

Winning isn't everything: Baseball as a theological discipline

by [Warren Goldstein](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

Baseball is the most maturing and deepening of all sports, with the possible exception of fishing. And it demands the most theological discipline. Unlike football, in which fans and players can dream of a perfect season, in baseball, as in life, you never win them all. No matter how much a team prepares, no matter how much it spends on salaries, no matter the size of its market, defeat is fundamental. No batter hits all the time; a “perfect game” is surpassingly rare. Longtime baseball fans and players must learn to accept loss, lots of it. Only five teams in the past century have won 70 percent of their games. No baseball fan is capable of committing the sin of perfectionism.

If the history of baseball is a quintessentially American story, its narrative line owes more to loss, defeat and imperfection than to chest-thumping triumphalism. If, as Walt Whitman claimed, baseball is “our game,” then it is above all the game of the outsider, the down-and-out, the folks who expect to lose—the least of these. Cubs fans understand this.

And for most of baseball history, so have the players. In the late 19th century large numbers of second-generation German and Irish immigrants migrated into the game. As the game segregated in the 1890s, transplanted rural southerners, and then second-generation immigrant Italians and Poles, filled the rosters of major league teams. Excluded from white ball until the late 1940s and '50s, African-American players created a remarkable sport of their own, and the players became so skilled that when they first entered the white majors they dominated the sport.

The surge of Latin American ballplayers continues this historical trend. Take the opening game of the series between the Florida Marlins and the Chicago Cubs. It featured home runs by Sammy Sosa, Alex Gonzalez, Juan Encarnacion, Miguel Cabrera, Ivan Rodriguez, Moises Alou and Mike Lowell (who has a Cuban father and was born in Puerto Rico).

In this emotional and theological counternarrative of American history, baseball has helped generations of Americans to develop the spiritual resources to go on with hope, against the probability (in some places, the near-certainty) of defeat. Except for the Yankees and their fans.

It was New York money—and the allure of a Broadway hit—that bought Babe Ruth away from the Red Sox. In the years of unparalleled Yankee dominance in the 1960s, pitcher Whitey Ford was known as the Chairman of the Board. Those on the political left grew up hating the Yankees as naturally as they revered the memory of FDR. Ordinary Americans rooted for the more lovable Bums of Brooklyn, knowing in their guts that the Dodgers represented more of what life is about.

Perennial losers to the baseball principalities and powers have to dig more deeply for spiritual strength. The signs at Red Sox and Cubs games say “We believe.” This was the phrase made famous by fans of the 1969 Mets, who rose from the deepest cellar in baseball history in 1962 to win the World Series.

Those who do not expect to win all the time have chosen to believe in possibility against long odds, and it is that belief that sustains them over time. The mantra of disappointed fans—“Wait till next year”—is more an affirmation of faith than a reasoned estimate of their team’s potential. The confidence of the Yankees, on the other hand, resembles nothing so much as the self-satisfied creed of the late 19th-century rich, whose ministers assured them that their wealth proved their worth in the eyes of God.

Despite the gargantuan player salaries, baseball remains the sport of the less well heeled, of Americans who best know loss and defeat and failure. Just compare the ticket prices in baseball, basketball and football.

Big league baseball remains far more the game of the Cubs and Marlins and Red Sox (and Phillies and Brewers and Tigers and Twins) and their fans—not the game of the Yankees, whose players, fans and owner expect to win all the time. (As George Steinbrenner said recently, “For us, winning isn’t the only thing—it’s second to breathing.”)

Except in the Bronx, baseball provides a difficult education in humility. That’s a lesson Americans might have learned from our foreign-policy misadventures, and apparently still need to learn. Being “No. 1” is an elusive goal, requiring much good fortune, skill, stamina, teamwork and not a little grace—not something we can

expect to breathe in when we get up in the morning.

President Bush ought to know this, having watched his former team, the Texas Rangers, spend a fortune on shortstop Alex Rodriguez and finish out of the running—again. (But then his interest in the Rangers had less to do with on-field victories than with buying in low and selling out high.) Instead, like many privileged children and immature believers, he seems to have missed out on the humbling experience of defeat. Childlike, forever proclaiming a kind of aggressive, prideful innocence, he and his administration never face up to the reality of loss, error and defeat. Pride says America always wins and never loses: being “No. 1” means never having to say you’re sorry.

Most baseball fans know better. Maturity, religious as well as emotional, comes from learning how to hope, how to work and play joyfully, in the face of probable defeat.