He does everything wrong, but it comes out right," former umpire Leo Browne told the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

"He's got short legs but he runs good. He swings at everything in sight ... but he's the best hitter I've ever seen. His name is Yogi something or other. Ain't that a hell of a name?"

Signed by the New York Yankees in 1942, Lawrence Peter Berra became the finest catcher of his era -- and one of the most popular former athletes in the United States.

"Everyone loves Yogi," sportswriter Allen Barra acknowledges. Only a few, however, take him seriously. With this well-researched, full-length biography, he makes a compelling case that Yogi was the most valuable player of the post-World War II Yankees -- and the greatest catcher in the history of baseball.

Although not a gifted stylist, Barra tells a good story -- and is masterful at mobilizing evidence for Yogi's offensive prowess. From 1947-58, when the Yankees won 10 pennants and eight World Series, he argues, ought to be known as the "Yogi Berra era."

No catcher before him (not Bill Dickey or Mickey Cochrane or Gabby Hartnett) and no one since (not even Johnny Bench) was as productive a hitter as Berra.

Since defensive statistics, alas, don't reveal all that much, Barra is far less "scientific" in documenting Yogi's skills behind the plate. In Berra's heyday, he points out, the Yankee pitching staff included Whitey Ford, a great pitcher, several very good hurlers (Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi and Ed Lopat), and "a long list of career mediocrities."

Barra contends that year after year the Yankees had the best pitching in the league without the best pitchers because Yogi knew how to handle the Bob Grims, Art Ditmars, and Ryne Durens.

He is least persuasive about Yogi's talent as a big-league manager. To be sure, his 1964 Yankees and 1973 Mets won pennants. And no one doubted that he understood the intricacies of the game. Nonetheless, as Bill Dickey predicted, Yogi's biggest problem was in "managing men."

It is almost surely a stretch to attribute team success "to Berra's cool calmness and simple faith in his players" -- and his failures to interference from or incompetence by the front office.

"True Yogi fans," Barra insists, must distinguish between "real Yogisms," distilled pieces of folk wisdom, and mere malapropisms. He even provides an appendix, with a "comparative study" of quotations from Yogi and world history's "great minds."

At the same time, however, Barra recycles stories by and about Yogi that reinforce images of him as a figure of fun.

Yogi Berra isn't proficient at the sharp retort. Nor is he a font of folk wisdom. So what?

He's a street smart businessman, laughing all the way to the bank, without worrying whether people are laughing at him or with him. And, as his biographer demonstrates, he's an eternal Yankee, one of the best of the best.

"YOGI BERRA: ETERNAL YANKEE"

By Allen Barra

Norton ($27.95)