In April 1976, Charlie Finley, the owner of the Oakland Athletics, hired Laurie Brady, an astrologer, to help manager Chuck Tanner make decisions about his lineup and pitching rotation.

Brady proclaimed that the stars were aligned for the Athletics to win the World Series. Joining Brady in the front office of the A’s was 14-year-old Stanley Burrell — the former batboy (nicknamed “Little Hammer” because he resembled Hank Aaron) and “eyes and ears” in a clubhouse rumored to be rife with drug-takers — whom Finley named executive vice president. A decade later, Burrell burst on the entertainment scene as MC Hammer.

These antics and outsized personalities, and many others like them, journalist Dan Epstein reminds us, comprised the colorful and contentious Major League Baseball season. In “Stars and Strikes,” he recaptures it, as only a box-score obsessed, “full-fledged baseball freak” can.

Epstein tries to set the season in the context of the celebration of the 200th birthday of the United States and the beginning of the era of “free agency” in baseball, which, of course, has fundamentally altered the economics of the game.

His analysis, however, is superficial. His principal aim, it seems clear, is to move on to the next bench-clearing brawl or pop culture nugget. “Manufactured or otherwise,” he writes, in a typical “transition,” Jimmy Carter’s smile became even more ubiquitous “than the pearly whites of Farrah Fawcett-Majors,” the star of ABC TV’s “Charlie’s Angels,” whose red-swimsuit pinup poster sold about 12 million copies.

“Stars and Strikes” is most likely to resonate with fans who enjoy recalling, reliving and learning more about a baseball season that was, indeed, well-stocked with great and goofy moments.

It introduced them, for example, to Mark “The Bird” Fidrych, the 21-year-old pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, who paced in circles after every play, dropped to his knees to smooth the dirt on the mound, appeared to be instructing the ball between pitches on how to behave and where to go — and compiled a 19-9 record and a league leading 2.34 earned run average.

When Fidrych was on the mound, Epstein reveals, the Tigers’ home attendance averaged 33,649 per game; when he wasn’t, 13,893 people were in the seats.

Happy to be in the majors, “The Bird” refused to be represented by an agent, asked his school teacher father to represent him in negotiations with Tigers General Manager Jim Campbell and, in essence, took a $6,000 pay cut for 1977.

Fidrych would injure his knee while fooling around in the outfield during spring training and, Epstein
writes, would never pitch another complete season, “much less enjoy a glorious flight like the one he’d taken the country on in 1976.”

A cautionary tale in his otherwise exuberant trip down memory lane, Epstein uses Fidrych’s fate to mark the substantial distance baseball was about to travel when the “reserve clause” disappeared — and ballplayers dared to demand salaries no one could have dreamed of in the year the United States gave itself a birthday party.

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