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Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville

Stephen Jay Gould

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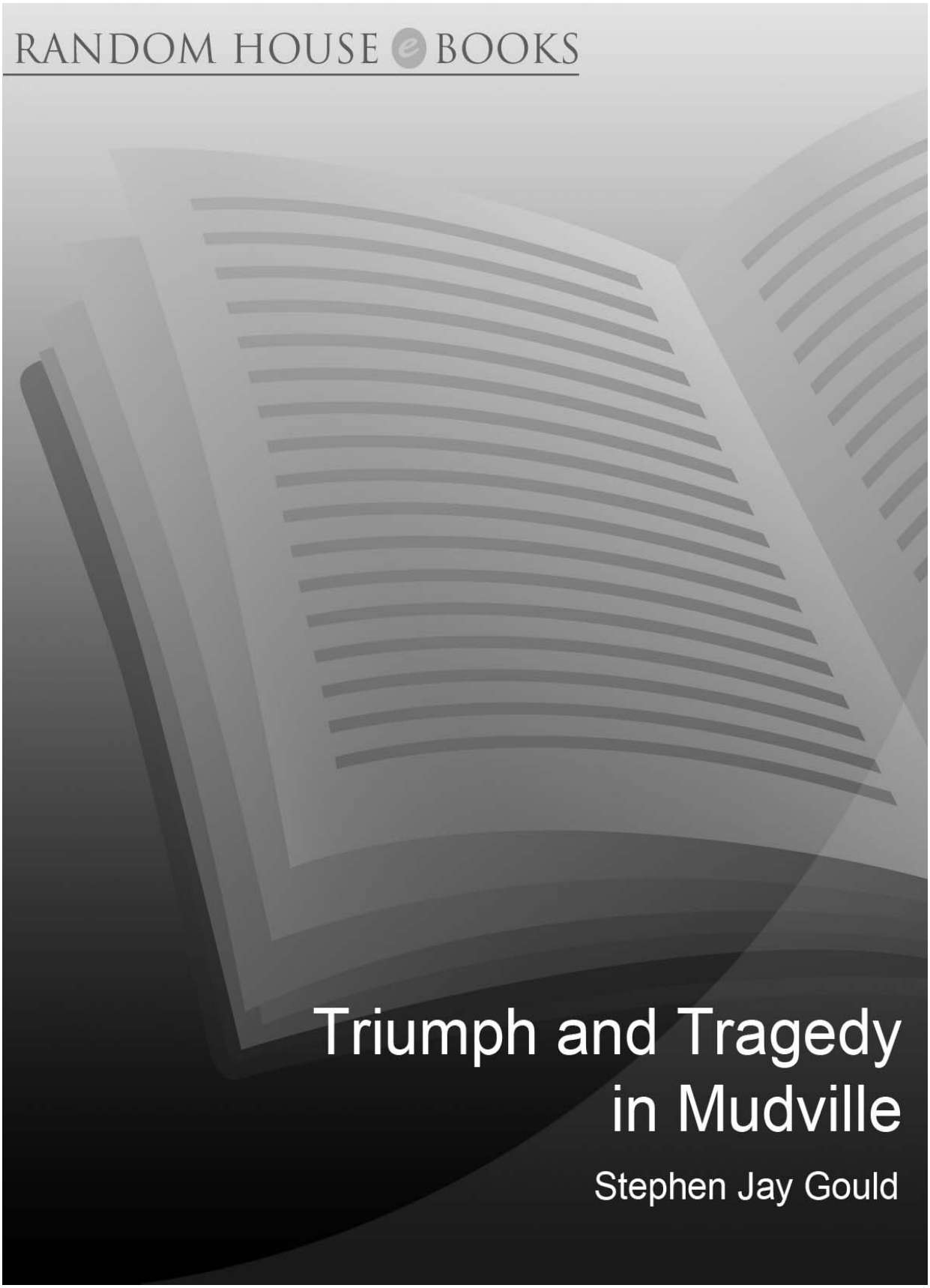

Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville

Stephen Jay Gould

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Stephen Jay Gould

TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY IN MUDVILLE

A Life long Passion for Baseball

Foreword by David Halberstam

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Frontispiece: Stephen Jay Gould at the ballpark of the 1993 Savannah Cardinals (now the Savannah Sand Gnats)
Credit: Yvonne Baron Estes

