

introduction

Never make predictions, especially about the future.

—CASEY STENGEL

Early one Sunday morning in the spring of 1987, I was awakened by a phone call and heard a booming voice ask, “Is this Miss Susan Jacoby?” “Who is this?” I inquired suspiciously. “This is Ernie Banks,” he replied cheerfully. “Oh, right,” I said and was about to hang up when he cut in, “I’m calling from Chicago to thank you for mentioning me in your wonderful review of Gary Carter’s book today in the *Tribune*.” Then I realized that the caller might actually be Banks, the beloved All-Star shortstop for the Chicago Cubs when I was growing up in the 1950s. I had indeed written a review for the *Chicago Tribune* of a baseball book titled *A Dream Season*, by Carter, the starting catcher for the 1986 world champion New York Mets. Carter had begun his book with the simple sentence, “I keep thinking about Ernie

Banks.”¹ He went on to mention Banks as one of the many great players—elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility—who never got a chance to participate in a World Series. Banks spent his entire nineteen-year career with the then-woeful Cubs, in the days when a player had no right to switch teams without the assent of his owner. Because my review was to be published in Chicago, I naturally picked up Carter’s allusion to Banks in my opening paragraph. Reverting to the voice of an awed ten-year-old, I said tentatively, “This is really . . . Mr. Banks.” “Call me Ernie,” he replied. “Call me Susan,” I said. We went on to have a long talk about the two great Chicago shortstops of the 1950s—Banks and Luis Aparicio, who played for my team, the White Sox. It all came back to me—the sun-swept afternoons at beautiful Wrigley Field, home of the Cubs, and ugly Comiskey Park, home of the Sox. Banks’s iconic baseball plea, “Let’s play two,” on a fine day when one nine-inning game didn’t seem to be enough. Aparicio’s dazzling footwork in the field. The recollected happiness of a game that has been a part of me for nearly as long as I can remember—a game I learned in front of the television set in my grandfather’s bar. Concluding our conversation, Banks gave me the greatest compliment any baseball legend could give a mere fan: “I told myself when I read that article, ‘The girl is *in the game*.’”

I became a passionate fan because my grandfather owned a bar and bowling alley in Harvey, Illinois, a blue-collar community just south of Chicago. Until I was ten years old, I spent the better part of my summer Saturday afternoons knocking back Shirley Temples while Gramp’s customers explained the inside

game to the little girl sitting on a bar stool with her legs propped up by liquor cartons. My grandfather had invested shrewdly in the first color television set in the neighborhood. (He had invested just as shrewdly in 1932, two days after Franklin D. Roosevelt won the Democratic nomination for the presidency, in a decrepit bar that had been shuttered throughout Prohibition. “Everyone knew that Roosevelt was going to win,” he told me, “and that it was just a matter of time until beer would be legal and then everything else. I was terrified that someone would snap this place up in the forty-eight hours it took me to round up \$100—no easy task, I can tell you—for an option to buy as soon as I could get a lawyer to draw up the papers.” (Prohibition, which had been in effect since January 17, 1920, was repealed on December 5, 1933.)

As South Siders, nearly all of my grandfather’s customers were Sox fans, although we occasionally watched the Cubs (especially if the still-Brooklyn Dodgers were in town and we would get a chance to see Jackie Robinson). By the time I was in first or second grade, I was very much aware of the significance of Robinson. In the summer of 1953, Gramps took me to Wrigley Field because the Dodgers were in town. Jackie didn’t do anything special that day, but every time he stepped up to the plate, he was greeted by a combined chorus of cheers and boos, with taunts of “nigger” audible among the latter. (Banks, who would become the first black player for the Cubs, was not on the field. He was called up from the minor leagues in September, and his first full major league season was 1954. I am told by Cubs fans of my generation that racial epithets vanished rapidly from Wrigley

after Banks, who became one of the most popular players in the club's history, established himself as that rare baseball figure, a power-hitting shortstop.) During the game I attended with my grandfather, I was very upset. The word "nigger," which I had heard on the school playground, was explicitly forbidden in both my parents' and my grandparents' homes. Gramps turned around and told one man in the row behind us to stop using such language in front of children, but the day was spoiled. I couldn't stop talking about it at the bar the following Saturday, and one of the men said to Gramps, "Jim, you shouldn't have exposed her to that." He replied, "She should grow up knowing what other people have endured." Then he added—I remember this precisely—"I'm ashamed of myself that I didn't say something a lot stronger."

Ah, those long, talk-filled Saturday afternoons, ending only when (if the game didn't go into extra innings) wives came to fetch their husbands home for dinner around 5 o'clock. There was nothing I wanted to do more than listen, on and on, to the arguments—about baseball and everything else—conducted in Chicago's distinct second- and third-generation Irish American accents. I now realize that this regular time out of time, spent listening to and talking with adults while watching the game we all loved for as long as the game lasted, was as different from today's technology-obsessed childhood as my childhood was from the one described by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her *Little House on the Prairie* series, set in the 1870s and 1880s. Looking back, I see that when I walked into my grandfather's bar, I was not only getting ready to watch the White Sox play the hated Yankees but

was entering the previous seven decades of American history, as taught by the men who, like Gramps, had been born in the late 1880s and 1890s.

I told a young friend—a fantasy baseball enthusiast who rarely attends games or watches them on television—that I was planning to write a short book about the challenges facing baseball, as a game and a business, in an era of fragmented attention spans and unprecedented competition for fans’ attention among all sports. His response was, “Oh, you’re going to write another one of those books about how wonderful things would be if baseball remained exactly the same as it was twenty or thirty years ago—sunny afternoon games, the green of the field, fathers playing catch with sons . . .” That is not my intention, because I do not think that everything about the game was better several decades ago—or even in the halcyon days preserved in selective memories of my childhood. (Actually, sunny afternoon games had become as rare by the late 1980s as players who spent their entire careers on one team.) My concerns about the future of baseball—a \$10 billion sport enjoying an unprecedented era of financial success and labor peace—are not based on misplaced nostalgia for a “pure” game that never existed. They are based on the dissonance between a game that demands and depends on concentration, time, and memory and a twenty-first-century culture that routinely disrupts all three with its vast menu of digital distractions.

To regain the attention of young fans, baseball will have to reinvent itself again—as it did after the First World War, when the lively-ball era came into its own with the arrival of Babe Ruth;

as it did when the old system of a team “owning” players was replaced by free agency in the late 1970s; as it did when baseball finally owned up to its drug problem, which vitiated so many records of the 1990s.

Can baseball get the minds of the young back in the game, even though the culture of my grandfather’s bar is gone? I hope so, because next to reading and making love, no other pastime has given me more pleasure and knowledge throughout my life. But I never make predictions, especially about the future.