

# Baseball author, professor reflects on America's pastime

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But from the sport's first professional team — the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869 — to the multimillion dollar rent-a-teams like today's Florida Marlins, he says the players, the fans and the game have been unique.

"Baseball is richer in history than other sports," he said. "Mainly because it's a slow enough game to be etched in the memories, etched in your conscious."

Its sometimes-snail-like pace, Rader said, helps the game forge its own history.

"I think that is its biggest attraction because the memories can become so vivid," he said. "No other sports have a moment like Bobby Thompson's home run in 1951 — moments that are singled out so clearly."

Rader, 62, was a 14-year-old boy in now-extinct Delaware, Mo., when he gathered with friends by the radio and experienced Thompson's "shot heard round the world" that won the National League pennant for the New York Giants.

"It was quite a dramatic moment for a kid," he said, nodding his head as he remembered the moment.

Growing up in southern Missouri, Rader was naturally a die-hard St. Louis Cardinals fan. But holding to his relatively non-purist outlook on the game, his allegiance has changed.

Now he's cheering for the Cleveland Indians. Not because of their tradition in the league, not because he loves the team, but because his daughter and her family now live there.

"I don't really have a favorite team or player now," he said.

His favorite subject, however, is history — American history.

Rader, who bears a resemblance to the famous former commissioner of baseball, Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis, has been teaching history at UNL since 1967, after receiving his doctorate from the University of Maryland in 1964.

He spent five years teaching at the University of Montana before coming to Nebraska.

"Baseball history is my main passion from an intellectual standpoint," the former seven-year chairman of the UNL history department said. "History in general is my passion though."

## 150 years in 216 pages

It took historian Ken Burns nine two-hour episodes to chronicle baseball's past in his award-winning PBS series.

After a few years of research and a year away from the classroom, Rader's "Baseball: America's Game" does it in just 216 pages.

An introductory book to the game's textured past — it includes figures and tables to help the reader compare teams, players and eras — the work is used as a textbook in sports history classes throughout the nation.

Randy Roberts, an American history professor at Purdue University, who, with Rader, is the co-editor for a small series of sports books, said Rader's piece was the perfect tool for student

“*Baseball is especially resilient to change. It has a place in American culture that will remain.*”

**BENJAMIN RADER**  
author, UNL history professor

sports enthusiasts.

"Ben's book is the best one-volume treatment of the history of baseball there is," he said.

It includes the triumphs and tragedies of the sport, from an entire chapter on Babe Ruth to another devoted to the fixing of the 1919 World Series — with every little detail in between.

He includes both of his passions in the book. It's not just a baseball history book, he said, it's an American history book.

"It looks at the external history, where I like to call outside the foul lines," he said. "It looks at the game's relationship with the history of American society and culture."

Roberts said that is what separates Rader's book from every other baseball history book on shelves today.

"That's the genius of that book," he said. "It ties baseball in with America's cultural and social context."

"Most of the people who consider themselves baseball history buffs may not be all that knowledgeable of American history. They don't see the relationship."

To see that relationship, Rader said, look no further than what he called in his book "Baseball's Great Experiment" — Jackie Robinson's entry into the league in 1946.

"Baseball is somewhat a pioneer in race relations," he said. "When Jackie came into the league it was before Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education was decided."

"Baseball was a forerunner of the breakdown of racial segregation."

The game has continued to follow — and sometimes determine — racial practices in the United States, he said.

As more Hispanics and Latinos have come to the United States and become an integral part of society, the game has, in turn, become more diverse, Rader said.

To look at baseball's place in society, one also must look at how changes in Americans' free-time activities have affected the game.

"Baseball has suffered from a change in American leisure activities," he said. "Baseball's golden age was before TV. That was when it truly was the national game."

Since the 1950s, he said, television has tied people to their homes, and "other sports televise better."

Rader has such strong opinions on television's effect on not only baseball, but sports in general, that he has written two books on the subject: "American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports" and "In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports."

Baseball, Rader said, is a game that can only be absorbed completely while sitting in the bleachers or in a cramped stadium seat, not by watching it on a 13-inch screen.