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Foreword
by David Halberstam

Stephen Jay Gould was one of the great public intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century, a man of science who by dint of a formidable, relentless intellect, an insatiable curiosity, and an exquisite literary sensibility turned much of the nation (as well as millions of people in other nations) into students in what became a great extended classroom. Technically he was a paleontologist, which meant to most of his fellow citizens, that he was in the dinosaur business, but I thought of him operating under a broader mandate as a kind of all-purpose historian-detective, working on a span of time which covered a mere three and a half billion years, looking for a glitch here and a glitch there that would mark the extinction of one species and the perpetuation of another, intrigued always as to why one species of mammal—human beings—ended up on two legs and, in William Faulkner's well-chosen words, not merely endured but prevailed, when all around us, bigger, more powerful species disappeared. The race that we run, he seemed to be reminding us constantly, was neither to the swift nor the powerful.

I think of him as a man on the job all the time, not merely scouring the latest pile of dinosaur bones for newer, more updated truths, but fascinated by the most trivial developments in the world of snails, as well as changes and adaptations in the world of baseball. To Steve Gould all of these areas had their truths, and even more remarkably, their truths were often interconnected. He was the least narrow of intellectuals: what made his intellect so admirable

was his ability to connect seemingly separate developments and truths in one field to developments in another; he could connect dots where few of his colleagues could even see the dots, let alone relate them. He was the most luminescent and valuable of citizens, able, as true intellectuals are (one thinks of the towering sociologist David Riesman), to rise above the boundaries of his own chosen profession and see things that others could not. He was able to take what were seemingly tiny bits of evidence, add historical and cultural dimension, thus giving them larger meaning, and enhancing their value. He could take big ideas and, through his skills as an analyst and writer, make them small, thereby making their truths infinitely more accessible. Equally important, he was capable of taking what were seemingly small truths and, through the proper interpretation, make them large, imbuing them with an importance and a dimension they otherwise lacked.

Nor was he simply some brilliant self-isolated figure, distanced by the very nature of so superior an intellect from much of what was around him; rather, he was in the best sense a major player in the ongoing national arena of debate, the most engaged of public men, not just a witness to the human comedy around him but a joyous appreciator of it. The descendant of an immigrant family which had escaped from an infinitely crueler Europe, the complicated, often painful lessons of assimilation were palpable in his own childhood, as were the uses of adversity. The scions of his generation of newly arrived, highly ambitious Jewish families were involuntarily well schooled in the uses of adversity, in the constant exhortations to work harder than those around them. He had flowered in the new pluralistic, post-World War II American democracy, and had great admiration for this society’s possibilities, as well as a thoughtful wariness of its excesses. As his friend the distinguished First Amendment attorney Martin Garbus said of him—“his was the most imposing of intellects, one that

seemed to have the widest possible uses, made all the more valuable to those of us around him because it was blended with a rich, enduring personal humanity—Steve was an almost perfect amalgam of great scientist and great humanist."

He was in all ways a valuable, pluralistic man, liberal in the best and broadest sense of the word; his liberalism was not merely an endorsement of a temporary fashionable political dogma, but liberalism in the better, classic sense: an abiding openness to new ideas and new forces. He understood earlier, and much more clearly than most of his peers, the public uses of science, and the ancillary lessons in history that science was capable of producing. He was a Darwinian, valuable in the ongoing debates with the creationists, in a debate he surely felt should have ended long ago. But he was a tempered Darwinian, he did not believe in a society where the powerful, armed with an arsenal of pseudoscientific data, could impose their will without restraints on those less blessed. He knew that was good for neither the weak nor the strong; even more, he knew that that those who appeared weak were not always weak, and those who appeared strong were rarely that strong.

That the creationists were still on the offensive late in the twentieth century, and that their newest proponents used the most modern means of communication to propagate what he considered myth-based views did not greatly surprise him. He was too wise and shrewd an intellectual to believe that good ideas which were science-based would, ipso facto, because of their elemental truths always triumph. He understood far better than most the power of passion bred by adversity. And he knew that the late-century backlash of the creationists in America was produced, if by no other force, by the most involuntary impulse to survive and live as in the past, on the part of people who thought the society as they knew it, and where

they were most comfortable, was changing, driven by forces of modernity that they despised and felt were corrupting all that they treasured.

