On the Occasion of Susan Jacoby's Why Baseball Matters

By Samuel Hux (August 2018)

Baseball at Night, Morris Kantor, 1934

Fully aware that this journal is *New English Review,* and not *New American*, that its readership is international—wherever English is spoken, read and matters—were I about to review some other of the Yale University Press "Why X Matters" series—say Paul Goldberger's *Why Architecture Matters* or Peter Gay's *Why the Romantics Matter* or even Charles Lemert's *Why*

Niebuhr Matters—I would not feel edgy and sort of loosely apologetic towards British, Irish, Australian, and various ex-colonial readers (but not Canadian!) who know in their hearts that, were there a *Why Cricket Matters*, that would be one thing but *Why Baseball Matters* is something entirely different. But were there such a book, I would be no more likely the reviewer than I would be the reviewer of a text on the techniques of cranial trepanning. But I might *read* the book, because I would indeed like to understand this strange game that fascinates denizens of the British Empire and its cultural descendants. By the same token, were there a book on why fox-hunting matters I'd be curious what the English have against that little fox. But, actually, there is such a book, by my favorite living philosopher, Roger Scruton: *On Hunting.*

Susan Jacoby is a journalist and cultural historian, author of a dozen books (*Alger Hiss and the Battle for History, Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* among them) so she has been around the block considerable times. She is a true fan, as she was long before she became a scholar, learning to love the game in her girlhood as a White Sox loyalist while growing up in Chicago and now a Mets fanatic since long based in New York. There's another reason the Mets have replaced the Sox in her heart that I will get to shortly.

There is an urgency in *Why Baseball Matters* driven by Jacoby's awareness that the game is now in danger, perhaps in peril even. It may be true (I stress *may*) that, as Jacques Barzun claimed (Jacoby of course quotes him), "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." But, in fact, fewer and fewer Americans learn it now: *American* football (not soccer, that is) and basketball may be closer to being "the American pastime." (Not that baseball really ever was: no sport had ever been that if such a thing has even

existed.) But no team sport has ever existed that comes as close as baseball to being the perfect game—a different issue, that. Jacoby concludes her book with the profession that baseball is "the most intellectually stimulating, emotionally satisfying, and downright glorious pastime ever devised. I see it as the duty—yes, a genuine patriotic duty in the best sense—of all of us who love the game to do everything we can to see that baseball continues to matter." Change the word *pastime* above to *sport,* drop the idea of a *patriotic* duty, and I endorse her passion completely.

This is a book I was eager to love, but several times I almost cast it aside before reconsidering: "Come on. Don't be so damned touchy and impatient." Jacoby "really, really hated this movie." "Field of Dreams" she's talking about, based on W.P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe.* However, "Field of Dreams" was not the worst movie in the 1980s in its dedication to sentimentality and unjustified nostalgia. That distinction goes to "The Natural," the film version of Bernard Malamud's 1952 novel. This is a stunning bias, especially given that the controlling theme of both novels, expressly so in "Field of Dreams," is that *baseball matters.* I resolved to forgive Jacoby on the grounds that as an insistent secularist, which she has always made a big deal of, she is victim of the effective restriction on the free range of the imagination. She talks a lot about the decline of the old family habit of father teaching offspring the game of baseball. But she seems unaware of the poet Donald Hall's wonderful book of essays, *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons*, which really more than touches upon her repeated insistence on the necessity of generations passing on the love and understanding of the game—another reason, by the way, she should not be so insensitive to "Field of Dreams": "If you build it he will come," the *he*, one will recall, being the protagonists' father.

Insensitivity may be too strong a word. But Jacoby certainly flaunts her avoidance of sentimentality, liking to appear tough-minded and rhetorically gutsy. “Some of us,” one can imagine her saying, “have to take unpopular positions.” But she should know that some of her “unpopular positions” will reward her with readerly approval because they are not unpopular at all. For instance, she objects several times to the *designated hitter rule,* which is one reason that, now a New Yorker, she’s a Mets fan: the Yankees play in the American League, which employs the DH. She expresses her dislike of the DH with a kind of casualness, so clearly assuming the reader’s casual agreement, implying without having to offer argument that her position is unassailable. *It is not.*

The fact that much of her book, as we’ll see, faces the question of possible changes to the game, the fact that the DH represents a change, and the fact that most *defenses* of the DH rules are, as a matter of fact, just as thoughtless as her assumption that her view is unassailable . . . these facts are the inspiration for the swift transformation of this *book review* into an *occasional essay* instead. Here I go.

