

Inside: Reader's Guide to Music, Theater, Movies

READER[®]

Friday, May 25, 1979 Vol. 1, No. 30

LOS ANGELES' FREE WEEKLY

Baseball Bearings

Why the National Pastime Strikes So Close to Home

Like any art form—for that finally is what we are dealing with—the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived. The cockfight is “really real” only to the cocks—it does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the hierarchical relations among people, or refashion the hierarchy; it does not even redistribute income in any significant way. What it does is what, for other people with other temperaments and other conventions, *Lear* and *Crime and Punishment* do; it catches up these themes—death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance—and ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them to those historically positioned to appreciate the construction, meaningful—visible, tangible, graspable—“real,” in an ideational sense. An image, a fiction, a model, a metaphor, the cockfight is a means of expression; its function is neither to assuage social passions nor to heighten them but, in a medium of feathers, blood, crowds, and money, to display them.

—Clifford Geertz,
*The Interpretation
of Cultures*

B. AUGUST '79



By Lawrence Weschler

The past few weeks—the subsiding of April, intimations of June—have brought me back to first things, to primary knowledge . . . to baseball.

I've been thinking about the way baseball, much more than, say, football, serves as a figure for American life, how it is precisely this figurative aspect that renders the game so engrossing.

The game unfurls at an utterly leisurely pace; there is endless time to daydream, and the game itself spawns reverie. Baseball functions as a social figure, or fiction. It is continually playing itself out as if it were a metaphor. *E.g.*, Dodgers down 5 to 1 in the eighth, bases loaded, and Ron Cey hunkers down and uncorks a grand-slam. In our reveries, this is almost an archetypal

figure for "coming through under pressure." Our daily lives are rife with situations—striking out, balking, bobbling a grounder, arguing with the umpire, pulling off a double play, hitting into a double play, taking a base on balls, fooling the batter, robbing the opponent of an extra-base hit, being caught looking, blooming a single, fouling out, tagging up, whacking a home run—for which baseball provides an image, a referent. Failing to enchant a would-be paramour is just like striking out (but maybe you'll have another chance at bat—eventually, of course, you're hoping you'll

score). Each new game is an utterly new experience, partly because we have lived an additional twenty-four hours and therefore bring twenty-four fresh hours of experience to the occasion, experience just waiting to be ordered, to be daydreamed into order.

One of the reasons baseball is so good for this (in a way football just isn't) is that it is a one-on-one sport *within* a social setting—it's just like real life. Boxing, for example, is a one-on-one sport of unmediated intensity: The myth of boxing is one man wedged off

against another, nonstop, for the entire duration. Football, on the other hand, is an utterly social sport: It is never one against one; it's not even eleven against eleven; it's more like forty versus forty, or even beyond that, one entire team organization against another. (In this sense, football provides a superb figure for technological America, the kind of America that mobilizes to send a man to the moon—consider, in this context, the way "Disco Star Wars" was continually being used a few seasons ago as the musical backdrop for the late-night TV football wrap-ups. This technologi-

continued from page 1

cal aspect, as has often been noted, accounts for why football is so superbly suited to television and its capacity for instant replay. An instant replay of a great pass play, seen from different angles, provides a variety of insights into the *technical* competence of twenty-two separate players, each of whose contributions was central to the success or failure of the play. An instant replay of a grand-slam home run, on the other hand, cannot provide much new technical information: What it does is provide an instant reprise of the exhilaration of feeling—how it felt to watch that grand-slam sail out of the stadium. But you can get that as well or even better from the oral recall of a good announcer over the radio: It is the story, the fiction, the detailing of the situation and its outcome—rather than the witnessing of its technical execution—that is savored.)

Boxing is one-on-one. Football is forty-on-forty. Baseball, as I was saying, is something in between. Within a social framework, nine

paranoid. Baseball, on the other hand, provides us with a closer approximation of our lived reality. Watching it, we are replenished: It is a national re-creation.

Or anyway, so I find myself speculating in the stands at Chavez Ravine, one recent afternoon, as the game unfurls below. The sun is daft and breezy; the field, that miraculous integration of colors—cleangreen, skyblue, dirtorange—who'd have ever thought they'd blend so splendidly? My friend Dennis comes weaving down the steep steps, bearing beers. He's also brought some Crackerjacks, although we both agree that the prizes recently have been minor league. I start unloading my latest theories on him, and, as usual, he dispatches them: Nonsense, he huffs, people come to the game because it's fun. Same difference, is what I think, but I let it pass. Play is tensing up down below—they've loaded the bases and Lasorda's ambled on out to the mound and now he's going to the bull pen. The bull pen's been

That's the great thing about baseball: Everybody has room to graze. When the play comes to you, it's your responsibility, just like it's your territory—maybe one person comes over to assist. Every one else, grazing, gazing, has time to breathe.

players on the field, a couple of players on base, it continually boils down to a personal confrontation, but one that is metastable, continually changing. The pitcher and the batter duel it out until finally the batter makes contact, then it's the batter and, say, the shortstop, the shortstop and the runner, the runner and the first baseman, the runner and the umpire. At any given moment, play is localized: It's not even one-on-one exactly, it's more like a series of individual challenges: the pitcher's, the batter's, the fielder's, the runner's. It is precisely because baseball addresses itself to a succession of individuals within a social context that it serves so well as a social figure, as an ongoing metaphor. You can't daydream into a football game: There is neither the time nor the occasion. Boxing, on the other hand, provides too intensive a figure: If a fan imagines everything in his life to be like a boxing match, "myself against the world," we account him somewhat

pretty thin this week and we've all got our doubts.