Stephen Gould was—perfectly in keeping with his own view of how immigrant families go through the process of Americanization—the most passionate of baseball fans; even his immigrant grandfather, born as he was in Hungary, liked going to games as a way of becoming that much more American, and it was through his own father, a court stenographer, that Steve eventually fell in love with the game, the Yankees, and Joe DiMaggio, in no particular order. That a bright, not particularly athletic child would love baseball was the most normal of possibilities in newly minted American homes at that time. There was less competition from other sports in what was essentially a pre-television, pre-entertainment-age childhood. Baseball was very accessible (all you had to do was turn the radio to 1010 and hear the honeyed voice of Mel Allen), and even if a child was not a gifted athlete, baseball offered early intellectual traction. It had all those wonderful numbers, batting and earned run averages that somehow seemed to unlock both past and present. Besides, the Yankees seemed to win all the time, which was comforting in a world where there were enough other defeats. In addition baseball is, as Bart Giamatti, the former president of Yale and later commissioner of baseball, once told me, the first thing a child can discuss with his or her parents—matters of sex and politics and religion are far beyond reach, but baseball offers a rare commonality and gives the very young an enviable social connection with their elders. Steve Gould's father took him regularly to Yankee games as a boy, offering him an almost textbook example of the role baseball played in the Americanization of its newest citizens, how it allowed them to feel more *American.* Equally important, he came of age in New York at a wonderful time, the late forties through the mid-fifties, a golden age of baseball in the city of his

birth, when a subway series was virtually a given each year. Though born and raised in Queens and not the Bronx, he became the most dedicated of Yankee fans; in all other things, one friend noted, Steve always rooted for the underdog. But not in baseball; the Yankees were rarely the underdog.

And so we have in these pages the great distinguished scientist at both work and play, studying a world he loves, that of baseball, and producing some of his most lyrical writing. What better field for study could there be for someone who was fascinated by the mutations of societal change, the impact upon a given institution by forces produced by the society around it. After all, in his lifetime the changes in the game were quite profound and yet the game remained essentially the same. When he first became a fan in 1949, there were only sixteen big league teams, St. Louis was a western city and Washington a southern one. The teams played more often than not during the day, on grass, and traveled by train. The games were broadcast on radio. Owners had complete dictatorial power over players—they could offer a player a preselected salary of their choosing, and a player's only recourse, if he did not like the number, was to retire. Though Jackie Robinson had just integrated the National League and Larry Doby the American League, it was still a very white game. But it did reflect the changing demographics of America. On the Yankee team that faced the Dodgers in the second game of the 1949 World Series, there were four children of the new Italian immigration to America—DiMaggio, Rizzuto, Berra, and Raschi—in the starting lineup.

Fast-forward to today, thirty teams, eleven of them in the Sunbelt (if you count the Bay Area teams), the game always on television, teams traveling in chartered jets around the country, games played mostly at night, often on artificial surfaces in domed stadiums, with power having passed from owners to players, and some players making as much as

$18–25 million a year. Ethnically, of course, it has changed as well. On occasion during the 2001 and 2002 seasons, his beloved Yankees fielded a lineup with seven black and Hispanic players. Thus baseball was a wonderful subject for him, something that essentially stayed the same (except for the designated hitter rule, which he quite predictably hated) and yet reflected the quite dramatic social and legal changes in the society around it.

