



# BASEBALL: AS UNIQUE AS AMERICA

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We at Prager University understand that America's culture is as important to the nation's health as American politics. And that sport is an important cultural ingredient. So, consider the many reasons why baseball deserves to be the national pastime--the game especially suited to our democracy.

First, democracy celebrates ordinary people. Of course baseball players have extraordinary talents. But most players resemble ordinary people. As a wise baseball man once said: To play baseball, you do not need to be seven feet tall or seven feet wide.

And baseball, like America, has a strong independent judiciary--the umpires. In fact, baseball is, in one regard, better than the rest of America. In baseball, three strikes and you're out--the most expensive Washington lawyers and lobbyists can't help you.

And remember, racial integration came to baseball in 1947, a year before integration came to the armed services. And eight years before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

Today, baseball is a career open to talented people from around the world. About 20 percent of major leaguers are from outside North America. This is because in baseball the only race that matters is the race to the base.

Baseball is a game of episodes--pitch by pitch, out by out, inning by inning, game by game. Hence baseball generates an enormous, constantly enriched sediment of numbers. And these numbers make baseball a game that embraces what a free society requires--personal accountability. Every morning during the season, a player will find in the box score a precise record of what he did the day before--his runs, hits, outs, strike outs, errors. If he was thrown out trying to steal second base, the box score will say so. If he failed to drive in teammates who were in scoring position, the box score will announce this failure to the world. In no other sport--and no other profession-- is individual performance so unsparingly displayed and dissected. Imagine if--every day--America's lawyers and teachers and business people and journalists had to read in the morning's paper a box score measuring the caliber of their previous day's work.

A free society like America is a place where people are free to strive--and hence are free to fail. There is a lot of failure in America--most new business ventures fail--and baseball is a game of constant failure. A player who bats .300 is a star--but a star who fails to get a hit 70 percent of the time. And the teams that lose today must pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again tomorrow. For six months. Which brings us to the number that is

hardest for most fans to appreciate.

It is not one of the famous numbers of individual achievement. Not Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak in 1941. Not Ted Williams .406 batting average, also in 1941. No, the hardest number to comprehend is 162. That is the number of games each team plays--in about 185 days. Because baseball is the sport of the longest season, it is the sport in which luck matters least. After 162 games, each team is its record--no better, no worse. From the beginning of April to the end of October, the bad bounces and lucky hits even out. Which means baseball is what America aspires to be--a real meritocracy.

Baseball also is a good game for a democracy because it teaches democratic lessons. It is a game of the half loaf. In baseball, as in democracy, no one gets everything he wants. Essentially all 30 teams go to Spring Training knowing they are going to win 60 games and lose 60 games. They play the long season to sort out the other 42 games. And every team also knows this: If it wins only 10 out of every 20 games, it is obviously mediocre. But if it wins 11 out of every 20, it will win almost 90 games and have a good chance of playing in the post-season. Which is why in baseball, as in the life of a competitive free society, little differences, ultimately, make an enormous difference.

Baseball also is, as America is, both about individualism--and cooperation. The heart of the game is the one-on-one battle between the batter and the pitcher. But baseball also requires teamwork--on offense, to move runners another 90 feet--and on defense, to make 27 putouts.

A wise man once said that there are really just two seasons, baseball season--and the void. Happily, the void ends, and another season is here. So take yourself out to a ball game and savor all the ways the national pastime illustrates the nation's values. And while you're there, have a hot dog. That's American culture, too.

I'm George Will for Prager University.