"It's not as interesting as other sports on TV," he admitted, going as far as saying he doesn't even watch regular-season games on TV anymore.

"But I love going to the ballpark," he said. "You can see the entire field, the position of the players — how they are separated from each other."

"That is what helps forge a special relationship with the fans — much better than football or basketball can."

## Remaining America's game

The relationship between baseball and the baseball fan has been strained in recent years.

Player strikes in 1981 and 1994 have soured fans on the game. Labor disputes had fans wondering what was more important to the league's players; the game or the money.

Many fans vowed to never return to a stadium. In fact, 1996 attendance figures were 15 percent less than those before the 1994 strike.

But each year, Rader said, the fans start trickling back.

"It's bounced back pretty well from the last strike," he said.

As a fan, he issued a warning to the bigwigs in baseball front offices.

"Baseball needs to set its house in order businesswise," he said. "Owners need to worry about the welfare of the game rather than their own personal benefits."

He said he was worried about the leagues' smaller-funded teams, like the Minnesota Twins and Milwaukee Brewers, being outgunned by the leagues' financial powerhouses in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago.

"There isn't much hope for those smaller-market teams, I'm afraid," he said.

But it would take more than the relocation or elimination of a couple of teams to completely ruin the game that has been the glue between millions of fathers and sons nationwide, Rader said.

Former Detroit Tigers manager Sparky Anderson said it this way:

"We have tried and tried to ruin this game, and we just can't do it."

The future of baseball will be left up to its fans, players and team owners, Rader said.

"It may not be as popular as it once was," he said. "But it will be a strong game in the future."

"Baseball is especially resilient to change. It has a place in American culture that will remain."

## Crowning glory



LANEHICKENBOTTOM/DN  
QUEEN Jisella Veath, a senior psychology and pre-law major, and King Viet Hoang, a senior finance major, celebrate their coronation Saturday during halftime at Memorial Stadium.

## Oldfield, Cather, Bryan inducted into state Journalism Hall of Fame

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Spirit of Notre Dame."

For no reason at all, "I wrote my idea of a review," he said, and put it on the desk of the woman whose job it was to do the weekly theater page at The Lincoln Star.

On that day, Oldfield became the newspaper's new movie editor, and a new career started.

That career took him to Hollywood where he would become a publicist for some of the day's biggest stars — including Errol Flynn, Elizabeth Taylor and Ronald Reagan.

He spent time writing television and radio scripts, writing speeches for political personalities and as a war correspondent during World War II and Korea.

He also served as a lifelong counselor for another former actor, who may be better known for his boxing accomplishments: George Foreman.

He has practiced his profession in 81 countries.

But Alan Beerman, executive director of the Nebraska Press Association, said that through all of that, Oldfield has remained true to Nebraska.

"He's known all the greats of the world," he said, following Friday night's festivities. "But he never forgot his roots — where he came from."

Perhaps Oldfield's greatest work has come from his philanthropic efforts,

Beerman said.

There are more than 250 scholarships in his name in at least five states.

"For all of his journalistic efforts, the fact that he has opened his heart, his hands and his home for others — to have him here while he is alive is an honor," Beerman said.

Following Oldfield's induction into the hall came the surprise for everyone on hand.

William Jennings Bryan (portrayed by Omaha attorney Donald Fiedler) entranced the audience with a retelling of the former presidential candidate's "Cross of Gold" speech.

Advocating a currency based on silver, the speech is regarded as one of the greatest orations ever.

Bryan, who was the first Nebraskan Democrat elected to Congress, was also the former editor of the Omaha World-Herald and founder of the populist newspaper, The Commoner, in 1901.

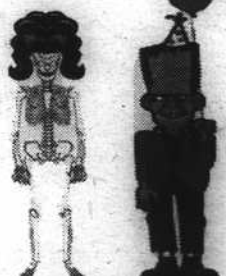
One of the greatest novelists who ever lived, Willa Cather, became just the fifth woman to be inducted.

She won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, "One of Ours," the story of a Nebraska farm boy who went to World War I.

Induction into the Hall of Fame is the highest honor accorded by the NPA and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

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