As “The Heart of the Order,” Theo Schell-Lambert’s debut novel, opens, Blake “Xandy” Alexander, the left fielder for the Carolina Birds, injures the cruciate ligament in his knee. Placed on the disabled list and sent to rehab, Xandy passes the time by making daily journal entries about the game of baseball, its impact on “a drifter making $1.8 million” and more.

Designed as a rehab-induced meditation and “meta-take,” “The Heart of the Order” spends too much time in the on-deck circle and warming up in the bullpen. It is about as eventful as an episode of “Seinfeld.”

That said, Schell-Lambert is a gifted, mordantly witty writer and a keen observer of American culture and what used to be called the national pastime. Mixing with the sport’s greats during the All-Star game, for example, Xandy realizes that stronger skills do not equal stronger ligaments, “though you could almost see that being true. The long-former DL is baseball’s great democracy: everyone can show the same aptitude at being absent from a 25 man roster.”

Many of Xandy’s gently ironic reflections ring true. He thinks at first that the ashen color and resinly smell of the 12 bats spread across his double bed are engineered to bring him back to his childhood — until he realizes that kids his age used odorless aluminum bats from Little League through college: “Only when you are at the top do you finally immerse yourself in Louisville Slugger nostalgia for a youth you never had.”

And, Xandy reminds us, although it’s hotter in July, Americans (ballplayers included) are more tired of the heat in August. Family vacations are less successful in July, he claims, because there is “too much hope left in the summer, not enough longing.” If left to August’s fourth week, “then the sadness is upon you, and you might as well not go.”

Most important, Schell-Lambert finds the larger significance in baseball’s long season. In professional
football, there aren’t enough games for players and coaches to take a loss in stride. So “they try onside kicks down 21 points, laterals and Hail Marys, whatever it takes.” But with 162 contests to contend with, major leaguers take the longer view. To them, a baseball loss is like a football loss on downs. It’s like the loss of a quarter in a vending machine.” They motor ahead in one of few sports without a time clock, “don’t do all they could with strategy, generally let a game decide its own fate.”

Unless, of course, it’s the playoffs or the World Series. Or they are playing a team they hate. Then, as in other arenas of life, they play furiously, out of spite, the Boston Red Sox facing off against the New York Yankees, using all the tools at their disposal, sending pinch hitters to the plate, “visiting the mound like it’s Mount Rushmore” and putting relief pitchers in to throw 1.5 pitches. And, for better and worse, “the contest takes forever.”