed observations made at ballparks, and interviewed people who had richly diverse experiences in baseball. Among these were Rob Fowler (owner and general manager of New York-Penn League franchise), Jim Gates (librarian at the National Baseball Hall of Fame), Gene Benson (former Negro League all-star), Rex Barney (teammate of Jackie Robinson and long-time public address announcer of the Baltimore Orioles), Larry Doby (later to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame), and Bill Monbouquette (former major league player and minor league pitching coach).

Based on rave student reviews, strong interest on the part of the press, and enthusiastic encouragement from the university, a second baseball journey was planned for the summer of 1997. That year brought its own set of highlights (including a group interview with Bob Feller and an afternoon spent with six former players from the All American Girls Professional Baseball League.) From then on, "Baseball and American Society: A Journey" took on a life of its own. In the summer of 2005, when this essay was written, faculty were preparing to board a bus with another forty students for the course's tenth season.

During the 2004 road trip that will serve as the basis of this essay, as with every other iteration of "Baseball and American Society: A Journey," all participants—credit students and auditors—were expected to read three core texts. The books for 2004 were *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*, edited by Edward J. Rielly; *I Had A Hammer*, by Hank Aaron and Lonnie Wheeler; and *Moneyball*, by Michael Lewis. Students taking the course for three undergraduate credits also read a fourth book of their choice (selected from a ten-page bibliography mailed in advance), and wrote a three- to five-page reflection essay on each of the four books. The purpose of the essay was to summarize the main ideas in the book, provide a critique, and examine ways the author(s) connected the game of baseball with American society. An oral report of the individually selected book was given on the bus during the journey. Additionally, two weeks after we arrived home from the trip, credit students submitted a final essay that summarized their thinking about the relationship between baseball and American society.

Students also were required to keep a journal of ideas and observations throughout the journey and submit five pages of her or his best journal entries to faculty along with the final course essay two weeks after the

completion of the journey. As one of two faculty members who co-teach this course, I believe it is important to model this writing activity. Therefore, since the initial 1996 odyssey, I have kept detailed observations and reflections about our many and varied experiences. What follows is a selection of journal entries written during the 2004 course. These reflections will give the reader a feel for what "Baseball and American Society: A Journey" is about, some of the logistics, a sample of topics that are addressed, and challenges that present themselves along the way to those teaching on the road. Since my long-term journal writing practice (over thirty-five years) is to write early in the morning, I continue to adhere to this schedule while on the annual baseball travel course. Each of the following entries represents a retrospective of the previous day's events.

Sunday, August 8

We began this year's course, as we often do, with an initial visit to our "home team," the Portland Sea Dogs and Hadlock Field. Chris Cameron, a double alumnus of this course and the director of public relations for the Sea Dogs, provided a tour of the ball park and answered students' questions about minor league baseball. One new piece of information for me related to community appearances by Sea Dogs players. Somehow I had been under the impression that making visits to schools or hospitals were nonpaid activities that were part of players' contracts. Portland Sea Dogs players are paid for community appearances they make, autograph sessions with the public, etc. However, they are not paid in cash. Instead they are given gift certificates to the team store, which apparently are welcome because players often like to pick up team merchandise to send to family and friends. Chris commented that this arrangement seems to work well both for the players and organization.

We finished our two hours at Hadlock Field under cover in the right field picnic area with Maine author Edward J. Rielly. Since one of the core textbooks we are using this year is *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*, edited by Professor Rielly, who teaches at St. Joseph College in Standish, we scheduled an educational session with him. Ed began by telling us the story of his own roots in baseball, which go back to rural Wisconsin in the 1950s. There were only thirteen kids in his school, so boys and girls played ball together. Professor Rielly went on to describe some of his teaching and writing projects, including the two years of work that resulted in *Baseball and American Culture*. This talk helped set the stage for students' questions.

We discussed a broad range of topics, including whether Pete Rose deserves to be in the Hall of Fame, steroid use, the financial inequities in

today's game, and details about the development of Ed's book. An interesting issue arose when Dr. Kay Yung, a psychiatrist who is taking the course for non-credit, asked a question that, in my memory, has never come up before. "Why is it that baseball players—apparently at every level—always appear to be chewing something: tobacco, gum, sunflower seeds?" The group quickly engaged this question and we heard a number of opinions that included oral fixation (whatever that means) and tradition. My own take on Kay's question, and I shared this during our discussion, is that baseball is especially stressful because players are not physically moving all the time. Constant running (like players do in basketball, soccer, and other sports) helps reduce tension. Chewing something can help to take the edge off.

