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LIFE | IDEAS | ESSAY

Baseball and Its Aging Fans

Can a game with a 19th-century tempo survive in the age of digital distraction?



Fans outside Yankee Stadium in July in New York City. PHOTO: TIM CLAYTON/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

By **SUSAN JACOBY**

Aug. 18, 2016 11:32 a.m. ET

In late August, when the sky becomes perceptibly darker at the start of night games, all true baseball fans begin to think about the approaching end of the season. This year, my annual regret is deepened by worry about the future of a sport that is hardly “just like life,” as some sentimentalists like to say. What could be further from the way we live now, in a culture of constant digital distraction, than a clockless game that demands patience and sustained attention from players and fans alike?

The business of baseball certainly looks healthy enough. Though it trails the National Football League and the National Basketball Association in national television ratings, its local broadcasts dominate the market in many cities. Baseball is also thriving at major and minor league box offices.

But there's a big demographic catch. Major League Baseball has the oldest fan base of any major sport. In 2015, according to Nielsen's annual year-in-sports report, some 59% of viewers for national baseball television broadcasts were over 50, as compared with just over 36% for the NBA.

Many explanations have been advanced for the aging of baseball's audience, including youthful resistance to the length and slow pace of games. "We all know that wonderful and startling things happen in baseball," says Michael Hauptert, an economist at the University of Wisconsin and a member of the Society of American Baseball Research. "But the fundamental fact of the game is that the best hitters fail two out of three times. If kids tune in to an NBA game, they're likely to see scoring within a few seconds."

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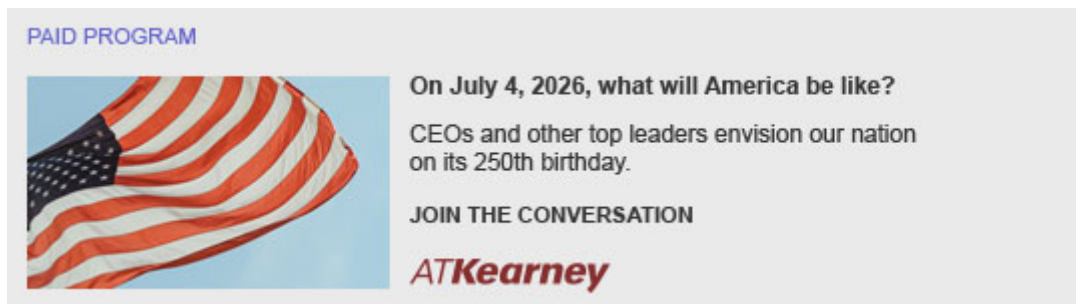
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points out that baseball remains the sport played by the largest number of children under 12. "The real challenge is to keep kids interested after that, with all of the competition for their attention," he says. MLB's At Bat app, Mr. Manfred notes, is opened eight million times a day—and the average age of users is 30.

Soon after interviewing Mr. Manfred, I happened to find myself in a New York City subway car next to a teenager who was using the At Bat app and wearing the cap of my beloved—and struggling—New York Mets. I asked if he had seen 43-year-old Bartolo Colon's outstanding 4-1 outing on the mound for the Mets the night before. He hadn't, he said, because he got bored when there was no scoring in the first three innings, but he had checked the final score before going to bed. This young man is certainly a fan—but a very different kind of fan from old folks who wouldn't dream of turning off a scoreless game after three innings.

I became a fan as a child, watching Saturday afternoon games in my grandfather's bar in the 1950s. Gramps had wisely invested in one of the first color television sets in his neighborhood in Harvey, Ill., a blue-collar town just south of Chicago. I can still hear the distinctive Chicago Irish accents of the customers enjoying their beer as they explained the game to a little girl sipping Shirley Temples.

Between innings, the men offered me an unsentimental education in what isn't obvious at first but is essential to understanding a complicated sport—the meaning of pitch count and location, the importance of positioning fielders in the right place to foil a particular batter, the exquisite tension of a 1-0 game.



Time and patience are the essential ingredients for producing a real fan. I once introduced a brilliant Russian-born scientist to baseball, and it took him a year before he understood enough to enjoy the game. Later he thanked me but admitted that he would never have persevered, had I not been his first American girlfriend. "I thought you had to understand this game to please American women," he said.

In fact, one of baseball's current challenges is the relatively small number of female fans. Many more women watch regular-season, nationally televised football than baseball (an average of 6.2 million versus 141,000 for each game day in 2015, according to Nielsen). The total audience for football is much larger than for baseball, but even on a percentage basis, baseball has the smallest share of female fans of any major sport. I have no explanation for this anomaly in an era when so many more girls and women are involved in sports than ever before.

The brightest spot for MLB in recent years has been a significant increase in the number of Hispanic fans. Stephen Master, Nielsen's vice president of sports, notes that Hispanic viewership of English-language World Series broadcasts rose a startling 30% between 2014 and 2015. The presence of so many Latino players—approaching 30% on MLB rosters in recent years—has presumably helped.