Baseball “purists” generally thrill to the National League resistance to the designated hitter rule instituted by the American League in 1973. Yes, they say, baseball throughout its history has had rule changes and subtle adjustments in the war between pitchers and batters but, to have a designated hitter replace the pitcher in the batter’s box for the entire game (not just a pinch hitter) is not just another rule change or adjustment, but a crude tampering with the beautiful balance of the game, an arrogant violation of tradition. Baseball is a conservative game: things should have been left

as they evolved. I agree it's a conservative game. But otherwise the "purists" are wrong. *This* purist is convinced that the American League's institution of the DH was a long overdue correction of a destructive anomaly, was a return in spirit (a kind of "strict construction" if you will) to the intentions of the wise founders and early developers of the game. It's the National League which shows scant respect for the original intentions. Failure to understand this is a failure to understand how tradition works, how humans adjust to save the past. If I have your attention now, afford me your patience as well.

In 1886, Louisville's Guy Hecker won 26 games and lost 23; he also led the American Association with a .341 batting average, encouraging Louisville to use him as a spare first-baseman and outfielder when he wasn't on the mound for 52 games. Nonetheless, pitchers have never been noted or appreciated primarily for their hitting, even if Hall-of-Famer Old Hoss Radbourn batted third in the order for the Providence Greys of the same period. And if they were good enough to bat fifth as Bob Carruthers did for the St. Louis Browns in 1887, they eventually wound up as full-time outfielders and part-time pitchers. But pitchers *were* expected to contribute to the offense. Perhaps not as much as position players—but that's not a simple certainty either. The first recognized year of major league play, 1876, the National (and only) League's batting average was .265. Pitchers collectively hit .255. Of course that's ten points below the league standard, but it is one point above the average for right field regulars and 44 above back-up position players. This close proximity to the league average did not last long. But consider that first major league season for its "symbolic" value, let's call it. If you add up all the league averages from 1876 through 1993 and divide by the 227 league campaigns (National League, American League, the old American Association, and the late

Union Association, Players' League, and Federal League) you get a mean of .261. That comports nicely with the 1876 average of .265. And the pitchers' .255 in that initial season is only six points off what a wise providence might have declared a baseball player was "supposed" to hit. Pitchers were, of course, to disappoint that providential supposition.

Why "through 1993"? It "rhymes" nicely with 1893, arguably the first year of "modern" baseball since that's when the distance from pitcher's mound to home plate was established at the present 60' 6"—and 1993 is the first season of the second century of the modern game. I like these symbols. And besides, there have been no essential changes in the game since 1993.

For the first ten years of major league play, 1876 through 1885, pitchers hit on average 27 points off the league pace with a collective .224 BA. In 1893 they raised their heft to .226, yes, but that was 54 points below the league average. Now .226 is no great shakes, but it's an average some middle infielders have been known to survive on. The pitcher had become obviously the weak link in the batting order (no more hitting third or fifth), but a weak link and an absolute detriment are not the same thing. Jump a neat two decades. In 1913 pitchers hit an atrocious .177, 82 points off the league average of .259. And so it went until . . .

The year 1972, last season before the DH rule, was a bad time for swinging a baseball bat. The National League hit .248, the American .239, for a collective .244. Neither had done so poorly since the miserable 1968 when the NL hit .236 and the AL .230—which necessitated a couple of those acceptable-to-purists adjustments: lowering pitcher's mound and shrinking strike zone. The pitchers in 1972 hit a comical .148: 98

points below the major league standard. To make this even more graphic: exclude the pitchers and the leagues hit .252 instead of .244, so that pitchers were averaging 106 points below everyone else. The American League said *Enough!* The National League said *What? Me-worry?*