Baseball is forever the province of prepubescent boys, or those just barely poised on the cusp of adolescence, I find myself thinking as the new pitcher warms up. The players, no matter how mature or manly they are as people, as players are forever boys. Football, on the other hand, is forever being played by high school seniors, jocks who go out after the game and screw the cheerleaders under the bleachers.

In baseball, the manager suits up with the team, one of the boys—an old boy. In football, the coach paces the sidelines in a business suit, a corporate president.

Baseball is pastoral, football military. Football concerns the conquest of territory, baseball the longing for home. The baserunner just wants to get back home—how often, at the close of an inning, he's been "left stranded." Football may activate my adrenaline, but it seldom taps my melancholy.

By the way, I should make it clear that I myself don't play the game all that well. I've never been terribly well endowed in the athletic dimension. Back in high school, when they'd be choosing teams—the six head honchos divvying up the spoils—generally the selection process would run its course until all that was left was me and this legally blind kid and this other kid with a wooden leg, and the captain whose turn it was would look us over for what seemed like forever and then ask the coach if anyone was absent. Eventually I'd be the only one left and the coach would say, "Okay, Francisco, you get him," and Francisco would whine, "But that's not fair, coach, we have *fewer* players than any of the other teams." That wasn't much fun, but playing was, always was, even though I was usually being pastured out to right field (except when a left-hander came to bat, at which point the left fielder would frantically rush over to trade places). I just liked it out there. That's another great thing about baseball: Everybody has room to graze. Nobody's crowding, nobody's huddled, wedged in tight, or scrambling together madly in pursuit of a bounding ball. Everyone has room to move around, get a sense of him or herself as an individual. When the play comes to you, it's your responsibility, just like it's your territory—maybe one person comes over to assist. Everyone else, grazing, gazing, has time to breathe.

And another thing about playing the game. Unlike most sports, in baseball there simply isn't that much difference between the experience of the seasoned professional and that of the rank amateur. That is, the feel of the sandlot game, to its participants, does not seem as removed from the feel of a professional match as would the feel of a game of touch football from that of a bout of professional caliber. Flagging down a crisply hit line-drive in center field—you pretty much know what that feels like the world over. Or anyway, so I like to think. Some Sunday afternoons, over at the field behind the local junior high where some of us play our games, I'm not so sure. When our team's fielding and the ball's ricocheting all over the outfield as the opponents keep toting up their runs—well, the phenomenological analogue there is more like what it must feel like to be a pinball machine—ding-ding-ding.

But sometimes even the Dodgers must feel like a pinball machine—that is, like rank amateurs. They're playing like that this afternoon, and Lasorda's out on the mound again. As imperfect as their performance has been, however, it does suggest another unique characteristic of the game. Because in baseball, perfection perpetually teases: *It would be possible*. The pitcher with an E.R.A. of 0.00, the batter with an average of 1.000, the game won on 27 pitches, the game won on 81 strikes. The batter who hit a home run every time at bat. The team that won every game. The perfect game. Indeed, baseball plays itself out within the bounds of a circumscribed, realizable ideal, always falling short by degrees, by percentages. No other game affords such precision, such clarity.

Numbers . . . and words. For as statistically intoxicated as the game is, baseball is also the ideal occasion for the inspired exercise of language—indeed, baseball is far more aural than visual, much better suited to radio than to television. And here in Los Angeles, we've for years been blessed with a master gameweaver in the person of Vin Scully. Tune in the radio at random most any evening: crackle, hone, and then the swell of that superb, familiar twang. "Okay, here's Reggie. . . . Here's the pitch, and it's slammed, she's back, she's back, she's awaaaay back—she's gone!" Roar of the crowd, endless seconds of delirium, the sound finally ebbing as Vin's voice resumes, "There was no doubt about it! Lopes on third, Cey on second, Garvey on first, and Reggie walks to the plate *with standing room only*, and he solves evvvverybody's problem!" Everybody's got their favorite Scully metaphor. I also loved that game last season when the Dodgers were stomping: By the bottom of the eighth, everybody on the squad had gotten a hit except Bill Russell, and as he approached the plate, Scully described him as "the only Dodger still outside the candy store."

I'm afraid as far as this evening's game is concerned, the Dodgers aren't even in the neighborhood of the candy store. The other team, meanwhile, seems due for an insulin fit any moment now. It doesn't matter. Twilight sets in and the game winds down. I try a few more insights out on Dennis and he smiles fondly as he shoots them out of the sky. Baseball is about friendship.