His favorite ballplayer, as these pages will make abundantly clear, was Joe DiMaggio, the greatest player on the greatest team in baseball at the historic moment when Steve Gould first discovered the sport. When he was a boy, he and his father had once gone to a midweek game against the hapless St Louis Browns and his father had caught a foul ball off DiMaggio's bat. In time DiMaggio signed the ball for him. If he was idolatrous of few other things or people in his life, he idolized DiMaggio ("He was the glory of a time that we will not see again"). Late in his life he taught a class at Harvard jointly with Alan Dershowitz, the noted law school professor and a close friend, and they argued constantly over DiMaggio. Dershowitz, originally from Brooklyn, was a devoted Dodger fan, and thus a Yankee hater; he would readily admit to DiMaggio's greatness as a player but saw all kinds of flaws in him as a man, flaws that remained invisible to the worshipful Gould. In this case, at least, the adoration of the great scientist looking out at a chosen icon late in his life was no different from that of the little boy sitting in Yankee Stadium in the late forties, holding his father's hand and hearing how great a player DiMaggio was. Of the two great hitting achievements of 1941, the year he was born, he was vastly more impressed by DiMaggio's fifty-six-game streak than he was by Williams's .406 batting average. Was this, others might wonder, the purely scientific importance of the streak, or was it as well the enduring charisma of a childhood hero?

The collection of these pieces shows Steve Gould at his best, and readers will readily understand the richness and complexity of his mind. There is a lovely small piece composed on the death of Babe Pinelli, the umpire who had called Don Larsen's perfect game in October 1956. The final pitch to Dale Mitchell, a pinch hitter and twenty-seventh batter, with the count 1–2, was just a little high and outside. "Strike three!" said Pinelli. Naturally enough, Mitchell groused about the call. Gould, the historian-as-umpire, calls the play for Pinelli and against Mitchell—"A man may not take a close pitch with so much on the line. Context matters. . . . Babe Pinelli, umpiring his last game, ended with his finest, his most perceptive, his most truthful moment." Another wonderful piece is about Dummy Hoy, a deaf and dumb player, who played for fourteen years from 1888 to 1902. It is powered by Gould's rage against the cruelty of the era, the stupidity of the nickname, and the demeaning forces with which Hoy had to contend. In Gould's words Hoy emerges as one of the most gifted, intelligent players of his time, a man admirable in all ways. And there is his long essay on the disappearance of the .400 hitter, a rumination on why no one is likely to do it again, on how the forces both inside and outside of baseball have changed the context and made it so unlikely.

To place Steve Gould's baseball life in proper historical perspective, one should note that he was born in September 1941, a month before Mickey Owen dropped the third strike on Tommy Henrich in game four of the World Series, a mistake that cost the Dodgers not merely the contest but a 3–1 lead in games and greatly improved the Yankees chances of winning the Series. And he died some sixty years later in May 2002, just as Jason Giambi was making his debut as a free-agent Yankee first baseman, but perhaps even more important, as Alfonso Soriano, the young Dominican infielder, rose to superstar status. He and I never talked about Soriano, but I presume Steve would have been

thrilled by Soriano's almost miraculous ascent to greatness, by the quickness of his bat, the amazing strength in his seemingly slim body, the explosiveness and elasticity in his muscles, and the fact that early in his major league career it was almost impossible to get him to lay off pitches and work his way on base by walking. This, I think, is the part that Steve Gould would have loved, the deep sociocultural imprint of Soriano's native culture, and the fact that, as they say, you don't get off the island (the Dominican Republic) by taking pitches and walking.

In the second part of his life, positioned permanently in the Boston area by dint of tenure at Harvard, he became a season-ticket holder at Fenway Park and something of a naturalized Red Sox fan as well, and there is in some of his later writing a rare compassion and affection for the Red Sox. (Because I was born in the Bronx, about eight blocks from Yankee Stadium, but grew up partly in New England, and later ended up with a house on Nantucket, I have considerable sympathy for what are, if not divided loyalties, at least dual, or partially shared loyalties.) He loved Fenway Park, came to appreciate the complexity of being a Red Sox fan, and sired a son who was a Red Sox fan. That meant that he could still easily go to games and sustain his love of it; baseball, as readers of this book will soon understand, was not merely a source of pleasure, though certainly it was that, but it soon became one more field on which a great detective could test his intellect. Steve Gould believed in what might be called the contingency of history theory—that is, history is not a simple unbroken, almost predictable line of progress with certain almost guaranteed givens and thus assured outcomes. Rather, it is filled with pitfalls and ambushes and there are land mines everywhere; occasionally it is almost whimsical in the course it chooses. If you rewind certain sections of history and try to replay them, he believed, things might come out very differently: the Confederacy, say (these are my examples not his),

might triumph at Gettysburg, Rommel might defeat Montgomery in North Africa, and Mickey Owen might hold on to the third strike from Hugh Casey. Interestingly enough, Dershowitz believes that Gould's view of baseball informed his larger view of history, rather than the other way around, because baseball is so accessible and it is so easy to see what might have happened in the outcome of a game with just the smallest of changes, say a different relief pitcher throwing to Bobby Thomson in 1951, or perhaps Casey Stengel in 1960 bringing in Whitey Ford for the final outs against the Pirates.