The story is very different for African-American players, whose numbers have been in decline for decades. In 1986, some 19% of major league players were African-American; at the beginning of this season, just over 8% were. The good news is that nine of the 36

first-round draft picks in 2015 were African-American—the largest proportion since 1992. MLB now operates six urban academies in cities with large black populations, with four more scheduled to open next year.

But there is still the troubling fact that fewer young Americans are continuing with baseball into their teenage years. The locally financed, informal baseball leagues of my childhood have been replaced by elite, rigorously coached traveling youth teams. As Brian Costa reported in this newspaper last year, the elite programs can cost parents several thousands of dollars year.

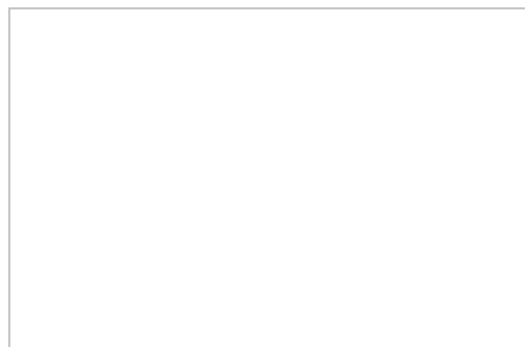
There is a real need for neighborhood youth programs in low- and middle-income areas, where parents cannot possibly afford sports that can cost more than private-school tuition. The culture of neighborhood pickup games, like the culture of my grandfather's bar, is gone.

Finally, the future of baseball depends not only on institutions but on individual adult fans making an effort to show the young why we love the game and why they might love it too, if they gave it a chance. A few years ago, I used Lawrence Ritter's 1966 classic "The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played It" in a volunteer tutoring program.

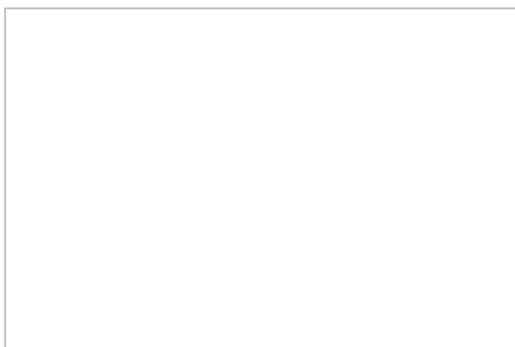
My 11-year-old-student became enthralled by the voices of men from a time he had initially dismissed as "boring." His general interest in both history and baseball increased dramatically. To my surprise, because I had been told he was a poor reader, this boy especially loved the biblical quote used by Ritter as an epigraph: "All these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times."

— *Ms. Jacoby, who is working on a book about baseball, is the author, most recently, of "Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion."*

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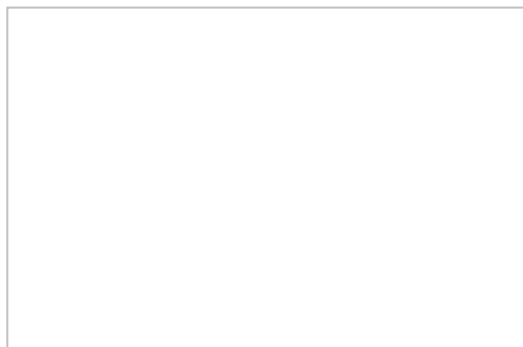


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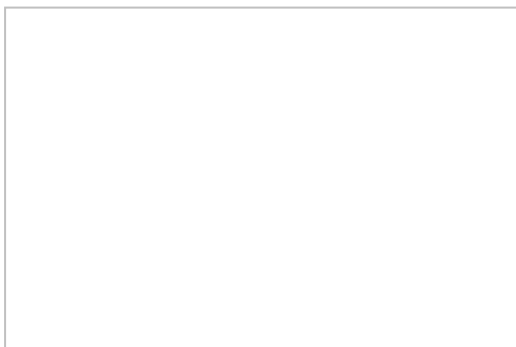
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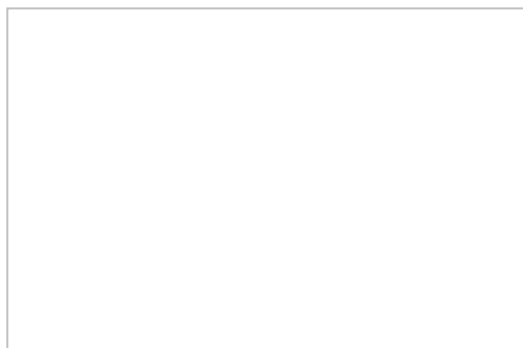
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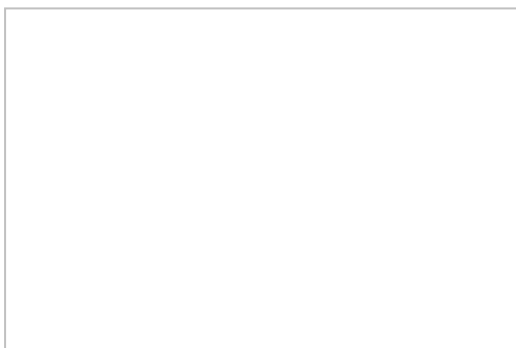
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