The New York Times
Book Review
October 1, 2000
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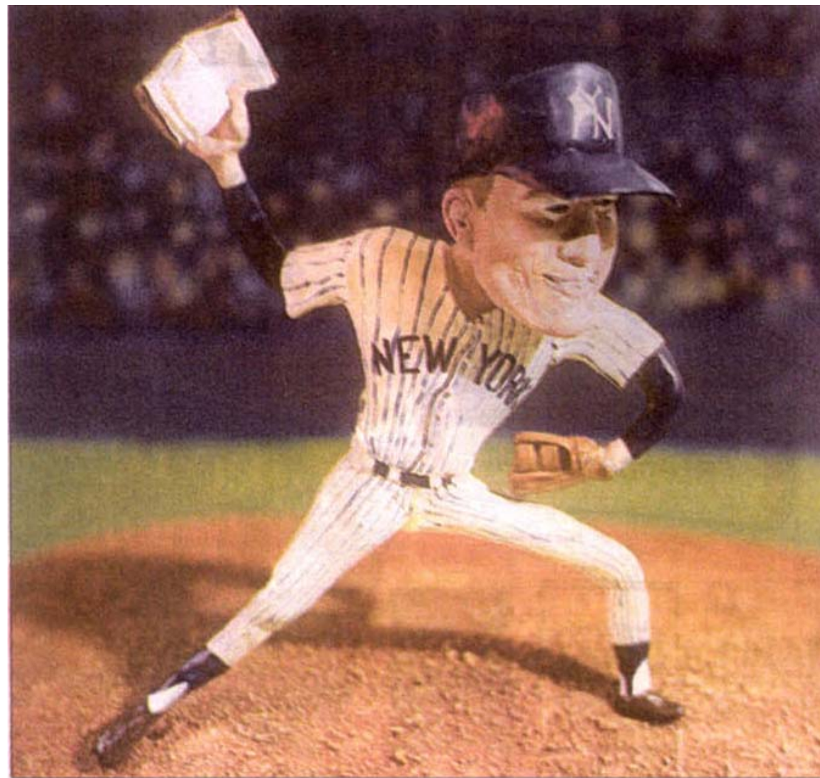
BOOKEND/ Andrew Santella

The Bad Boys of Summer

In 1946, Joe DiMaggio published a book called "Lucky to Be a Yankee." It was a pretty standard baseball autobiography of its time, telling with unfailing modesty the story of DiMaggio's rise from humble roots to stardom. The dedication was indicative of the book's tone. DiMaggio dedicated "Lucky to Be a Yankee" to, among others, "all the ballplayers in both leagues, a clean bunch of fellows and all grand sports."

DiMaggio's book followed in a tradition that went back at least to Christy Mathewson's "Pitching in a Pinch," published in 1912. The general idea was to provide a good example and tell an inspiring story – a true story, if possible, but inspiring in any case. It would be a long time before any baseball memoirist, or his ghostwriter, would dare to deviate from that tradition. Even then, baseball wasn't ready. When Jim Bouton's "Ball Four" came out in 1970, one of the first stops the pitcher author had to make was to the office of Bowie Kuhn, then the commissioner of baseball. He was asked to repudiate the contents of his own book.



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The problem with "Ball Four," as the commissioner, some sportswriters and most players saw it, was that it described the heirs to DiMaggio's clean fellows and grand sports fighting on the team bus and popping pills in the locker room. It described some of them peering through keyholes and hotel windows, even drilling holes in dugout walls to spy on women. Worst of all, it described Mickey Mantle – DiMaggio's successor in the Yankee lineage – playing hung over. Bouton's book was, the argument went, bad for baseball's image.

"Ball Four" became known as the first of the tell-all baseball memoirs, a title that unfairly obscures Bouton's real accomplishment. He was a once promising pitcher whose career had faltered, and his original plan for "Ball Four" seems to have been to write a book that would take the form of a diary of a make-or-break baseball season, with his career on the line. But Bouton turned out to be too good a reporter to stop there. He also thought to ask why a grown man should want to keep playing baseball. Bouton might be remembered for what he wrote about other players, but in "Ball Four" he also examined himself, determined to reconcile his love for the game with his exasperation at its pettiness and primitivism.

He turned out to be a keen observer and recorder of detail, too. His supposedly startling revelations about the behavior of the big stars got all the attention in the weeks after the book's publication, but his book's most lasting value might be as a deadpan documentary of the most mundane moments of the baseball life. "I try, but it remains most difficult to convey the quality of the banter in the back of the bus," he writes. "There is zani-

ness to it, and earthiness, and often a quality of non sequitur that I find hilarious."No other writer has matched Bouton at getting this sort of banter down on paper. The sheer nonsensical vulgarity of his teammates and coaches is a delight to read. If for no other reason, "Ball Four" should be prized for leaving a record of the Seattle manager Joe Schultz's knack for combining curse words in novel ways.