Baseball really begins for Steve Gould in the 1949 season, DiMaggio's last great year, when he missed the first two and a half months of the season with aching feet and then came back in late June to lead the Yankees to a three-game sweep in Boston, a series in which he hit four home runs and knocked in nine runs. If I have any regret, reading these pieces, it was that Gould did not seem to have made a comparable connection to Ted Williams, whom I think he would have adored. For someone who was fascinated by the complexity of human behavior and its effect on performance ("the human heart in conflict with itself," to use another phrase of Faulkner's), it has always struck me that Williams is a much more interesting, much richer subject than DiMaggio. I can just imagine Gould and Williams together—Gould with his wondrous, shrewd, and relentless curiosity, and Williams with his exuberant spirit, his ferocious and on occasion belligerent intelligence, delighted because he had finally found someone smart enough to understand him: "No goddamn it, Professor Gould, when I said pitchers are dumb by breed, I meant exactly that, *pitchers are dumb by breed. . . . Yes, of course pitchers are a breed—what else would they be? Why you ought to know that—I thought they told me you were a smart Harvard scientist!"*

I'd have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that one. After all, Williams's own philosophy (though he was

technically a political conservative and Gould a liberal) paralleled Gould's with some surprising similarities, and Gould would have loved one of Williams's elemental truths of both baseball and life: "God gets you to the plate, but from then on, you're on your own." That is, natural talent has a lot of to do with the earlier rounds of selection in any enterprise, but what you put into it on your own, how hard you work and how much passion you bring to it, how much you study to improve yourself matters equally—it is our mark as individuals, our passions, our visions, our commitment on occasion to something larger than ourselves, which sets us apart. Fittingly, no baseball player ever studied the game more closely, worked harder to build himself up physically (especially in an age when players accepted their bodies and did not try to improve them) than Williams. He was, as much as any player I can think of, someone who reflected the qualities in a society that Steve Gould wrote about so well, the achievement of a seemingly ordinary man fighting not inconsiderable disadvantages, who raises himself to a position of excellence out of his own fierce will. For certainly there was a central theme which distinguished Gould's most important work: he was wary of classification of people by race and by ethnicity. Here he was well ahead of the curve; he understood that continuing breakthroughs in science—the coming of DNA with its awesome implications—would likely create an ever greater instinct to categorize people and to do it too quickly, based on what are presumed to be genetic characteristics, as if to rephrase Tolstoy, your genes are your fate. He was, in effect, the anti-bell curve man; other forces, he believed, determine our character and fate more than sheer DNA. He did not like people being pigeonholed based on presumptions about them, presumptions that had nothing to do with their character and their individuality. (As such, I believe he would have been fascinated by the revelations which came out about Williams, just about the time of both

of their deaths in 2002—of the fact that May Williams, the ballplayer's mother, was half Mexican, and there was a virtually secret part of the Williams family, something which surely, given the prejudices of Southern California in that era, must have had something to do with Williams's exceptional rage to excel.)

Steve Gould, it should be said, was a devoted and somewhat ritualistic fan. One of the reasons he loved baseball so much was because the past casts so important a shadow on the present: players are measured not just against those whom they play today, but against those who have gone before them. Other sports did not catch his fancy. His friend Dershowitz was a serious basketball fan as well as baseball fan, but he could never get Steve to buy in on basketball, arguably our most balletic and athletically demanding sport. It simply did not move him, and he could not be reconnected with his boyhood as he was when he watched baseball. By contrast, when he watched baseball, the man could become a boy once again. He had learned to keep score as a boy, and as a man, ever meticulous, he still kept score. When he was a boy, he had always gone to games by public transportation, getting a feel for the excitement of the crowd even before it got to the stadium, and as a grown man he still demanded that he and his friends go to games by public transportation, never by car, in no small part because he still liked getting a feel for the mood of the crowd. In addition, though he liked eating well in good restaurants, no amount of pressure from his pals could convince him to go to a good restaurant and eat well before a night game. That was not the way it was done, because it was not the way it had been done when he was a boy. If he was going to a ball game, he was going to eat at the game. Hot dogs it would be, not coq au vin.

