

The Real Season

I was sure, absolutely sure that I would write something for you today about this glorious season, about air and leaves and chill and cider. Today is so lovely that I thought it a forgone conclusion. So I sat down and dialed up the Muse, preparing myself for the onrush of images and music when she said, "Not so fast little buddy; the real baseball season starts in a week." What was I thinking? She's right.

One of the very best things about this time of year is that a select few teams in all of Major League Baseball have earned the right to start playing the game in earnest, for all the marbles. The bragging rights are on the line and in a short time there will be one team that can truly say, "This year we are the best." As a boy I played in a few playoff games but never came away with the ultimate trophy. That went to better teams and I knew they were better. The great thing about extended playoffs (I will write, no doubt, about the down side of the long season in the near future) is that when they're over the winning team is a bona fide claimant to the throne. It's almost impossible to 'get lucky' through three playoff series against the other best teams in the game. You can win a game or two on a fluke, an umpire's call, a fan's interference but the likelihood of winning eleven games against really good ball teams by accident is almost zero, nada, zilch. No way.

Aside from the fact that in the postseason only the really good teams are still in the game you have the verity that the players play their hardest when everything is at stake. There is a long, proud list of great players who played even better at this time of year. In my life a few that come to mind are Berra and Mantle and Gibson and Koufax and Rivera. And what about the 'average' players who rose beyond all expectation at the precise moment in time when everyone was watching? I suppose the single greatest example would be Don Larsen who threw a perfect game in the '56 World Series. Do you know how many players are in that tiny club? How many players pitched 27 up and 27 out in a World Series game? One. Pretty exclusive membership, really hard to get in.

One hundred and sixty two games is a really long season and baseball is a really hard game. Can you imagine a quarterback completing only 30 percent of his passes, a golfer making only 30 percent of his putts, a goalie saving only 30 percent of shots on goal? But in baseball a .300 batting average will get you into the Hall of Fame. Why? Because

it's just so darn difficult to hit a round ball with a round bat especially when the ball is travelling at a hundred miles per hour and jumping. At the end of this long season, doing the nearly impossible, fatigue and focus are really a problem. Six months of day in and day out trial by fast ball is tough on a body. Even you hair hurts.

Yogi Berra, the great catcher (baseball's toughest position) sometimes looked like he was dogging it a bit during the regular season. When asked why he didn't go full tilt every pitch of every game he didn't hesitate. "If played as hard as I could all the time I would be dead for the Series." An honest man and arguably the greatest player in World Series history. For Berra and for most players on the good teams the regular season is only the qualifier, just the preamble to the Show. There are a dozen or more teams at the beginning of every year who have a legitimate shot at the championship and only one at the end of it all which gets those rings. I can't think of a Major Leaguer who would be satisfied to say, "Yup, we were one of the also rans, and proud of it." Guys who think like that come up for a cup of coffee and then find other work. The Jacksons and the Gehrigs of the game played to be champions.

The down side of this long hard climb to make the Series is that only one team is going to go home feeling good. If you get to the World Series you have every right to think that this is your year. If you get that far you know you are capable of winning. There is no past and no future. You will win four more games and you will be the champion. You have to think that way. There is no alternative at that level of play. But only one team can win, right? I remember stories of Mickey Mantle crying like a baby after the amazing finish of the '60 World Series. He was sure that his team was the best; he knew they would win...and they didn't. Here's a guy at the top of the game, adored by millions, one way ticket to the Hall, handsome, rich and full of mischief but he's sitting half naked in the locker room sobbing and inconsolable. That's what it means to these guys. That's what makes them great.

And here it is, that time of year again. There are teams from Texas and New York and Philadelphia and Minnesota and Cincinnati and Tampa (we'll see about Atlanta and S.F. and San Diego) all of whom have a legitimate shot. They've put in the long season, they've kept their eyes on the prize and now it's here. All you have to do is win eleven more games against the best baseball players on the planet, all of whom feel as entitled to the prize as you do. It's here, the real season is about to begin.