A combined argument of the anti-DH lobby might go something like this: The wise founders and developers never meant in their farthest dreams that a pitcher should not swing a bat just like everyone else. (Yes, that's what I've said: just like everyone else.) That pitchers became, by and large, pikers at the plate is just something that happened over time, in part because of their taxing job what with being in on every single pitch. (Unlike catchers, who squat three to four more total games than a starting pitcher stands?) But that trend having evolved as it did, there's still much to be said for the pitcher having to take his turn at the plate. Arguing thus, Jacoby as one critic of the DH writes, "I still hate the American League designated hitter rule . . . which eliminates a key strategic element from the game—the manager's decision about whether to remove a pitcher in favor of a pinch hitter." (Or, removing the onus or responsibility from Jacoby, I continue my summary of the anti-DH lobbyists' point of view:) There's the fan's delight at trying to "manage" or second-guess the manager: should Lefty, who's hurling a fine game, be removed for a pinch hitter late innings when he's behind a run, or should one chance it that he'll come through with a single as he does one out of seven times? So there is a subtle excitement in his time at bat. And, anyway, that's the game!

Now I wouldn't quarrel overly much with this point. But I would add that the occasional excitement is swamped by the general boredom of the situation, rather like watching a sound .280 hitter from Greenville High struggling before the likes

of Masahiro Tanaka, or even before a run-of-the-mill journeyman hanging in the big leagues by his finger nails, and baseball was never meant to be boring. Slow-paced and deliberate, yes, but never boring. And with the DH rule, the manager still has to judge when or if to remove his pitcher, for reasons having to do with *pitching* and nothing else (as it was in the early years), and in this day of matching lefthanded batter against righthanded thrower and the reverse, there's ample opportunity for the grand tradition of the pinch hitter—which might mean you have to take out your whiz of a shortstop, and do you want to do that?

There's another point the lobbyist will make: *You* just want more offense in the game; you want to disrupt the balance. But that's *not* the point, although it's a point often mis-made. In fact, from the time the DH was initiated through the 1993 season the differential advantage in batting averages for American League over National averaged six and a half points a season, not an astounding gap. (The pre-DH differential was five and a half, sometimes one way sometimes another.) The point is, rather, to return the game to something like its intended *man-made nature,* by which an offense had nine men, not eight, just like a defense.

Consider a fictive analogy. Suppose that football had not become the offensive-defensive platooning game it now is, that players went both ways as they used to. Suppose, let's say, that the quarterback played the old single safety position on defense. Suppose further that while at the beginning his open-field tackling was not different from the cornerbacks' over time it got much worse until eventually the safety wasn't expected to tackle, unless he sort of stumbled in the direction of the runner and got lucky. Would one say then, "that's the game"? That's obviously a rhetorical question. A

non-rhetorical question: Could that have happened? Yes, possibly, because something like it happened to the position and sport we're considering, the pitcher in baseball. Another question: How did it? Now that takes some answering. So consider patiently the development of another analogy.

A losing argument has it that something was changed in the physical composition of the baseball around 1919, 1920. In 1919 Babe Ruth hit 29 home runs for the Boston Red Sox. The highest number before that in the 20th century had been 24 by the Philadelphia Phillies' Gavvy Cravath in 1915, but he had the advantage of exceptionally close fences at the Baker Bowl. Inexplicably, Buck Freeman's 25 for the Washington Senators in 1899 had more or less faded from memory until reporters dug up the record. (The average HR king 1893-1918 hit 13.) Then in 1920 Ruth hit 54 for the New York Yankees, the next highest total being George Sisler's 19 for the St. Louis Browns. In 1921, Ruth hit 59, with five other players poling over 20. In 1922, when Ruth dropped to 39 in his incomplete season, Rogers Hornsby of the St. Louis Cardinals hit 42, Ken Williams of the Browns 39, Tilly Walker of the Philadelphia Athletics 37, three other sluggers over 20, and a gaggle in the high teens. The rest is history: the home run as non-exceptional weapon was here. But this revolution has not a thing to do with a supposed "rabbit ball" livelier than the old (and supposed) "dead ball." William Curran has laid that myth to rest with his *Big Sticks* (1990). If Curran hasn't then understanding is just not possible in the baseball world.

