

THREE NIGHTS IN AUGUST

Strategy, heartbreak, and joy inside the mind of a manager

(Tony La Russa of the St. Louis Cardinals)

by Buzz Bissinger

So there's a tendency among political ideologues —actually I'm trying to be a recovering ideologue— to eschew other avenues of real life... as if whether we achieve our liberty today or three years from today were the only issue that mattered. Fortunately, real life is more rich than politics. We have birth and death, love and marriage, sex and movies, golf and homebrewing, etc. And baseball.

As a boy, for the longest time my goal in life was to become a professional baseball player. Well, I never quite reached major league size, and there was a small issue of "talent," but I might have pursued baseball more steadily had I not run into Ayn Rand and *The Fountainhead* in high school. Somehow, standing around catching fly balls began to feel like a waste of time when measured against taking sides in the eternal contest between individualism and world collectivism.

Since the baseball players strike in 1994, and probably well before that, I've had only a casual interest in the game. Of course, on and around the years the Detroit Tigers won the World Series (1968 and 1984), I paid attention. I even attended perhaps 5-10 games per season at old Tiger Stadium, when—in the era before the Giant Corporate Suck Machine (GCSM) kicked in—you could enjoy reserved seats close to the dugout for the price of taking your girlfriend out for a nice dinner. And the field was right there.

Reading *Three Nights in August* nearly rekindles that excitement I used to feel for the game. In grade school, when we lived in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, I could sit in front of a transistor radio and do nothing except listen to the Kansas City Athletics' play by play. Cheap thrills. And as I learned the game—through 3&2, then later in high school, lettering in my junior year—so many things became automated in my understanding. Subtle things that fans who have not played the game wouldn't have an appreciation of: e.g. the timed pickoff play, the infield fly rule, or where to throw the pitch on a suicide squeeze.

The book makes what I learned about baseball seem like fingerpainting compared to the Mona Lisa. But not only on the detailed play-by-play level, also on the elements of the grand strategy of a season... or even a decade. The setting for all this education is the 2005 National League central division playoff race, and a series in the closing days of August between classic rivals: the Chicago Cubs managed by Dusty Baker and the St. Louis Cardinals managed by La Russa. They're playing at Busch Stadium, the Cardinals' home field.

La Russa in the foreword gives you an idea of how deep the rabbit hole goes:

"In this book, Buzz Bissinger describes baseball as 'complex and layered.' I've been involved in professional baseball for over 40 years, and the whole time I've been consumed by a drive to understand those complexities and layers..."



And his rabbit hole runs deep. For example, the way the game has changed since the 1960s which was my prime time with Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Ted Williams, Bob Feller, Sandy Koufax, and a host of others it takes me too long to come up with through routine pondering.

The money: Nowadays, for example, because the money is so extraordinary, many a player with the talent to be the next Roy Hobbs[1] figures, "Heck, why sweat it trying to be 'the best there ever was?' I can coast for 10 years at 75% of my ability and make \$100 million free and clear, buy a yacht, become a world class playboy, whatever." [Same thing happens in professional golf... or any sport where the money is artificially inflated by the GCSM (pronounced Gesism), or, say, municipal subsidies.]

Number of pitches: Back in the day, pitchers tried to pitch complete games, and managers were all too content to let them. It would be nothing for a star starting pitcher to throw 150-200 pitches per outing; it was expected. Having to walk off the mound before the 7th inning was considered unmanly. But today, managers and trainers apply a strict count—ideally less than 100—and pull the starters at the limiting number. As a consequence, pitchers' arms last longer and their careers do, too. Managing pitch count has also led to the variety of relievers we see today, from middle-inning transitioners to last-minute closers. Three Nights in August devotes three pages to the subject; fabulous.

Amount of video use: Both offense and defense, pitchers and batters, watch video of their opponents for hours on end. The Cardinals have a pale-faced video/computer guru who takes all the footage and helps the players analyze it. The ability to see what to expect before you perform in reality has led to a refinement of abilities heretofore uncommon. No doubt, some of these freaks of nature—I'm thinking of pitcher Greg Maddux who was the Cy Young winner for several seasons with the Atlanta Braves—can perform their magic unaided by video. But for the 'average' major league player, video enhances the prospect of success.

But the forgoing are all in the nature of background to the competition of the game: pitch by pitch, out by out. Bissinger masterfully tells the story in real time of what is happening on the field in the three critical games, and, as best he can, the thinking and intentions of Tony La Russa regarding those games.

In this particular moment in Game 2, with a runner on first and one out in the bottom of the third, La Russa is weighing the matchup between Hart and Wood as a reason to consider the hit-and-run. It's not a great matchup for Hart, given [Kerry] Wood's nasty curve. So if he can hit-and-run Robinson to second, it will give Pujols a better opportunity to drive in the run, which, in La Russa's mind, makes it worth any potential sacrifice.

Because La Russa believes in the hit-and-run, he has his players work on it exhaustively during spring training and throughout the season during batting practice... [followed by two pages on the intricacies of the hit-and-run tactic, before Hart makes a swing]

Oh, and on the sophisticated signaling used by managers, coaches, and players to one another, you receive a minor treatise. Even if you've played the game, this book shows you realms of thinking and planning that never occurred to you.

Nor does Bissinger forget the human touch. I like his treatment, particularly of pitchers who struggle to stay at the top of their game—through numerous hardships, and when the medical advice is to give it all up. Like this paragraph about this relief pitcher:

He was prone to the ill-timed dinger. Sometimes the cutter slipped a bit, landing over the plate when he wanted it more inside. Sometimes when Matheny wanted to go back away, Eldred shook him off and went inside, with the result a double pulled down the line. But he had appeared in 50 games during the season up until this moment in the bottom of the sixth. He had thrown fifty-one innings and struck out an equal number. He led the Cardinals' relievers in wins with seven. And sometimes, when he threw the four-seamer and it went to the spot he intended and it exploded with a pop in the back of the catcher's glove as the hitter swung through it, he knew exactly why he was here: not for the money, not for glory, not to build up his own statistical package, but because it was still where he belonged.

I came to this book by accident—it was on a \$1 shelf at a book fair in the local mall—but I'm glad I did. It renews my faith in the game and [most of] the men who take part in it, and it helps me to ignore the Gesism that continues to infect any honest human enterprise. [For the near future, my baseball dollars will be spent in minor-league stadiums of Toledo, Lansing, or Grand Rapids.]

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[1] Roy Hobbs is the mythical baseball phenom played by Robert Redford in *The Natural*.

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