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The book on baseball

by Joe Feuerherd



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It is fitting that Easter and Opening Day run close together. It is a time of expectation, of faith in the improbable, and, of course, of new baseball books.

Among them, the third edition of the 957-page *Dickson Baseball Dictionary* (W.W. Norton, 2009), which offers definitions on all things baseball, ranging from "Abner Doubleday Field" to *zurdo*, Spanish for "lefty."

Paul Dickson, in his "opening day" entry, cites legendary baseball chronicler Roger Angell: "It is a ceremony of renewal and welcome -- a celebration of the simultaneous return to springtime and baseball time, a brief moment of pure hope, and a noisy, cheerful restoration of the bonds of loyalty and affection that bind the fans to their home club, and vice versa."

It was with a sense of hope that I opened Joe Torre and Tom Verducci's *The Yankee Years* (Doubleday, 2009), No. 4 this week on *The New York Times* bestseller list. My hopes, like those of a Chicago Cubs fan in September, were dashed. It is a work only a die-hard Yankee fanatic could enjoy. Do I really care that Alex Rodriguez is a self-indulgent media hound? Or that George Steinbrenner can be overbearing? (I knew that from watching "Seinfeld.")

Torre is a legendary manager and was a near-great player, Verducci a skilled writer and reporter. The

book, however, is not worth its \$26.95 price tag.

For about half that price, baseball lovers should turn to Amazon.com and order *Ball Four*, Jim Bouton's often hilarious and always perceptive take on a baseball season that began 40 springs ago. In the early 1960s, Bouton became an improbable all-star pitcher for the Yankees. By 1969, however, his arm hurting from too many years of pitching too many innings, he was nearly washed up. The knuckle ball -- defined by Dickson as "a slowly pitched ball that is gripped with the fingertips, fingernails or knuckles of the middle two or three fingers pressed against the ball and thrown or 'pushed' with little or no spin so that it will dance, float, flutter, dart, bob, weave, wobble, sail or dip in a totally unpredictable manner" -- extended his life in the major leagues.

Ball Four broke with the sports book formula, which focused until that time on the camaraderie and toughness of our gridiron heroes or baseball diamond stars. Typically ghostwritten by sports reporters on the team beat, these books were mythology, designed to enhance a legend, not shed light on sports culture or describe revealing aspects of team life.

Bouton's disdain for those who ran the business of baseball at a time when a player had no ability to negotiate with other teams that might value his services shines through. When the book appeared in 1970, baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn ordered Bouton to renounce it, to state that what he had written was not true. The book, said Kuhn, was a scandal because it told of stars like Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford who drank too much and sometimes suffered the effects of that lifestyle on the field, or of players who pumped "greenies" -- amphetamines -- into their system to enhance their performance. In the age of steroids, these seem simpler vices, though they did not appear so at the time.

Bouton refused to recant and the ensuing publicity made *Ball Four* a bestseller.

Bouton's love for the game is evident and he has a way with a phrase. "You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball," he writes, "and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time."

Now, in spring 2009, the reality is that your team will likely not win the World Series. But on Opening Day everything is possible. Every team has a 0-0 record and the prospect of new life.

Play ball!

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