At the game he was the most attentive of fans. Others might see a baseball game, with its languid rhythms, as a chance to get together and talk of other things, but not

Steve Gould. He was not there to socialize. He was appalled once when Dershowitz brought a cell phone to a game and actually took incoming calls. Dershowitz might just as well have endorsed the DH rule. Gould protested vigorously and it did not happen again. He was there to see the game, to watch the field at all times, with one eye if need be on the scoreboard. He loved the subtle byplay of the game, certain pitchers against certain hitters in tight situations. Once he had gone to a game with his longtime editor, Ed Barber, and it was one of those nights when Roger Clemens was pitching and was absolutely on top of his game. About the eighth inning, Gould showed Barber his scorecard, and Clemens's line went something like this: eleven strikeouts and two hits, and one or two walks. Perhaps in all, a hundred or so pitches thrown. As he showed this statistical update to Barber, Steve turned as if to the crowd itself, and said, talking about the game Clemens was pitching, but perhaps more important, the whole scene, and the pleasure of being a part of it, his words as much as anything an epitaph for his own exceptional and occasionally magical life, "Isn't this wonderful!"

Editor’s Note

In the months before his death on May 20, 2002, Steve Gould had been hard at work on this volume. The subject had come up between us in the seventies, when Steve began to write his vibrant essays about baseball for *Natural History* and elsewhere. Early on, he had displayed a unique skill in blending his science and his game in a way that humanized the former and deepened the latter. We agreed then that there would be a baseball book but that it must wait in line. He had in mind *The Mismeasure of Man, Wonderful Life*, and of course there followed hundreds of essays gathered into his wonderful collections as well as long work on his final scientific statement that became *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory.*

So, time passed. Steve lived a busy life, constantly balancing teaching, research, writing, speaking, travel, and a personal life that prominently featured baseball, as well as, tragically, the first onset of his cancer, over fifteen years ago. But by late 2001 he was ready to go out to the literary ballpark. In 1992, his friend Stephen King had written him a letter suggesting that Steve “devote a small but not inconsequential block of time” to writing a novellasized memoir about baseball, a pivotal exhortation. In the introductory piece that follows, Gould says that this book “exists to fulfill a promise” made to King, meaning the memoir to come.

Steve went to work, first gathering all of his writings on baseball, choosing and revising the pieces to accompany the memoir and lining up an order of presentation. He’d always been good at titles, and the title here is his. This was the same procedure Steve had always used in turning his

various essays into book form. At last he turned to the long, personal work which was to have been the book's cornerstone, only to be overcome by the cancer that would take him from us. Game and enthusiastic to the end, Steve called in the early spring of 2002 to assure me that he would deliver the book, and he has. He had left it, neatly organized and in good hands, in his office at Harvard. With the revised earlier essays, designed to accompany the memoir, were two new pieces: the warm introduction to this volume and his fond—and analytical—story of a boyhood spent playing stickball on the neighborhood streets of Queens, as far as he could go with the longer work.

We at Norton are proud to present this book, and we are grateful to Patricia Chui for her invaluable work and to Kay McCauley who so professionally smoothed the way.

Steve Gould loved baseball; and he loved the New York Yankees, loved them not so much because they were champions, but because they were *his* champions—he'd grown up with them. Millions of readers have, in a way, grown up in science with Steve Gould. With this last legacy, he offers to us a celebration of both as only he could, with depth, grace, wit, and passion.

Edwin Barber
W. W. Norton . . . Company
September 2002

Seventh Inning Stretch: Baseball, Father, and Me

Introduction and Rationale

This introductory and longest piece of the book exists to fulfill a promise made to one of my best baseball friends, author Steve King, who wrote to me in late October 1992: “I think you should set aside a small but not inconsequential block of time—three weeks, maybe a month—to write a long (20,000 to 30,000 words) ‘linchpin essay’ that would place your love and knowledge of baseball among the other landmarks of your rather remarkable life.”