Curran's findings in a nutshell: There is no evidence, there never was any evidence, and there's fairly irrefutable evidence to the contrary, that there was a rabbit ball accounting for the surge in power hitting. What's amazing is the longevity of the myth, which survives even now, even among

many of the baseball *cognoscenti.* (The details are fascinating but too copious for here. *Read Curran!*) In fact, there had been an inadvertently livelier ball (meant only to be sturdier) tested late in the 1910 season and introduced fully in 1911: the cork-centered ball. And there were higher BAs and more HRs in 1911 (Chicago Cub Wildfire Schulte led the majors with 21) than there would be again until 1920, but power and averages quickly leveled off. When the famous power surge did begin years later *it was with this ball!*

Curran's theory in a nutshell: First, rules outlawing the pitchers "loading up" the ball with "saliva, licorice, hair tonic, chewing gum, mud, grass, and who knows what else caked into the seams" cut down on the crazy flight of a pitch, giving batters the advantage of a more predictable flight of ball from mound to plate. And balls not loaded up for innings (and, furthermore, replaced more often by the umpire) were lighter and could be propelled farther with a bat. Second, and most important, Babe Ruth set an irresistible example. Pre-Ruth baseball wisdom had it that the way to success was "scientific" batting, choking up on the bat, in a sense "aiming" it (tailor-made for a genius like Ty Cobb), and that swinging freely (or "naturally," as Curran says) sent BAs down. Ruth's example showed that one could swing from the heels for both power and average—and once other natural (but "repressed") power hitters saw that . . .

I'll provide one example, avoiding Hall-of-Famers like Hornsby. In the five seasons prior to 1920, Cy Williams for the Cubs and Phils averaged .265 with nine homers a year. In the eight seasons beginning with 1920 in which he played 100 games or more, he averaged .314 with 23 homers. That story could be multiplied by a dozen easily.

What we're dealing with here is something like a "four-minute mile"—and a human phenomenon I'm sure someone must have a name for but which I will call "the law of precedential expectation." Once upon a time the four-minute mile was a plateau runners dreamed of reaching but could not quite realize. Eventually someone was clocked at three minutes, fifty-nine seconds and a fraction, then someone else, someone else . . . and then the four-minute mile was de rigueur for a good runner. One can talk as much as one likes about better conditioning and such. But something else is involved: the law of precedential expectation. A good runner is *expected* to run at a certain speed—and he does. Something that was impossible becomes possible and then normal. Of course, it was always possible; it just seemed not. Let's not confuse this with the achieved impossibility, the statistically improbable, rather—the miraculous perhaps. A hitting streak of 56 games is, I'm told, so statistically improbable as to approach impossibility. But when Joe DiMaggio did it in 1941 as a New York Yankee, it was clearly not impossible for him since in the Pacific Coast League in 1933 he'd already achieved a streak of 61. His miracle was then in a sense a failure. (Smile.) In any case, the miraculous does not become a precedential expectation for a superb hitter. We deal here with lesser phenomena.

But consider another kind of lesser phenomenon which last occurred in the year of DiMaggio's major league streak, the .400 batting average. Why has there not been one since Ted Williams's .406 when there had been 22 between 1894 (the year after pitching distance was stabilized) and 1930? The disappearance of the .400 average is a function of the decline in *league-leading* averages. But why that decline? I like the answer of Stephen Jay Gould, "The Extinction of the .400 Hitter" (in *The Armchair Book of Baseball*, edited by John

Thorn, 1985. A different version of the argument is “Why No One Hits .400 Any More” in Gould’s collection *Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville,* 2003). Paleontologist Gould treats baseball as a “system” analogous to biological systems. Extremes of variation are “limiting values” of a system, and early in the history of a system the extremes will be vast; but eventually the system sorts itself out and the extreme variation decreases. In the language of biology, “early experimentation and later standardization.” As with echinoderms and mollusks, so with baseball—we are charmingly led to consider. “League-leading averages are extreme values within systems of variation,” as are the league’s bottom averages. The decrease of both extremes reflects a standardization that comes as the “system” sorts itself out with better techniques and tactics (not talents!). “The best now [meet] an opposition too finely honed to its own perfection to permit the extremes of achievement that characterized a more casual age.” If baseball is such a system, it would stand to reason that over time both the highest and lowest averages would tend toward the middle. And they do. Excluding batters with fewer than 300 times at bat per season (which gets rid of pitchers, by the way) Gould finds that in the early game the variation between the *leading* averages and the *league* averages was 91 points, from 1901 to 1930 the variation was 80, and from 1931 for five decades to the time of his research a variation of only 69. And the distance between the league average and the pits showed a similar although not identical decrease.