In the bus on our way to New Britain we began with a journal writing assignment ("Write a reflection on an early baseball memory") and personal introductions. As usual, we have a solid core of returning people—ten or twelve—and a healthy mix of those taking the course for credit and audit. I'm happy we made the decision years ago that every student, whether taking the course for three undergraduate credits or not, would read the core books. This way we have a common basis for discussion. We have obtained our average of about 20 percent women. I'd like to see this ratio increase in the future but am not quite sure how to do it. It would be interesting to learn from other professors who teach courses on baseball if a substantial proportion of their students are female. The most we have ever had on this course has been nine (out of forty) and this year seven.

Our educational session with Bill Dowling, principal owner and general manager of the New Britain Rock Cats, held in box seats along the third base line in New Britain Stadium ninety minutes before the game, was fascinating. Bill used to be the executive vice president and general counsel to the New York Yankees. "George Steinbrenner is tough to work for. He is very detail-oriented and works his staff hard. When I was with the Yankees I had almost no personal life. I think I had three days off in three years." In 2000 Bill and a partner bought the New Britain Eastern League franchise.

Bill stressed how minor league baseball is primarily about family entertainment. The key is to sell an alternative to a night out at the movies or an amusement park. They have created a jingle that is helping to sell interest in Rock Cats baseball: "These cats rock!" The trick, says Mr. Dowling, is to get wives and children to want to go to baseball games. Additionally, Bill feels that one of his best friends is Major League Baseball. With high ticket prices (especially in the two closest major league cities to New Britain—New York and Boston), parking, expensive concessions, etc., minor league ball is perceived as a real bargain to many baseball fans.

Monday, August 9

We spent yesterday in Baltimore. Although our original plan was to have a session with co-general manager Jim Beattie (an old friend of my teaching partner, Al Bean) after the afternoon game, Jim is away this weekend and sent a pinch-hitter, Dave Ritterpusch. Dave has a long history in baseball (including being a scout) and has also served as a colonel in the U.S. Army and as an assistant secretary of labor. He is currently director of Baseball Information Systems with the Orioles. We met in the organization's executive boardroom.

The Orioles do not employ a pure "Money Ball" approach to scouting and player development but prefer to use a blend of tools. They do use statistics—Bill James's "win shares" is an important instrument for this organization. But Dave and his fellow Oriole senior administrators place a great deal of trust in a personality profile that is given to every ballplayer (across baseball) each year during spring training. The profile is available both in English and Spanish. Evidently these data are offered to all baseball organizations through the Major League Scouting Bureau, but only a few teams take advantage. "Certainly no other team has the thirty-one years of experience working with this profile that the Orioles do." The instrument itself is a paper and pencil test involving 130 questions that measure a variety of traits: drive, determination, composure, trust, self-confidence, coachability and so on. According to Mr. Ritterpusch, "We've taken our scouts pretty much away from the intangibles. This profile handles those. What the scout can concentrate on are baseball skills. Is this guy a baseball player? We're after talent and it is an art to find it."

Tuesday, August 10

The course seems to be going well thus far. There is healthy energy and a developing sense of community on the bus. We had our first three student book reports yesterday (on the book selected from the large bibliography people are sent in advance that is in addition to our three core texts.) Because students make such a wide range of choices it's hard to group these in any meaningful way. Yesterday we had reports on Dan Shaughnessy's *The Curse of the Bambino*, Harvey Rosenfeld's *Iron Man* (which is about Cal Ripken, Jr.), and a classic in the baseball literature, Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*. Over the course of the week we try to have some of these reports on the bus and others in a motel conference room that we rent specifically for this purpose. While giving the report itself works fine on the bus (the student comes to the front and uses the microphone), it's hard to facilitate a discussion with bus seating the way it is.

Typically, however, three or four people will come forward to comment about the content in the book report or ask a question. So while it's not the ideal environment, we still achieve substantial learning while cruising at sixty-five mph along the interstate.