Obviously, I appreciated the implied compliments in Steve’s remarks. But I quickly resolved to follow his suggestion for a set of more literary and personal reasons. I have published eleven volumes of essays, ten from my monthly series in *Natural History* magazine that ran to three hundred successive pieces, without a break, from January 1974 until January 2001, and an eleventh (*Urchin in the Storm*) based primarily on essays originally published in the *New York Review of Books.* I have been writing about my serious dedication to baseball (in a wide variety of formats, from short op-ed statements to fairly lengthy articles) since the early 1980s; and I suppose that, for at least fifteen years, I have been intending to collect these baseball scribblings into a volume once enough material had accumulated. Steve King’s suggestion of a decade ago (I began this “novella” in mid April 2002) made my resolve firm, but the press of other commitments and the need to accumulate more material made this palindromic year of the new millennium an appropriate time to begin in earnest.

As much as I have loved and followed baseball all my conscious life, I never thought, before deciding to “cash out” Steve’s suggestion in an opening novella, that I would ever try to discourse (at any length or seriousness) about why the game continues to hold me so tight after more than half a century of serious and continuous rooting. After all, one loves what one loves, and unless the activity causes clear and intrinsic harm to others, no explicit defense need be provided for following one’s bliss.

Yet I have developed personal answers to the two major questions so often thrown at academics and other professional intellectuals as challenges to their baseball commitments, and my responses might be worth sharing, especially since discussion on these issues never seems to abate. First, why are so many American intellectuals so serious about their baseball commitments? Or (to put the matter more specifically, as this form of inquiry so often does), why has baseball alone among major American sports, with boxing as the only other possible contender, generated so much writing of not insubstantial literary quality? Second, does this favoritism toward baseball arise in any way from the plethora of common claims about baseball’s imitation of the central rhythms and patterns of our lives? Does life imitate the World Series in any way that might transcend lame and meaningless metaphor? Does time begin on opening day in any sense that might help us, at least by analogy, to accept the loud evenings of July 4 or the silly costumes of neighborhood kids on October 31?

I have devised, over the years, a definite way of treating general questions of this sort, including these two particular inquiries—and though my resolutions satisfy me both rationally and emotionally, I cannot claim for them any abiding status as provable or general truths. These resolutions do, however, set a groundwork for permitting me to begin this baseball book with an autobiographical rationale.

I have written two general books (*Wonderful Life*, 1989, and *Full House*, 1996) dedicated to viewing the history of life as a sensible and interpretable unfolding of one actual pattern among the countless alternative (and equally sensible) scenarios that just didn't happen to attain the privilege of empirical realization. We live in a basically unpredictable world, featuring histories dominated by contingency—that is, actual patterns that make good sense and become subject to interesting and sensible explanation once they unfold as they did, but that could have proceeded along innumerable alternative routes that would have yielded just as sensible a history, but that did not gain the good fortune of actual occurrence.

Thus, if it be true that intellectually inclined American sports fans tend to enjoy and follow baseball at a higher frequency than other popular national sports, I don't for a moment attribute such favoritism to any inherent property of the game itself. Baseball became America's pastime for a complex set of reasons, explored throughout this book, but the game is not intrinsically more difficult or inherently harder to fathom than any other major sport—and I therefore reject the common assumption that strong rootership among intellectuals can be related in any important way to the nature of the activity itself.

Rather, I would argue that sports plays an important role in the lives of many people (either by direct participation or by following it as a fan), and that intellectuals roughly match the norms of any other group in their predisposition to such avocational interests. Thus, if baseball has captured the serious attention of many scholarly fans, I would seek no special cause beyond the general appeal of the game among all aficionados of sport. By this argument, baseball holds its favored place as a general phenomenon in the history of American sport, and not because the game holds any special or intrinsic appeal to the intellectually minded fans.