Now the reason I bring up Gould’s theory for the extinction of the .400 hitter (beyond the fact that I love it) is twofold. First, it’s a good thing, it’s proper, that he in effect excluded the pitcher—whose BA, against any apparently reasonable expectation, has grown farther from, not closer to, the league average. The pitcher could wreck any “system.”

Pitchers with bats in their hands are like biological sports—like mollusks with wings. Second, his theory about one thing and mine about quite another are kindred in spirit but headed in two different directions, and that fact clarifies the nature of mine. Gould is talking about systemic constraints on precedents, suggesting how something becomes highly unlikely; I am talking about precedents removing constraints, suggesting how something becomes highly likely. Very loosely: he's talking about improbability approaching the impossible, I about possibility generating the probable.

It was possible (although apparently not) for someone to approach 30 home runs in 1910, when three people each hit 10, but no one had come along to show batters that some could and certain types of batters should. I should not wax too metaphysical about this? Doesn't it amount to saying that within certain parameters people *learn to do if they are capable what is expected of them?* Well . . . yes; but let's not dismiss the compelling wonder of it either, which I think that sentence tends rather too much to do. So let's consider a couple of smaller, but easily replicable, instances of it.

From 1978 to 1985, the Detroit Tigers' shortstop Alan Trammell batted .282 with an average 9 homers and 48 runs-batted-in a year. He became a fine number two man in the batting order. In 1986 he muscled up (it happens, you know) to 21 homers and 75 runs batted in with his .277 BA. The next year manager Sparky Anderson, although he had the career slugger Darrell Evans on hand, announced that he was going to bat Trammell fourth in the order, "clean-up," traditional spot for the big gun. Trammell hit .343 with 28 homers and 105 RBI. Some would say he rose to the occasion. I'd say he rose to the *expectation.*

Now runs-batted-in of course depend upon hitting well when there are men on base, which is what a clean-up man is supposed (expected) to do. Number one in the order, the "lead-off" man, is supposed to *get on base* by hook or crook to provide the possibility of the RBI. By general agreement the best lead-off man in recent decades was Rickey Henderson, who incidentally had good power, a bonus for lead-off. In 1993 Henderson hit a more than respectable .289. Add to his 139 base hits 120 bases-on-balls and four free passes after being hit by a pitched ball and Henderson was on base 264 times in 134 games: that's doing one's job. Furthermore, when he led-off an inning Henderson's BA—according to Gary Gillette's *The Great American Baseball Stat Book 1994*—was .324, 35 points above his season's average: that's doing one's job! Now the lead-off batter isn't expected to be much of an RBI man himself since there are usually fewer men on base when he comes up (and of course it's a certainty that at least once a game there will be no one on). When Henderson batted with runners in scoring position (second base, third, or both) his average fell 48 points to .241: that's *fulfilling expectations.*

Henderson wasn't alone that season, 1993. Considering six other veteran professional lead-off hitters (by *professional* I mean those who almost always, not just occasionally, led off, by *veteran* I mean those who had done this long enough to establish a pattern), four of them suffered when batting with baserunners in scoring position: their averages then fell by 17 points, 55 points, 73, and 75. So, there is a down side to the law of precedential expectation, which gets us back to:

My fictional quarterback-safety in the football that might have been. Adequate tackler, not much of a tackler, then not expected to be, he gradually "learned" how not to tackle. Now,

I am convinced that the pitcher in historical baseball, not fiction, learned how not to hit. (Exceptions made for those like the great Brooklyn Dodger Don Newcombe, lifetime BA .271, obviously a poor learner—not like the greater Dodger Sandy Koufax, lifetime BA .097, in spite of the fact of having been a first baseman in high school.) Not expected to be much of a hitter, he became not much, he became terrible. But why did the precedents generating eventual expectations happen in the first place, since at the beginning the pitcher was not drastically far off the pace? I will dismiss out of hand once more the taxingness of his job, since his "being in on every pitch" for say 200 innings cannot really compete with the catcher's, say, 1000 innings of unnatural bodily punishment. I will offer instead the following remarks.