On our way from Baltimore to Durham we had to—naturally—view the film *Bull Durham*. This film was shot on location at the old Durham Bulls Athletic Park, which is several miles away from where the Bulls currently play. One of the reasons why we do not want children on this course (we set the lower age limit at 14—if that person has a parent or guardian along) is because of R-rated films such as this. And even then there have been times when we've gotten into trouble. I remember once, five or six years ago, after we showed this film (we do not show *Bull Durham* or any other particular baseball film every year) one of our students came up to the microphone during the debriefing and castigated the faculty for "showing such filth in the presence of children!" After this embarrassing situation we now make a concerted effort, when we know that an adolescent will be accompanying a parent or grandparent on the course, to advise the family ahead of time that not all baseball films are "Disney-like" and, in the least, the language is not what one would usually hear in church. While discussing this caveat on the telephone I have, without exception (at least up until now), only heard responses such as "We understand," "This is not a problem for us;" or even "Don't worry. We have plenty of experience with sex and foul language in this house!"

While we met with several Durham Bulls front office personnel prior to game, a highlight was spending thirty minutes with field manager Bill Evers. This is Bill's seventh season with Durham and he is the only field manager the AAA Bulls have had. (While this franchise has had a long and colorful minor league history, it has been affiliated with the AAA-level International League only since 1998.) Bill has led Durham to back-to-back International League championships and has more wins than any other manager in franchise history (471). All totaled, Evers has managed for twenty-eight years and has over 1,200 victories (fourth among active minor league managers).

Bill spoke with us about a wide range of issues, including team travel (the Bulls fly to away games), pitch counts in the Devil Rays organization (90 for the first five starts; 105 after that), the difficulty of making it all the way to the majors ("Of all the guys who are drafted, only three percent make it"), and drugs ("Yes—drug use does take place here. It exists at all levels of the game. Players at the AAA level are tested four times a year"). Bill feels that minor leaguers are rushed too quickly today and consequently are not as sound fundamentally as they were ten and twenty years ago. Clubs are in a hurry to move prospects up the organizational ladder

because of the large signing bonuses many young players receive. Finally, Bill is not a believer in the philosophy espoused by Michael Lewis's recent best-selling book. "I'm not a *Moneyball* guy. Intangibles are important, especially heart."

Wednesday, August 11

We did something highly unusual for a college course of any kind yesterday. On our way from Durham to Atlanta we held a memorial service on the bus for Ed Amos, who recently died. Ed was a double alumnus of this course and a number of people aboard the bus knew him, either from those two previous trips or Ed's near-constant presence at Hadlock Field. We held a similar service for Larry Epstein several years ago. When, at the age of 86, Larry traveled with us for the second time (1997), he was then and remains the oldest person to have taken "Baseball and American Society: A Journey."

There was nothing religious, at least in the formal sense, about either of these memorial services. In Ed's case, I began by telling the group a little about him and read the obituary that was in the newspaper. I knew that Bob Paskal and Paul Marshall were close to Ed (mostly by way of Sea Dogs games) and asked them in advance to prepare brief statements about their friend. Then we opened up the microphone to anyone else who may have known Ed and wanted to share a story. I have been to many church funerals and believe that what happened on the bus yesterday was no less sacred than any of those rituals, albeit with the name of God never once being invoked. To have done this, and to have had it work so nicely, says something about the special nature of the community we have built over the years through this course.

Yesterday was supposed to have been our day to meet with Hank Aaron. I had worked at arranging this meeting for several months. I still have the e-mail message that I received from Susan Bailey, Mr. Aaron's personal secretary, on June 8: "Dear Dr. Brady—Mr. Aaron is pleased to address your group on Tuesday, August 10 at 3:00 PM at Turner Field...." Indeed, this was among the happiest moments I have had in planning the hundreds of events we have experienced in nine years of running this course. And then the e-mail message I received from Ms. Bailey only twenty-four hours before the bus departed last weekend: "I just left you a voice mail as well.... I am sorry to tell you that Mr. Aaron has to travel to Mobile tomorrow to be with his mother and get her to the doctor on Monday. She is in her mid-90s and since Mr. Aaron's sister passed away (she lived in Mobile very near Mrs. Aaron and was her caretaker) a few months ago Mr. Aaron has had to spend more time with his ailing mother...."

How can one argue with this? Hank Aaron is not only a legendary ballplayer but is a good son. When I told the class about this disappointing news several hours before arriving in Atlanta yesterday, there was an audible group sigh. People were respectful enough of my obvious disappointment and of the circumstances Mr. Aaron faced that nobody openly complained. But the depletion of spirit and energy was palpable. I chided myself about having told everyone, by way of the final itinerary we traditionally mail to students several weeks prior to departure, that we were going to be meeting with Hank Aaron to discuss his memoir, *I Had A Hammer* (written with Lonnie Wheeler). "Better to surprise everyone with good news" was my self-talk. But how could one have anticipated this turn of events? It's nobody's fault. Just one of those things that happens on occasion and with which we all have to live.

