

Baseball

We early retired folk find that the afternoon tends to drag until it is time for *Countdown*, and I have taken to watching the TV programmes that I have taped from the night before. I find that I have become addicted to the major league baseball originally screened by Channel 5 in the early hours of the morning.

I enjoy the little cameos. The batters blowing bubble-gum as they sit in their dug-out. The staring and heavy breathing of the pitchers. The managers striding out to out to argue with the home-plate umpire, or to dismiss their pitcher. The pumped-up arms and Van Dyck beards of the batters. The catcher, with reversed cap, making secret signals to the pitcher by wagging his fingers against his crotch. The spectators snacking away on Coke and hot-dogs.

Do I understand it? It should be the simplest of games, but I confess that I do not. My understanding of American Football – which must be the most complicated of games – is better. My basic problem is that I cannot distinguish between a ball and a strike. This is a fairly major problem, since the game is centred on this distinction. I understand that a strike is a pitch that passes between the batter's armpits and knees and goes directly over home plate, and a ball is a pitch...well...one which doesn't. I can follow the longitude bit, since there are markings on the ground, but the latitude bit remains a total mystery. The pitch flutters down like a winged grouse and passes the batter at ankle-height. I am certain that must be a ball, but the commentator will say, 'Martinez takes a strike from Santienni's sinker'.

One of the fascinations of the game is the struggle between tradition and commercialism. For instance, apart from the batter's helmets, the players still wear the same uniform they wore a century and a bit ago. (I am unsure whether the presence of a helmet for the batter means that Americans are more prone to pitch at the head than they were in Civil War times, or that Americans are more concerned these days about head injuries, or that baseball-resisting plastic had not been invented during the Civil War). And not an advertising logo in sight on players or umpires.

By contrast, cricket players are walking billboards. Why, I can even remember seeing, during the last test series against the West Indies, a 'Happy Shopper' logo on the breast pocket of the umpires, those grey heads employed to dispense the Wisdom of Solomon. And it is striking how the memories of baseball tradition persist. When I go to Worcester, I may hear one wrinkle say, "That's nothing. I can remember seeing Dennis Compton scoring a triple century before lunch," but it is very rare to hear another wrinkle

cap him with, "Child's play. I once saw Wally Hammond hit a quadruple century after tea," and no one will ever recall what Jack Hobbs or WG Grace once did; but frequently I will hear a baseball commentator say something like, "That is the first time that a left-handed rookie has pitched 12 strike-outs in a game in August since 1899, when Catfish Cassidy pitched for the Duluth Diamondbacks against the Yankees in a double-header."

Fighting this sense of tradition is red-in-tooth-and-claw commercialism. I get used to a pitcher playing for one team and then the commentator will talk of stalled contract negotiations, and suddenly I have got to get used to him pitching for another team. There is a regular battle between the millionaire team owners and the millionaire Latin American players. Walk-outs, lock-outs, presidential intervention, a shortened season. It is not a simple task being a millionaire owner. It needs great skill in the use of spread-

sheets and sensitivity analysis in order to balance out gate revenues, and TV fees, and the takings from selling caps and shirts against the cost of meeting the salaries for free agents and supporting feeder clubs in the minor leagues with the ever-present threat of having to share revenue with clubs who lack these spreadsheet skills. (I would have thought that baseball clubs provide a great opportunity for young MCTs to fashion their modelling skills). If the bottom line in the spreadsheet does not show a big enough positive figure, some millionaire owners have turned to blackmailing their local communities into building a new publicly-financed ballpark under the threat of moving to somewhere with a better climate and a more appreciative local community. Do I intend to offer a parallel in cricket? Don't even ask. Although Rupert Murdoch, in the shape of Fox TV, might have

bought the LA Dodgers, I have heard no rumour of him buying Worcestershire County Cricket Club.

Instead, I will offer you a contrast. On the day that John Major lost the last election, he went off to watch some cricket at The Oval. He subsequently became president of Surrey County Cricket Club, and I have seen him on television rattling a begging tin for money for the yet another development of The Oval. On the other hand, before George W. Bush won (some people, but not, I stress, myself, would use the word *stole*) the American Presidency, he was Governor of Texas, and before that co-owner of the Texas Rangers, his local baseball club.

In America, a connection with a baseball club can be a springboard to greater things. In Britain, a link with a cricket club is just a way of keeping retired politicians happy. ■

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