It quickly became customary, and good tactics, for the weakest hitter in the line-up to bat at the bottom of the order, ninth. But that is not where the pitcher was just *naturally* slotted; that doesn't seem to have happened until the 1890s. I cannot provide conclusive evidence but I can suggestive, thanks to the box scores in Jerry Lansche's wonderful *Glory Fades Away: The Nineteenth-Century World Series Rediscovered* (1991). The box scores in these "Series" between National League and American Association from 1882 through 1890 suggest that by 1888-90 the pitcher batted ninth 80% of the time; but that previous to that the catcher batted ninth just about as often as the pitcher. No, I don't know that these batting orders were typical, only that they belonged to the very best teams in the leagues. And what they suggest is that up through 1887 at least there doesn't seem to be much difference between the pitcher's and the catcher's perceived *offensive* responsibilities. That ended of course, but not quite so dramatically as one might assume.

As the 19th century ended and the pitcher was firmly entrenched in the nine hole, where he damned well belonged by then, the catcher was almost as firmly entrenched in the eight hole, where he didn't necessarily "belong." It would be a considerable time before he wasn't just naturally placed there, not until the likes of Mickey Cochrane, Bill Dickey, and Gabby Hartnett. Cochrane batting third for the Philadelphia Athletics, as Curran says, "was turning the world upside down."

While the pitcher batted ninth because he had become the weak link, soon to be the detriment, the catcher batted eighth not because of any weakness. Eighth, with less responsibility for driving in runs or getting on base, was more "restful." It was as simple as that. (Ninth was even more restful, which is why National League pitchers still usually bat ninth.) In a proper batting order no one should "rest," and the "blue-collar" catchers, unlike pitchers, did not.

The expectation that catchers would not hit never really set in, even though their primary responsibility was to catch and call a good game, to be the field general, and a great deal will still be forgiven a catcher who can. (When ex-catcher Tim McCarver calls the catching gear the "tools of ignorance" he only means y'-gotta-be-stupid to submit to such labor.) There never were enough compelling precedents of a good catcher not being a complete player. There surely were with pitchers. Why? The answer is as simple as it is undocumentable, since none of the managers from the early years are alive to talk. But at some point in the 1890s or early 1900s some manger said, "Lefty can't hit a lick, but his fast stuff is something. Hell, I guess we'll just have to live with that. And maybe he ought to just concentrate on what he does best." (The manager never said that about his weak-hitting shortstop.) And then

that resignation, spoken in other clubhouses as well, since it's easy enough to think and say, and even seems in a folksy sort of way cunning and pleasingly cynical, became common wisdom. But I remind you: if the manager said that in 1893 when Lefty was hitting .226 and he could recall his own playing days back in '77 when Ol' Charlie was hitting .245, he would never have imagined his grandson hitting .177 twenty years later. Or his great-great-grandson hitting .146 in 1972.

There's no escaping the fact that after a while the pitcher, unlike that shortstop, was not expected to hone his skills at the plate. He was allowed, and then he was expected, and he agreed, to become a defensive specialist in a game that goes both ways. Yet there are those, the anti-DH lobby, who say he should not be "platooned." As if *two* half-players were not better than *one* half. With eight other players assuming their responsibilities, two halves do mean nine full responsibilities assumed—the way the game was meant to be—instead of eight.

Now it's time to examine what the designated hitter rule actually does. For even if it *is* a conservative return to the past in spirit, a "strict construction" of original intentions, nine men sequentially taking their turns against nine in the field, it does have a radical effect upon the game. But some simple brute assumption of "more offense" is not the radical effect. As a matter of fact, it's hardly any effect at all. Take the 1992 season, more than incidentally the one hundredth of *modern* baseball. The lobbyist's assumption that the American League would score more runs because of the radical DH rule is of course statistically sound. But *how many more*? If the reader will allow me not to detail the mathematical process and trust my math I will save him or her a lot of trouble and share the answer, which I

admit surprised me, the answer being about *a fifth of a run per game. Big deal!* A fraction of a run—the kind of statistic that cannot actually be *experienced* by a fan, the person that increased offense is supposed to be for.

