

Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

SCORECARD

Write Stuff

As baseball has changed so have the dreams of those who try to get inside it, from finding glory on the field to calling the shots from on high

BY JACK DICKEY

SPEND ENOUGH

time in a profession and you will end up refitting your dreams to its realities. So many baseball players who once fantasized about being the greatest ever strain just to stay on rosters; only a handful—think Bryce Harper, Clayton Kershaw, Bartolo Colon—can fixate higher, on mastery. The same could be said of baseball writers, constrained as we are by rote narratives, cliché-happy athletes and, above all, the immense distance between the press box and the field. Every so often, though, a sportswriter breaks free with flair.

And perhaps no sportswriter exhibited more of it than the late George Plimpton. Seven of the sports books written by the longtime SI contributor and literary eminence were reissued by Little, Brown on April 26.

Participatory journalism was his preferred conceit. As Plimpton tells it in *Out of My League*, the first of his sports books, on one lazy afternoon in 1958 behind the Yankee Stadium visitors' dugout, he watched a pitcher curse himself for giving up a home run to Mickey Mantle. Despite having pitched in high school and at Harvard, Plimpton thought he could not understand such anguish until he took the big league rubber himself. He suggested the idea to Sid James, SI's founding managing editor, saying that he would pitch not "as a hotshot but a guy who's average." After some prodding from New York City saloon keeper Toots Shor, James turned the writer loose to face AL and NL All-Stars before an exhibition game that fall, with \$1,000 to be divided among the team



who hit him hardest.

Plimpton's day soured even before he took the mound; he toted a rotted mitt to the park and failed to find a pro who would warm up with him. Once on the mound, however, the gawky, WASP-y righty looked more comfortable: He induced a popup from Willie Mays and got Ernie Banks to fly out. He only pitched to six more NL batters before being removed because of fatigue, without getting a chance to face the AL.

The reader learns little about Plimpton's pitching craft, predictably so considering that he admits he has none. He fittingly, though frustratingly, writes more about what he thinks

than how he pitches, which gives the book the shine of relatability and relative timelessness but strips it of some journalistic worth. While hundreds of men could tell the tale of retiring Willie Mays, only one did it while on assignment for SI.

The baseball outsider's dream has drifted over time, as has the default mode of analyzing the game. Blame fantasy baseball or *Moneyball*, but the scrawny types spat out by the game in high school or college now hope to run teams, not play for them. All of which makes *The Only Rule Is It Has to Work: Our Wild Experiment Building a New Kind of Baseball Team*, by Ben Lindbergh and Sam Miller, out May 3

from Henry Holt, a worthy modern heir to Plimpton's 1950s stunt. Lindbergh and Miller, enterprising and witty baseball writers at FiveThirtyEight and Baseball Prospectus, respectively, were given a season's control of the Sonoma (Calif.) Stompers by the team's owners. The Stompers play in the Pacific Association, an independent minor league so ramshackle that "pregame meals are a tub of peanut butter and Costco-brand white bread . . . and a player's incentive clause could be a case of beer."

To find players Lindbergh and Miller combed spreadsheets of statistics from all the colleges and minor leagues. Several

targets turned them down, citing new jobs or grad school. But Lindbergh and Miller found some gems, like Sean Conroy, a sidearming righty from Division III Rensselaer (N.Y.) Polytechnic Institute who became their best pitcher and, in 2015, pro baseball's first openly gay player. But they also wound up with two games of a 50-year-old Jose Canseco, plus an insubordinate player-manager, Fehlandt Lentini, who had doctrinaire views on bullpen management and dubious ones about 9/11.

Knowing the benefits of having an information edge, they brought as many big league approaches to the Pacific Association as

their budget would allow, implementing pitch- and hit-tracking devices and software to analyze the data. They had daily surveys to track their players' moods. They enlisted listeners to their podcast, *Effectively Wild*, as advance scouts.

And when the Stompers start 18–3, racing to the league's first-half title, the reader begins to envision a book about the salience of analytics and the power of radical thinking. In their infinite wisdom and mercy, the baseball gods had something better in mind.

A combination of sputtering performances by the players and persistent squabbling between the writers and their insubordinate managers sends the season south, frustrating Lindbergh and Miller and driving them from good humor to self-doubt. (Among the book's many strengths: The authors kept detailed records of their year, and they have not blunted their thoughts to protect their players.) Writes Miller in one chapter, "Our dreams have become small. Our lives feel small."

The years since Plimpton took the mound in 1958 have overturned baseball, and baseball writing with it. But in the matchup of baseball against the writers who would try to master it for the sake of a story, the game remains undefeated. □

GO FIGURE

100

Age of **Ida Keeling** of New York City, who set a world record for the 100-meter dash in the 100+ age group at the Penn Relays last Saturday by finishing in 1:17.33 seconds.

3

Consecutive playoff games, through Sunday, in which Warriors guard **Klay Thompson** made at least seven three-pointers—the first player to do so in NBA history. He made 21 of 36 threes in a stretch that covered the last two games of Golden State's series with the Rockets and the first game of its series against the Trail Blazers.

12

Runs scored by the **Mets** in the third inning of their 13–1 win over the Giants at Citi Field last Friday, the most in one inning in the 55-year history of the franchise.