As I argue within this volume, modern baseball coagulated from a variety of stick-and-ball games, played in England and perhaps in other European nations and imported to this country by early settlers. In essentials, the modern form of the game coalesced by the mid-nineteenth century, having evolved as a truly popular sport, played by farm boys and city slickers alike. By contrast, other currently popular team sports, football and basketball in particular, arose primarily as university activities at a time when only a small percentage of Americans achieved any tertiary education. During my childhood in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, professional football and basketball played short seasons and commanded only quite restricted popular attention. Hockey was, and to a large extent remains, an import from a great land just to our north. (I remember going to a hockey game at Madison Square Garden in the late 1940s and reading in the program that almost every starting player for the New York Rangers was Canadian by nationality.)

And so, I would argue (at least for myself and, I suspect, for most baseball fans of scholarly bent as well) that a serious personal affection for the sport does not follow, either logically or intrinsically, from any particular inherent property of the game's uniqueness, but rather needs to be explained in the same basic mode as most autobiographical phenomena—that is, as a contingent circumstance that did not have to unfold as it did, but that makes perfectly good sense as a reasonable outcome among a set of possibilities. In this general sense, and for a large array of excellent reasons, baseball became America's "signature sport." I can think of no reason why its appeal should be any less or greater among intellectuals than among any other segment of our population. So I would suspect that the appeal of baseball should, at least as an initial hypothesis, be equally strong among intellectually minded fans as among any other group of Americans.

I am not, however, either in this introductory piece or in the book in general, trying to advance general explanations of the appeal or success of our national pastime. Thus, I can only speak for myself and from my own life. If any of my personal reasons apply more generally, then we will need the confirming testimony of others. I view the major features of my own odyssey as a set of mostly fortunate contingencies. I was not destined by inherited mentality or family tradition to become a paleontologist. I can locate no tradition for scientific or intellectual careers anywhere on either side of my eastern European Jewish background. I myself am the oldest member of the third cohort, the offspring of immigrant grandparents who passed through Ellis Island—that is, the generation destined for university education and professional careers outside the garment district and the world of small shopkeepers.

I accepted this circumstance gladly (not that we have much choice in such matters). And I view my serious and lifelong commitment to baseball in entirely the same manner: purely as a contingent circumstance of numerous, albeit not entirely capricious, accidents. In other words, my affection for baseball does not predictably follow from any generality of my being (in a “laws of nature” type of explanation preferred by scientists like myself), but rather from a set of “accidents” arising from the particulars of my personal life.

Among these particulars, I would single out two for special emphasis. In fact, I rather suspect that versions of these two factors tend to rank high on the list of contingencies for explaining the inclinations and commitments of many serious fans.

1. Issues of how, or whether, to assimilate to the language and customs of an adopted land stood in the forefront of consciousness for the millions of immigrants (including all members of both sides of my family) who arrived in America during the great wave of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. Some chose to retain native languages and customs so far as they could, and to assimilate only to the minimal degree required for basic success and solvency. Others consciously abjured their natal tongues and traditions and struggled to speak only English and to learn and practice the history and customs of their adopted land. This second assimilationist group tended to dismiss the traditionalists and newcomers who had not yet made up their minds as “green horns” or “greenies.” My maternal Hungarian grandparents (the relatives I know best and who served as my surrogate parents during World War II, when my father fought in Europe and Northern Africa) were devoted assimilationists who spoke Hungarian only when they didn’t want me to understand, and who took great pride in their accommodation to America. I doubt that they ever understood the limits to their success, particularly as expressed in strong accents that they actively denied, but never lost nonetheless.

Immigrants who opted for assimilation tended to choose particular American institutions or customs as public foci for their commitments. Some veered toward politics of democratic systems that they and their families could enjoy for the first time—as in, for example, the domination of local governments in several major cities by new Irish and Italian citizens. (The WASPs of old Brahmin Boston feared the death of their beloved city when poor Irish immigrants took local political power away from traditional sources, but the Hub persevered and prospered.)

Particularly for men, and especially commonly for Jewish men, a dedication to a distinctively American sport provides the major tactic for assimilation. The three Bs in particular (boxing, basketball, and especially baseball) assumed great importance in the lives of many Jewish and other immigrants. Few Jews grow very tall, so we were probably not destined for basketball triumph as players (although Abe Saperstein put together and coached the Harlem