20 Days with ‘The Mick’

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHLER & PATRICK M. BURNS

Sunday, October 24, 2010

Mutt Mantle named his son — who was born in Spavinaw on Oct. 20, 1931, the depths of the Great Depression — in honor of Mickey Cochrane, the great catcher for the Detroit Tigers. He placed a baseball in his crib, rolled balls to him before he could walk and taught him to be a switch-hitter. Worn down by a life in the mines, Mutt wanted a better life for his son.

Thanks to baseball, Mickey got out. Big time. He became one of the greatest — and most popular — ballplayers of all time, taking the New York Yankees to seven world championships. In “The Last Boy,” Jane Leavy, a former sportswriter for The Washington Post and the biographer of Sandy Koufax, focuses on 20 days in Mantle’s life. An indefatigable and imaginative researcher, she shines shaft and shaft of new light on her subject, illuminating, for example, the kinetics of Mickey’s swing and the trajectory of the longest home run he ever hit.

More ambitious than most baseball books, “The Last Boy” takes the measure of the blonde Bronx bomber with the buck-tooth grin as an athlete, a human being and an American icon. Mantle’s “raw talent, the unprecedented alloy of speed and power,” Leavy claims, underscored post World War II optimism. But his sunny smile and euphonic name concealed a kid who was never forced to become an adult.

Mantle was a great ballplayer, Leavy demonstrates, because he combined physical prowess with “neuromuscular genius” (the capacity to play with pain). After he stepped on a drain in the outfield in 1951, one “successive knee injury predisposed him to the next” in “cascading episodes of instability.” But if he grimaced after every swing and could barely climb out of bed every morning, Mantle never complained and rarely took himself out of the line-up. No wonder the other Yankees thought him “the best teammate ever.

They also liked him because he was a guy’s guy. Crude and lewd, he was always ready to drink the night away, before or after a game. And to swat some “green flies,” the term ballplayers used for the girls who swarmed around every bar and hotel lobby frequented by big-leaguers. In 1983, in fact, Mantle groped Leavy, before passing out in a drunken stupor.

Mantle cheated on his wife, paid no attention to his kids and wasn’t always kind to his fans. When the mother of a little boy with a broken arm asked him to sign his cast, the Mick replied “let me know when he breaks the other one.

As her subtitle suggests, Leavy tries to find some larger meaning in Mantle’s actions and his allure. “He was proof of America’s promise,” she writes, that “anyone could grow up to be president or Mickey Mantle — even Mickey Mantle.” His innocence couldn’t withstand the death of his father, the only authority he ever acknowledged, or the “acquired situational narcissism” that came with celebrity. Mantle’s fall from grace, Leavy concludes, forced those who came of age in the ’50s and ’60s “to grow up and see the world as it is, not as we wished it to be.

Perhaps. But the analysis in “The Last Boy” seems to us, well, pretentious. Mantle was a special baseball player — and a rather uninteresting man. Like many American celebrities before and since, he didn’t discover until it was too late that he had wasted — and shortened — his life. And neither did we.

The Mick, sports columnist Dick Young once wrote, was not too smart, not too friendly, emotionally immature, but “all things considered,” a pretty nice guy. Jackie Robinson, however, deserves the last word. “We’ve got plenty of guys that stupid,” the artful Dodger observed before a World Series game in the early 1950s. “But we don’t have anyone that good.

Glenn C. Altshuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. Patrick M. Burns is the Associate Director of Student and Young Alumni Programs at Cornell University.

Associate Images:
1951 World Series bat owned by Mickey Mantle. MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World
THE LAST BOY
Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood
By Jane Leavy
Harper, $27.99