



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Baseball season

It's dangerous to write about baseball. The topic is too loaded, has been done badly too many times, and almost everyone is an expert. But it is spring, after all, the loathsome caterwauling of the election primaries is getting worse, the season is underway, and this is Vin Scully's final year — or so he says.

There is an old saw that goes something like this: Football is brothers beating each other up in the backyard, baseball is fathers and sons (or daughters) playing catch. Sappy? Maybe, but there is something there, something too rich to be ignored in today's hyperbolic world, where

professional protestors, purveyors of screech theater and grievance robots abound, endlessly tilting at the foundations and institutions that have framed our life of relative peace and luxury.

So this spring — every spring — I turn toward baseball, and not just because everyone looks better in pinstripes — which they do — but because it allows me to clock out of the sound and fury for a few precious hours. Especially when I listen on the radio, which is a kind of time travel.

Baseball is doing its best to ruin itself, naturally, by caving to the grievance mongers and putting mound conferences on a timepiece, but I'm willing to forgive that horrendous indiscretion for the pleasure of an acrobatic double-play, a Kershaw pitching masterpiece, or a manager going postal over a called third-strike, ripping second base out of the ground and tossing it into the dugout.

Kenneth Turan told us that the game "endures at least in part because it is a contemplative sport that delights in nuances. Not a brazen game, eager to sell its thrills cheaply, but rather an understated affair that must be courted if it is to be

loved." It's never been said much better, and contained in there is a larger lesson — as baseball is wont to provide — in how we might approach modern life in general.

Baseball, we are told, is losing its audience, and youth participation is lagging. That's probably true. It's also lamentable for what it says about what we are becoming as a culture. The game, they say, is simply too slow, laborious to the uninformed, and doesn't pack a thrill a minute. I would argue that it is precisely baseball's pace which recommends it, particularly in our on-demand, must-have-it-now, impatient, entitled, and uber-selfie universe.

My grandfather, a life-long working cowboy, once told me the only other thing he would have wanted in life, outside of the deserts and mountains and some great horses, would have been to play professional baseball. And my memories of him are full of the voice of Vin Scully calling the Dodgers and Giants, of sitting in the cab of his truck on a hot summer afternoon with the radio on, far out on the Nevada desert, listening

to the ballgame by some miracle bounce of scratchy radiowaves, and watching a fresh load of bulls stir up dust in the corrals.

You never get those moments back in full, but you file them away, and so the game becomes a meaningful part of your fabric, and perhaps even an influence on how you see the world. Baseball can still do that.

Regrettably, this season is Vin Scully's farewell, and when that voice goes silent we will have lost something utterly grand, something poetic and sublime that has been playing in the background for 67 years. To hear Vin Scully call a baseball game is like listening to Homer recite the Iliad. He's that good, and fans of the game will feel a hole open up in the middle of their chests when he signs off for the last time.

But baseball also teaches us that the great ones all go down. Sometimes, like Chuck Knoblauch, they just can't throw the ball to first base anymore. No one knows why this happens, but it does, and they disappear from the game, leaving us with another

mystery and another set of memories.

Baseball is a game of numbers, of course, and here are a couple: I've watched all nine volumes of Ken Burns' epic on baseball. That's a feat on par with drinking nine gallons of chocolate milk, back-to-back, but I'd probably do it again, because the game can teach us about ourselves, our world, and encompasses, unlike any other sport, the history of our nation — good and bad.

Closer to home, on a different level of the game, we have the Outlaws, who each year field a fine brand of baseball, and I would encourage all of you who still care about the game to join me this spring to cheer them along. They are young this season, but they are well-managed, and no team from Sisters will ever lack for heart. Sometimes heart is enough, Hall of Fame careers have been built on heart, and luck, and just a little skill. So put on your rally caps and come out to watch the games, or just come to yell at the umpire a little bit — he might need help with his strike zone.

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