'The Kid: The Immortal Life of Ted Williams': An intimate look at the ballplayer and man

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By Glenn Altschuler

On Dec. 7, 1937, the Boston Red Sox announced the acquisition of Ted Williams from the San Diego Padres (in the Pacific Coast League). "This is the happiest day of my life," the 19-year-old phenom proclaimed. "If the Red Sox give me a chance, I'll make good."

They did -- and so did he. At his retirement in 1960, which he celebrated with a home run in his last at bat, Williams was universally acclaimed as one of the greatest hitters in the history of baseball. He had a lifetime batting average of .344, the best ever on base percentage, won six batting titles, two Most Valuable Player awards, two Triple Crowns, and was selected to the American League All-Star team 18 times. Had he not served five years as a combat pilot during World War II and the Korean War, "Teddy Baseball" may well have approached or surpassed Babe Ruth's career record of 714 home runs.

In "The Kid: The Immortal Life of Ted Williams," author Ben Bradlee Jr., a former reporter and editor at The Boston Globe, draws on Williams' private papers and some 600 interviews with teammates, associates, friends and family members to provide an intimate look at the ballplayer and the man.

Williams, Mr. Bradlee demonstrates, was a great hitter and a war hero but also a deeply flawed human being, whose insecurity and hypersensitivity belied his perfect swing and swagger. A fine feat of investigative journalism, "The Kid" is a comprehensive and often compelling account of an immensely talented, controversial and beloved baseball legend.

Mr. Bradlee has unearthed information that will surprise even the most ardent Ted Williams fan. The last player to hit .400 or more in a season, Williams' batting average in 1939 would have been .411 (instead of .406), Mr. Bradlee indicates, had he benefited from the rule (in effect through much of the modern era) that does not charge a player with an at bat if he hits a fly ball that scores a runner from third base. And he describes Williams' attempt (following a suggestion from 14-year-old David Pressman from Chelsea, Mass.) to hit the ball harder by heating (and drying out) his bats.
Mr. Bradlee's research into Williams' personal life is also impressive. Williams hid the fact that his mother was Mexican-American, he reveals, because he feared it might jeopardize his major league career. And Mr. Bradlee documents Williams' support for the Jimmy Fund, the Boston-based charity to benefit cancer research, and the lengths to which he went to prevent reporters from revealing his involvement to the public.

Nonetheless, "The Kid" is too long. Mr. Bradlee gives extra innings to self-serving comments by individuals he has interviewed -- or stories that cover ground he has already traversed (such as Williams' use of profanity or his temper tantrums). He spends hundreds of pages on Williams' post-retirement years, when he was diminished, physically and cognitively, and exploited by his children (two of whom, Mr. Bradlee suggests, falsified documents so they could transfer his body to Alcor Life Extension Foundation, to be frozen and preserved).

And the armchair psychoanalysis in "The Kid" often seems simplistic. Mr. Bradlee links Williams' misogyny and his contempt for organized religion, for example, to resentment of his mother for choosing Salvation Army work over quality time with him. When Williams didn't get adulation from fans and writers, Mr. Bradlee asserts, he regressed to childlike behavior, stimulated by "the slings and arrows he'd endured in his youth," felt remorse for his outbursts, but rejected expressions of regret as signs of weakness.

"One reason" he connected with the Jimmy Fund, Mr. Bradlee writes, was the feeling it gave him (in contrast to the "helpless and dying kids") of being powerful and in control. "The Kid" leaves little doubt that when Williams wasn't at the plate or fishing, he had feet of clay. He feuded with sportswriters and spat at fans who booed him. He gave up after three marriages, he confessed, because he never wanted to go 0 for 4. He ignored, verbally abused, and bulldozed his children. As his teammate Jimmy Piersall put it, he was only "really in love with himself."

With time, Mr. Bradlee concludes, "questions about a tarnished legacy receded." Although he can be accused of reviving them, Mr. Bradlee is surely right that "the mind's eye -- and history's" -- gradually readjusted, as they should, "on an image of Ted Williams in his prime on a ball field." After all, Teddy Baseball's life story don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.