

Cornell professor says that in life, as in baseball, it's good to hit all the bases

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By Hart Seely / The Post-Standard



Rob Schumacher / The Arizona Republic via AP

Arizona Diamondbacks pitchers and catchers begin their baseball spring training workouts Monday near Scottsdale, Ariz.

Somewhere, in far warmer places, pitchers and catchers have reported to spring training. For Glenn C. Altschuler, spring has begun. Altschuler, a Cornell University professor and historian, teaches "Baseball in American Culture," a course that covers everything from the economics of the national pastime to its place in literature. He's authored and co-authored nine books and more than 500 essays. Post-Standard staff writer Hart Seely spoke to Altschuler at the professor's office at Cornell.

You say the arrival of pitchers and catchers means spring is here. What if you're a Mets

fan?

If you're a Mets fan, it remains the winter of your discontent.

As it will in July.

It doesn't look like spring. I'm seeing snow on the ground.



Glenn C. Altschuler

In Syracuse and in Ithaca, spring starts in our hearts and in our minds. Much of the joy of life is eager anticipation of memorable experiences, and that's what the arrival of pitchers and catchers brings.

Wait a second. Are you saying, "Baseball is a metaphor for life?"

Of course, I am! I'm a professor!

C'mon, haven't we done away with that old saw?

Those of us who remember (former Major League Baseball Commissioner) Bart

Giamatti still cling to cliches. And, really, what would life be without cliches?

They used to say, "nine innings, nine planets," and then —

Yeah, I know: We lost Pluto.

"Four bases, four seasons ..."

Yes, and by the way, you can go home again.

As a metaphor, where does the infield fly rule fit in?

It is a chance for umpires to take plays out of the hands of incompetent or scheming infielders.

Was that rule written by lawyers?

All rules are written by lawyers.

OK. You got me. Who do you root for?

As a boy from Brooklyn, I've spent my entire life a Chicago White Sox fan.

How did that happen?

I came to my baseball awareness just after the Dodgers and Giants left New York. My father, a shoe salesman, was a militant Yankee-hater who took his boys to the right field bleachers, where a knot of us Yankee-haters hoped against hope that the Yankees would lose at least one of the two games they played every Sunday.

The Go-Go White Sox of Luis Aparicio and Nellie Fox were the challengers to the Yankees, and I adopted them.

I'm a Yankee fan, you know.

Hm-mm.

So what's your problem with the Yankees?

Well, for those of us with origins in the working class, the Yankees represent corporate America. They represent buying your way to success. They represent arrogance. They were owned for decades by a magnate (George Steinbrenner) of an unsuccessful company, American Ship Building, who by dint of luck and loud mouth parlayed his way to fame and fortune.

So — you really don't like the Yankees?

I think I've made that pretty clear.

Derek Jeter. What offends you about Derek Jeter?

Well, actually, I like Derek Jeter.

Hah!

Truth be told, I like his quiet confidence. What I don't like is his blandness. It would be nice if every now and again he said something.

OK, how about Mariano Rivera?

The greatest relief pitcher of all time, with the possible exception of Hoyt Wilhelm.

Seriously, didn't that baseball-as-metaphor-for-life thing go out with "Field of Dreams?"

You know, I don't think baseball is a metaphor for life. Here's what I think it is:

For my generation, baseball is a way of connecting with our youth, through comparisons not available in any other sport. Baseball provides a statistical context in which people could legitimately argue about and compare the achievements of the stars of their youth with the stars of their adulthood — and that's the tragedy of steroids.

So opening day is just six weeks away?

That's right.

And the White Sox are undefeated.

Let's hope so. You know, what I'm looking forward to is not March Madness — we've got too much madness in our lives already — but March mellowness: contemplation and virtual strategizing. I look forward to having time when I can sit and relax and contemplate, and that's what baseball provides.

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