I like *I Had A Hammer* and consider it one of the better baseball memoirs. We have used it once before in this course without any plans to meet with the author or even come within 500 miles of Atlanta. The end of Susan Bailey's e-mail message held out the promise that we could plan to arrange such a session again the next time we are in Atlanta. But who knows when that will be, if ever?

It would be nice to return to Atlanta, however, with or without an educational session with baseball's all-time home run leader. The people there were gracious. The Braves bent over backwards to compensate for our not having the conference with Hank Aaron. For example, they provided us with a free tour of Turner Field and also complimentary passes to the impressive "History of the Braves" museum that is located inside the ballpark. Our group was even impressed by the civility of the public address announcer moments before the first pitch: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Atlanta Braves would like to welcome the Milwaukee Brewers and their fans to Turner Field." As one of our students said to me during the game, "Can you imagine such a welcome at Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium? It would be more like 'Welcome to Fenway Park where we hope to beat the brains out of the Yankees!'"

Thursday, August 12

Baseball was first played in Asheville in 1866. The famous American writer Thomas Wolfe was a batboy here in 1915. Decades later Cal Ripken, Jr., had the same job. Up until now nearly 500 players (the actual number is 499) came through Asheville on their way to the major leagues. *Baseball America* rates this small city in the western mountains of North Carolina as one of the top five places to watch a baseball game.

As we planned our first itinerary in nine seasons that would take us

south of Virginia I wanted to visit three locations: Durham, Atlanta, and Asheville. All are legendary in their own right in the annals of American baseball. Meeting yesterday afternoon with Chris Smith, assistant general manager and local baseball historian, and Ron McKee, co-owner, general manager, and former president of the South Atlantic League, made our visit even more worthwhile. As we sat in the grandstands two hours before game time, watching the grounds crew roll tarp onto the infield and then roll it off once a fast-moving storm moved through, we learned a good deal about the history of this fabled city and franchise. What is more important than the facts and traditions we learned, however, was to take the measure of these men who represent their ball club and are willing to spend time with our class when so many other responsibilities call. For the most part I have observed over the years that, although not well paid at the minor league level, people in this game love their work and take pride in the cities and franchises they represent. Smith and McKee beamed with enthusiasm when they spoke about the Asheville Tourists, the old and beautiful McCormick Field, and the details of their day-to-day activities running a team in the SALLY [South Atlantic] League. It was an honor to have spent time with these generous and passionate folk. I hope some year we shall travel south again on this course and, if not all the way to Atlanta, at least make it as far as Asheville.

Friday, August 13

Thursday night's game in Charleston, West Virginia, was rained out. It was only the second time in nine years (approximately 90 games) that we have lost a ball game to rain. Fortunately, because of another Maine contact, Alley Cats field manager Kenny Joyce, we were at least able to have an "up close and personal" educational program despite the disappointing rain-out. I say "up close and personal" because we actually had our interview and discussion in the club house and his office.

Kenny grew up in Portland and played for coach Ed Flaherty at the University of Southern Maine. He later coached with Ed. He was a grammar school teacher in South Portland when the new Eastern League franchise, the Sea Dogs, came to Portland in 1994. Kenny volunteered his services to the organization as a hitting coach. Carlos Tosca, who was Portland's manager at the time, took notice of his teaching talent and became Kenny's mentor and advocate. "Most coaches need someone to open doors. But once the door is open you're on your own to work hard and show your talent. So, like, I suppose, in many businesses, in baseball it's who you know that gets you a job, but what you know keeps you in."

Over the years Kenny has coached in Utica, Glens Falls, Bangor (Inde-

pendent), Medicine Hat, Alberta, and most recently here in Charleston. Up until this year he had been able to keep his teaching job because his baseball coaching involved short-season leagues that begin play in mid-June and end by the start of the new school year. "There is no security in baseball and last year I had to make the tough choice to give up my full-time teaching position." Kenny and his family understand the risks. But he enjoys working in baseball and thus far has no regrets about this decision to give up the security and roots provided by a public school teaching position in order to both continue and further develop his coaching career.

Saturday, August 14

I think folks are getting tired. I know I am. I slept all the way to wake-up call (6:00) this morning, which is very unusual.