The radical effect is, ironically enough (and it amazes me that the anti-DH lobby cannot grasp this), a conservative preservation of the game as God and Nature intended it. Instead of "more offense" that the DH supposedly gets the American League, it is actually with everybody in the batting order contributing, with no pampered pikes creating a lull and giving a break to the opposing pitcher, a more *relentless* game, *the way it was supposed to be*! The National League's hold-out may seem "principled"—it's only pigheaded.

The argument is now over . . . but I am not done. Pretending to a power I do not have, I'll grant the anti-DHers a couple of compromises. If I were king, I would allow no designated hitting in the minor leagues. If that sounds inconsistent then here is my reasoning. I would never want different rules for the DHers minors if they were still the *real* minor leagues. Major league veterans and even some Hall of Famers used to choose to play a few years in the minors when their big-league careers were over. Can one imagine that now? The class D Coastal Plain League I watched as a kid had something in common with the old Double A and Triple A leagues: they were places of work for those on their way up to the majors, for those on their way down, and for those who had, with no disgrace, found the right level for their skills. I saw all three classes: Bill Kennedy made it to Cleveland, ex-Athletic Chubby Dean was a player-manager in Class D, and what ever happened to Turkey Tyson? But those days are gone forever, the final result of the farm system. The minors no longer offer careers to players as players, or coherence to local fans.

They are only multi-level testing grounds for prospects, with the higher levels serving as well as rehab centers for the injured, and as labor pools for temps.

But, of course, this is no answer to the obvious question. Why not train designated hitters the same place shortstops and so on learn their trades? Because I don't want career designated hitters. I want DHs who can play positions or even pitch. After all, my objection to the National League pitcher is that he's only a specialist clogging up a game intended for the generalist. And that leads to my second compromise. If I were king I would have an age limit (say 33, but I won't be a stickler) below which no one could be a DH—or a certain required longevity in the majors at least. A veteran, yes; some iron-handed rookie, no. "Designated hitter" should be an honor for an elder batsman after an achieved career as a complete player. That appeals to my aesthetic and moral senses. Also to the romantic. I would love to have followed the 37-year-old Johnny Mize, part-time first baseman with 25 home runs and 72 RBI in a mere 274 at-bats for the 1950 Yankees, hitting every day.

But back to the minors a moment: the DH rule there has certainly contributed to the ever-worsening batting averages of the pitchers who do bat. If they had to hit in the minors, were trained to hit, had forced upon them expectations generating expectations generating expectations, then in perhaps a hundred years the pitcher would be capable of at least the .226 he hit in 1893. Then the destructive anomaly having been reasonably well corrected sometime around the 200th anniversary of modern baseball, the designated hitter rule could be retired.

Now there is more here than a long digression leaving Susan Jacoby behind. For *a* or *the* major theme of *Why Baseball Matters* is the question of whether and how the game could/should be changed to make it more appealing to a generation, male and female, which seems to prefer the two other native American *ball* sports, football and basketball, and is becoming more receptive to the foreign but universal game of soccer. She notes—and I despair—that NASCAR (for Gods' sake) is more popular than baseball with women!

The trick is to change the game, if it must be (I confess I doubt that *must*!), in such a way as not to change its basic nature. Jacoby admits, by the way, that the DH is not a radical change. "Much as I dislike the designated hitter, I do not consider it a major reinvention. Baseball is played in essentially the same way it was when my grandfather watched it as a teenager a century ago and when he passed it on to me as a child in the 1950s." Furthermore, she is healthily skeptical of rules to speed the game up, to make it shorter: rules such as limiting the time a pitcher can hold the ball before pitching, or limiting the time a batter can fiddle around before taking his stance in the batter's box, or limiting the number of visits to the mound by catcher or manager, or dispensing with actual pitches on an intentional base on balls, merely declaring a free pass instead, or other petty trifles in order to cut ten minutes or so from a game. (I have never understood making pleasures shorter! If it isn't a pleasure, stay away and don't shorten mine!)

Why not something really radical instead? Like outlawing pick-off plays, pitcher throwing to first, second, or third base—which to be a logical revision would require outlawing the stolen base. Why not cut the game down from nine innings to five? Hell. . . why not count two strikes as a strike-out,

and three balls as a walk? These stupidities are my own ironic suggestions, by the way, not Jacoby's. But such revisions might appeal to the easily distracted, the digitally drunken prospective fan unworthy of being called any kind of fan!