Returning to "Ball Four" now, 30 years after its publication, is like discovering a cache of old letters from an insightful friend – one who just happened to spend a long-ago summer trying to survive in the major leagues. Bouton' diary entries are impressionistic, like chatty correspondence. And like great old letters, "Ball Four" offers readers the pleasure of revisiting a former time – in this case, one of the crossroads in the game's history.

Baseball is supposed to be a conservative game, but every once in a while it goes through a transformative period: the 1960's, for example. It was during the 60's that major-league players established a union and began the struggle that would lead to free agency. In that decade, the National and American leagues added new teams for the first time since 1901. Clubs appeared in places like Kansas City and Seattle. For the first time, teams were packaged in West and East divisions in each league, and a preliminary round of postseason play was inserted before the World Series. To encourage more offense, pitching mounds were lowered and the leagues began experimenting with the designated hitter rule in preseason games. Baseball's color line had been obliterated for more than a decade, but it was only in the 60's that black and Latin American stars began to dominate the game. Also in the 60's, teams started playing in a new generation of look-alike multipurpose stadiums, and on artificial grass. Even baseball fashion changed. Teams started emerging from dugouts not in drab flannels but in close fitting, brightly colored uniforms and white spikes.

It can only be a coincidence, but this period of upheaval coincided almost exactly with Jim Bouton's career. Between1962 and 1970, Bouton played for three major-league teams, starting with the most tradition-bound of them all: the New York Yankees. (He made a brief comeback in 1978.) He looked like a rising star for the Yankees, winning 39 games in 1963 and 1964, two in the 1964 World Series. But by 1968, he was demoted to the minor leagues. His decline mirrored the Yankees', who had dominated postseason play for decades before fading in the mid-60's. In "Ball Four," Bouton calls 1965 "the year the Yankees stopped winning pennants." The next American League dynasty would come from Oakland, a city that didn't have a major-league team when the 60's started.

Bouton's alienation from the Yankees- his arguments with management, his bitterness toward the team's cliquish stars – is a recurring theme of "Ball Four." Even before he published the book, Bouton was an outsider, a player with a reputation for talking too much and making waves. Old-school baseball types had a hard time tolerating his questioning of authority (especially after he stopped winning), and he could not stomach what he called "the more Neanderthal aspects of baseball thinking." In a way, it was appropriate that he began the 1969 season, the one documented in "Ball Four," with the Seattle Pilots, an expansion team made up in large part of players rejected by other teams.

Still, for all Bouton's iconoclasm, what he really seems to have wanted was to be one of the guys. "I've resolved not to be an outsider this year," he writes. "If the guys go out to a bar after a game for a few drinks, I'm going too. I'm going to get into card games on airplanes. I don't like bars much, and card games bore me, but I'm going to do it. If you want to be one of the gang, that's one way to do it." Bouton makes a real effort, too. When he is seen drinking milk in the locker room, he lies and tells his teammates it's for his bad stomach. He finds this better than admitting that he prefers milk to beer. And he is embarrassed to be caught reading a magazine on the plane, prompting a teammate to ask if reading makes him smarter. (In his 1960 book, "The Long Season," another pitcher-author, Jim Brosnan, remembers the dumbfounded stares of onlookers as he read Mark Twain's comic essay on James Fenimore Cooper on a team flight.)

Nothing in "Ball Four" is more touching than Bouton's take on the lot of the outsider on a baseball team, traveling for six months with two dozen men who have little use for him. It's the sort of writing we'd been trained not to expect in books by ballplayers: "I know about lonely summers. In my last years with the Yankees I had a few of them. You stand in a hotel lobby talking with guys at dinnertime and they drift away, and some other guys come along and pretty soon they're gone and you' re all alone and no one has asked you what you're doing about dinner. So you eat alone."

Of course, the appearance in print of "Ball Four" doomed Bouton's campaign to ingratiate himself with his teammates. He'd told clubhouse secrets and maybe even worse, he'd engaged in the intellectual pretense of writing a book – and he wasn't even a star. When batters knocked his pitches all over the park, as they increasingly did, the catcalls came from the opposing dugout: "Put that in your book, Shakespeare."

It's easy to cast Bouton's critics as narrow protectors of the status quo and Bouton himself as a courageous truth-teller. Upon the book's publication, writers like David Halberstam rose to Bouton's defense to make just such an argument. In fact, Bouton did violate confidences, did reveal secrets he had promised not to reveal and did profit by trading on the celebrity of colleagues. And baseball did not forgive Bouton easily or soon; not until 1998 did the Yankees invite him to Old-Timers' Day. But 30 years after "Ball Four" came out, what passed for stunning revelations upon publication no longer seem so stunning. Our capacity to be surprised by the behavior of professional athletes is not what it used to be. What continues to impress, though, is Bouton's humor, his eye and ear for detail, his willingness to confess his own vulnerability. These are qualities only rarely on display in books by ballplayers. Bouton deserves to be remembered not as the guy who ratted on Mickey Mantle, but as the guy who showed how good a ballplayer's book could be.

Andrew Santella writes for GQ and other magazines.