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## MLB

[Scores](#)  
[Schedules](#)  
[Standings](#)  
[Statistics](#)  
[Transactions](#)  
[Injuries: AL | NL](#)  
[Players](#)  
[Weekly Lineup](#)  
[Message Board](#)  
[Minor Leagues](#)  
[MLB Stat Search](#)

## Clubhouses

## Sport Sections

[MLB](#)  
[Scores](#)  
[NBA | Playoffs](#)  
[Scores](#)  
[NHL | Playoffs](#)  
[Scores](#)  
[Golf](#)  
[Scores](#)  
[Soccer](#)  
[Scores](#)  
[NFL | Draft](#)  
[RPM.ESPN.com](#)  
[WNBA](#)  
[College Football](#)  
[M Col. BB | Recruit](#)  
[W Col. BB](#)  
[College Sports](#)  
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[Boxing](#)  
[Horse Racing](#)  
[Action Sports](#)  
[Soccernet.com](#)  
[ESPNdeportes](#)

Thursday, June 15

Wit, wisdom and social commentary

By Jim Caple  
Special to ESPN.com

*Editor's note: In 1969, Jim Bouton was a former World Series hero with the New York Yankees, now on his last legs as a big leaguer and trying to survive with the expansion Seattle Pilots as a knuckleball pitcher. He kept a diary of the season, which he and collaborator Leonard Schecter turned into the 1970 best seller "Ball Four." This fall, Sports Publishing, Inc., will publish a special-edition hard-cover.*

Back when he lived in a different house, Pirates assistant general manager Roy Smith kept his copy of "Ball Four" in a prominent place where he could always turn to its pages when he needed to look up a bit of wisdom from Joe Schultz or Fred Talbot.

"I kept it in the bathroom," Smith said. "That and 'The Godfather.' That pretty much covered it all. What else do you need? Well, I guess I could have had The Bible."

Perhaps. But does the Old Testament tell you how to play for a manager whose advice for most any situation was generally limited to "go pound some Budweiser"?

Smith estimates he's read "Ball Four" in its entirety five times, which is about average. I know several people (myself included) who read all or part of it every February as a spring training ritual. Just as pitchers and catchers report to Florida and Arizona, fans report to the pages of "Ball Four," the best book ever written about baseball.

It's in the many re-readings when you realize the full depth of Jim Bouton's book, once described by David Halberstam as "a book deep in the American vein, so deep it is by no means a sports book," and a book that was officially named a couple years ago as one of the most important of the century (alas, Warren Cromartie's book on his season in Japan was somehow overlooked by the panel of judges).

Read "Ball Four" for the second time or the 22nd, and you are sure to notice something you missed before. Particularly if you first read it at age 12, when, as Smith said, "I didn't get all the jokes."

Ah, yes, those infamous, rawer portions of "Ball Four" that dealt with late-night mischief and explaining to a wife "why she needed a penicillin shot for your kidney infection." Those sections seem tame by today's standards, yet they helped "Ball Four" achieve its notoriety as a "tell-all" book. But to focus on the occasional passage about sex or even Mickey Mantle's drunken behavior is to miss the book's essence. And to call it simply a "tell-all" book is like describing "The Grapes of Wrath" as a book about harvesting peaches in California.

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Although remembered for "Ball Four," Jim Bouton won two World Series games for the Yankees in 1964.

Yes, Bouton told us things we never knew about ballplayers, but more importantly, he related them from an interesting, questioning and thoroughly independent viewpoint. And that's where all the ensuing "Ball Four" ripoffs ("more revealing than 'Ball Four' ") fell short. Those books claimed to tell all, but because they were so often "written" by dull, shallow ballplayers they usually told nothing. Bouton didn't just take us inside the clubhouse, he provided keen insight to the clubhouse.

The irony is baseball's most famous outsider wrote the ultimate insider's book.

"Ball Four" also is more than a diary of Bouton's 1969 season with the Seattle Pilots and Houston Astros, it is a vibrant, funny, telling history of an era that seems even further away than three decades. Bouton writes of negotiating his \$22,000 contract, seven years before agents and free agency. He worries about losing a \$600 apartment deposit. He notices the relations between blacks and whites in the clubhouse. He reports the problems the Pilots' management had with Steve Hovley because of his long hair and penchant for reading Dostoyevsky. Not just a diary of 1969 baseball, it is a time capsule of American society in the sixties.

A time capsule, and yet, also timeless. Much of what Bouton wrote still is true today; only the dollar figures have changed.

Further, Bouton had the amazing good fortune to write about an expansion team that existed for one year and is otherwise lost to time. He has described the 1969 Pilots as the Flying Dutchman of baseball, a lost team claimed by neither the Brewers nor the Mariners, doomed to sail aimlessly without a harbor. "They should hold the reunion game in the middle of Montana," he once said.

Recently, I saw him compare the Pilots to the magical village in "Brigadoon" that comes to life one day every 100 years. I like that description better. The Pilots played just one magic summer, then disappeared into the mists of baseball history.

Thanks to "Ball Four," however, we can simply take the book down from the shelf, turn to a page and find Steve Hovley, Gene Brabender, Joe Schultz and the rest of the boys alive, well and pounding the Budweiser.

*Jim Caple is the national baseball writer for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, which has a website at [www.seattle-pi.com](http://www.seattle-pi.com).*

Key players on the '69 Pilots			
Player	HR	RBI	BA
Don Mincher, 1B	25	78	.246
John Donaldson, 2B	1	19	.234
Ray Oyler, SS	7	22	.165
Tommy Harper, 3B	9	41	.235
Steve Hovley, OF	3	20	.277
Wayne Comer, OF	15	54	.245
Tommy Davis, OF	6	80	.271
Jerry McNertney, C	8	55	.241
Mike Hegan, OF	8	37	.292
Gus Gil, IF	0	17	.222
Steve Whitaker, OF	6	13	.250
John Kennedy, SS	4	14	.234
Rich Rollins, IF	4	21	.225
Ron Clark, IF	0	12	.196
Merrit Ranew, C	0	4	.247
Greg Goossen, 1B	10	24	.309

  

Pitchers			
Player	W	L	ERA
Gene Brabender, R	13	14	4.37
Diego Segui, R	12	6	3.36
Marty Pattin, R	7	12	5.60
Fred Talbot, R	5	8	4.15
Steve Barber, L	4	7	4.81
Bob Locker, R	3	3	2.19
John Gelnar, R	3	10	3.30
Mike Marshall, R	3	10	5.11
Jim Bouton, R	2	1	3.91
Gary Bell, R	2	6	4.72