Analogy: I have heard Americans say of soccer, "How can anyone enjoy a game with so few scores?"—missing the point that in some sense the fewer the goals the finer the match, because soccer is by nature a defensive game and the goalie may be as valuable as, perhaps more valuable than, the most prolific striker. Why not then to appeal to this prospective fan by dispensing with the goalkeeper and relying on defenders and sweeper? The answer to my fictional question is perfectly obvious. I would make some similarly absurd suggestion about cricket if I knew how.

One of the most charming moments in Why *Baseball Matters* is Jacoby's accidental discovery vacationing in France of a café which was the headquarters of "The Reims Baseball Club," a group of French fans and amateur players. Some young men who had studied in the U.S. took their New York Mets-mania back home and shared it in the halcyon days of Doc Gooden, Keith Hernandez, and Darryl Strawberry. "Baseball is the most beautiful game I have ever seen," one citizen of Reims told Jacoby. "And it ought to be perfect for France, because it's *très logique* (very logical). It will be popular in France someday. *Absolument*." One of the youngest club members added, "If I were an American, I would be proud to be of the country that invented this game."

This is in the concluding chapter of Jacoby's book—and I am glad I didn't miss it because I almost gave up reading, bored to distraction by the penultimate chapter, "The 'National

Pastime’ and the National Culture of Distraction.” Not that Jacoby is boring—but rather the people she is writing about, as she analyzes why the impatient and digitally distracted and mostly young Americans are turned off by the mentally deliberate game of baseball. Yogi Berra once observed that “Baseball is 90 percent mental; the other half is physical.” (Yogi one has to love. At some social event Yogi, dressed to kill, was approached by the mayor’s wife, who said, “Yogi, you look real cool,” and Yogi returned the compliment, “You don’t look so hot yourself.” My guess is that if I told this story to the digitally distracted it would fall flat.)

My point, or my prejudice is that the people Jacoby wastes so much energy analyzing are not worth the effort. They are among the most boring people in my experience because so easily bored. Having recently retired from college teaching—thank God!—I know them well. With their heads stuck to their iPhones and iPads, baseball will reach them no more than literature, philosophy, history, or the thrilling mysteries of quantum mechanics. There is a danger for baseball in trying to alter the game to reach the unreachable. To hell with them, I say, *Vive la France*!

Another analogy, or two. Mainline Christianity, especially Protestant, not satisfied to be “the word of God,” has tried to gain the attention of non-believers and swell the shrinking rolls of communicants by becoming more socially “relevant” and de-mystifying the sacred mysteries of the faith and turning into prose, so to speak, the stirring poetics of theology. The result is perfectly predictable. Nothing is gained but spiritual vulgarity.

There was time when people who had been to school—not

necessarily college—retained some small-at-least relationship to poetry: maybe read it, maybe recalled a line or two, certainly thought it, even if not their cup of tea, an elevated form of language superior to practical speech. But poetry, not being demotic expression, was "not for everyone." Then somewhat later, or overlapping with the earlier, there was a time when educated people and some poets themselves thought and taught that poetry *should* be "for everyone." But how could that laudable outcome come to be? Not everyone, after all, could hear or appreciate the phenomenon traditionally thought "poetic": striking visual, imagistic effects of course, but even more important the use of *sounds* to achieve a musicality just as musical as music (if I may be so deliberate).

So, what to do? Well . . . make the discovery (fabricate the discovery) that common speech is just as musical as poetic expression. After all, if I say "I think I'd like to scratch my back," that scans as an iambic line, ta Dum, ta Dum, ta Dum, ta Dum. *Ergo,* poetry can now be "for everyone" because actually "everyone" can do it and does it and it does not have to be, as Grandpa and Grandma thought, "an elevated form of language superior to practical speech." I can be doing poetry even when I share with you the stunning confession that my back itches.

So now there is a time when poetry—in order that it be saved—becomes prose. To test my conclusion, all a reader has to do is subscribe not to a general cultural review, but to specifically-poetry journals such as the ostensibly leading magazine entitled—puzzlingly enough—*Poetry*, and others of its ilk. But that's a task I would not wish upon my mother's murderer, had she had one.

Now, as I was saying about the beautiful game of baseball . . .

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