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'Ball Four' changed sports *and* books

By **Rob Neyer**
 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.

Thirty years ago, "Ball Four" was published, and made perhaps a bigger splash than all previous baseball books ... combined. Author/pitcher Jim Bouton was summoned to the Commissioner's Office. Newspaper columnists tried and convicted Bouton with as much effect as ink and newsprint could muster. And a fair number of Bouton's ex-teammates, most of whom didn't bother actually reading the book, professed their disgust with "Ball Four."

But what of the book's lasting impact? It has, after all, been three decades since the publication of "Ball Four," plenty of time for a bit of perspective. To that end, I recently spoke with three men -- Jeff Neuman, Peter Golenbock and Bouton himself -- who are each, in their own ways, uniquely positioned to judge the impact of "Ball Four."

Jeff Neuman joined Macmillan Publishing in 1979, and in the two decades since -- he moved to Simon and Schuster in 1987 -- Neuman has probably edited more baseball books, and certainly more *good* baseball books, than anybody, the latest of them Whitey Herzog's 1999 memoir, "You're Missin' a Great Game."

Neuman says, "'Ball Four' is, if not the most famous baseball book, certainly the most important, and in good ways and bad. It changed the expectations of what not only sports books, but sports journalism could be. It created a very different appetite among the fans for inside stories, and especially for inside dirt. It was the first book to pierce the veil of the locker room -- and once Bouton started telling these stories, how could the press ignore them any longer? This, in turn, radically changed the atmosphere in locker rooms."

Bouton wrote about Mickey Mantle playing while hung over, guys popping "greenies" for a little extra energy, teammates criticizing their manager or sleeping around while on road trips. Much of it seems tame by today's standards, but it wasn't in 1970.

"There is now a much more adversarial relationship than before 'Ball Four.' Before the book, there was an understanding between players and writers about what you could write and what you couldn't," Neuman said. "Those old rules are gone, and players today, to a much greater extent, feel surrounded by hostile forces. 'Ball Four' didn't create that

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Jim Bouton, right, was called a "Benedict Arnold" for writing about Mickey Mantle's heavy drinking.

circumstance, but 'Ball Four' *was* one of the watershed events in the series of changes that has left us where we are."

Needless to say, Bouton's memoir of his 1969 season and recollections of his earlier days with the Yankees, spawned similar books.

"I hate to blame 'Ball Four' for the excesses of its successors," Neuman said. "Nonetheless, we've gone from the Yankees on the roof of the Shoreham hotel in Washington, to Sparky Lyle sitting on cakes, to Dennis Rodman's sexual adventures with Madonna. And I'm not at all sure that that's a good thing.

"On the other hand, 'Ball Four' is also a brilliant, wonderful, funny book."

Sadly, many people forget that Bouton had a collaborator, a talented sportswriter named Leonard Schecter, who died just a few years after the publication of "Ball Four." Of the many writers inspired by Bouton and Schecter, Peter Golenbock has certainly been the most successful.

In addition to writing and editing wonderful oral histories of the 1950s New York Yankees ("Dynasty") and the Brooklyn Dodgers ("Bums"), among others, Golenbock became something of the unofficial New York baseball collaborator, writing books with Sparky Lyle, Billy Martin, Graig Nettles, Ron Guidry and Davey Johnson. Golenbock and Lyle's book, "The Bronx Zoo," was the first to explore the bizarre happenings at Yankee Stadium during the 1970s.

"When I was doing 'Dynasty,' Golenbock recalls, "Bouton was one of the Yankee players I went to see. Jim didn't know me from Adam, but he was wonderful, could not have been more cooperative, and we've been very close friends since then.

"My philosophy was always the same as Jim's, which was to be reportorial. That's one of the lessons I derived from 'Ball Four.' If you want to write a book, be a reporter and not a flack. You have to have the guts to stand up there and take the heat. That's something that Bouton did, and I think he did it with great aplomb. He took shots from Hank Aaron and Bowie Kuhn and others, and he took them with great class.

"'Ball Four' was a truly great book, and it was great because it was honest and the stories he told were memorable. Jim is a terrific storyteller. He's had a very interesting life, he could have been a movie actor, could have been a stock-car driver. I have a great deal of admiration for him."

Golenbock was kind enough to give me Bouton's phone number, and Bouton was kind enough to return my call within a few hours. I had assumed that Bouton, after all these years, must be tired of talking about "Ball Four."

I was wrong. When discussing "Ball Four," Bouton's voice comes alive, and you can still hear the kid in him that comes through so clearly in the book.

"'Ball Four' seems to be something that's become larger than me; it has a life of its own," Bouton says. "It was all out of proportion in terms of what I was intending to do. You know, in some respects I almost feel like it's not really my book, more like it was a collaborative effort between me and my teammates. I look back now and I have much more reverence for the guys I played with.

"They're not just teammates, they're characters in my life. So they've become larger than life, at least to me, and they mean more to me now than they ever did when I was actually playing."

Bouton's teammates were, of course, the Seattle Pilots, who lasted just one season before becoming the Milwaukee Brewers. They didn't make a ripple in the standings. Nobody in Seattle talks about them, and their old ballpark is now the parking lot for a hardware store. Yet they still exist in our minds, almost entirely because of "Ball Four."

"The Pilots existed for only one year," Bouton says. "It's almost a magical story. They're like 'Brigadoon'. It's a Major League Baseball team that, in many respects, exists only within the pages of a book. It's like a fictional baseball team, so the characters in the book

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Jim Bouton

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"And they were perfect for the book. It was gold. Everyone one of those players was an interesting story, in one way or another. You had rookies, and you had grizzled veterans. You had Ray Oyler with all the Detroit Tigers stories, Don Mincher with all the Minnesota Twins stories, Tommy Davis with all the Los Angeles Dodgers stories ... It was like every club sent a special representative to the Seattle Pilots, so we could chronicle this team. It was a perfect cast of characters, almost as if somebody had said, 'This team's not going to win any games, but if someone writes a book, this'll be a great ballclub.' "

And the result was, indeed, a great book. In this writer's opinion, the lasting impact of "Ball Four," more than anything else, is that it's a *great book*, wildly entertaining and worth reading every two or three years. How many books about *anything* can make the same claim?

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