We got lucky yesterday with the weather. We were rained out in Charleston Thursday night and all indicators were that we would be traveling east and north with this low pressure front to Philadelphia. It rained much of the way from Charleston across West Virginia and into Maryland yesterday while we kept busy on the bus debriefing the Kenny Joyce experience, engaging book reports, and viewing and discussing films. To our delight and surprise the sun actually greeted us late in the day as we approached Philadelphia. However, with two hurricanes having struck Florida within the past forty-eight hours and now on their way up the East Coast, we may have weather problems tomorrow and the rest of the way home.

As one student said last night at the ballpark, feeling the tension and observing the fans' incessant and intense heckling of the Giants (especially Barry Bonds): "You can tell we're back in the North!" There was a palpably different "feel" to this game as compared with Durham, Atlanta, or Asheville. An edge, an intensity, even a sense of anger. Our psychiatrist colleague, Kay Yung, whom we have endearingly come to call "Moonlight" (after Dr. "Moonlight" Graham in *Field of Dreams*), and I had a conversation about sport as catharsis. Catharsis used to be an outcome of theater in Ancient Greece. It was a way of letting go of deep feelings. Apparently sporting events have assumed some of this role in contemporary society. There is an anonymity in large venues such as these baseball parks that may give permission to people to "let it out." Another thought related to the psychology of sport: Is heckling a kind of displaced envy? A way of drawing attention to oneself?

Sunday, August 15

For the ninth year in a row we have included Cooperstown in our course itinerary. And once again this quaint and lovely town in out-of-the-

way Otsego County, New York, did not disappoint. A highlight of our visit to Cooperstown, as always, was a conference with the senior librarian at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Jim Gates has been a constant in this course and, in fact, the only person besides myself who has participated in all nine runnings of "Baseball and American Society: A Journey."

While he calls his talk "Hall of Fame 101," the information that Jim shares with us changes from year to year. Yesterday he talked about the work of the library, the myth of baseball's beginnings, rules changes over time, use and abuse of statistics, new "electronic educational programs" that have been developed by the Hall of Fame, and little-known facts. (For example, the only U.S. Navy chief petty officer enshrined is Bob Feller, Lou Gehrig never had an induction ceremony, and the accounting firm Ernst and Young actually counts the Hall of Fame election ballots.) Having Jim speak to the class before we individually tour the museum helps many people derive more insight and meaning from exploring the National Baseball Hall of Fame. In academic terms this is called an advance-organizer. This approach is effective in traditional classroom-based courses as well as with this more experientially based model of education.

Summary Reflection on the 2004 Experience—Monday, August 16

We spent our final afternoon on this year's trip in Boston watching the Red Sox lose a heartbreaker to the Chicago White Sox. Before the game, our class was invited to stand in the New England Sports Network television studio to watch the pregame show. In doing so we got a chance to meet Jim Rice, and a number of our students received autographs.

We had a terrific group of people this year. Everyone arrived on time for all our rendezvous points, was respectful of the educational mission of this journey, and worked hard to build a learning community. We have not always had such cooperation in the past. (Although the above-mentioned attributes describe the vast majority of people we take on the road every summer, all you need are one or two discourteous people to change the dynamics of the entire group. Gratefully, we had none this time.)

There are characteristics of this course that I do not find in any of my other teaching. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate the experiential nature of this learning in any traditional campus-based course. The education engaged here represents, in my view, the action-reflection cycle at its best. Also, in no other educational setting that I have observed does one find the vast range of ages that interact meaningfully with each other. Some day I would like to write a paper about the myriad meanings that

derive from sixteen-year-olds spending hours sitting on a bus or in a ballpark next to seventy-six-year-olds and learning from each other. And where else do people have so much fun learning? I have been teaching more than thirty years, and only with "Baseball and American Society: A Journey" have I received course evaluations that read "This was the best week of my life" and "I hope heaven ends up like this trip."

I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of this annual baseball learning journey these past nine years. During the nine road trips we have undertaken since the inaugural 1996 season, we have logged tens of thousands of miles, experienced nearly one thousand innings in ballparks both grand and modest, engaged hundreds of eager and thoughtful students, and met scores of knowledgeable people inside the game of baseball. I hope my teaching partner, Al Bean, and I shall continue to enjoy the university's support and have the health, energy, and overall good fortune to keep "Baseball and American Society: A Journey" alive long into the future.

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