# FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

# NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

2023: Our 39th Season

Edition No. 30 October 12, 2023

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("PAwesome")
Wahoos
Returning Champion

**Jeff Bechtolt**
("Screech")
Monarchs

**Jon Blongewicz**
("Sunny")
Blues

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("SloPay")
Bears

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("Tirebiter")
Redbirds

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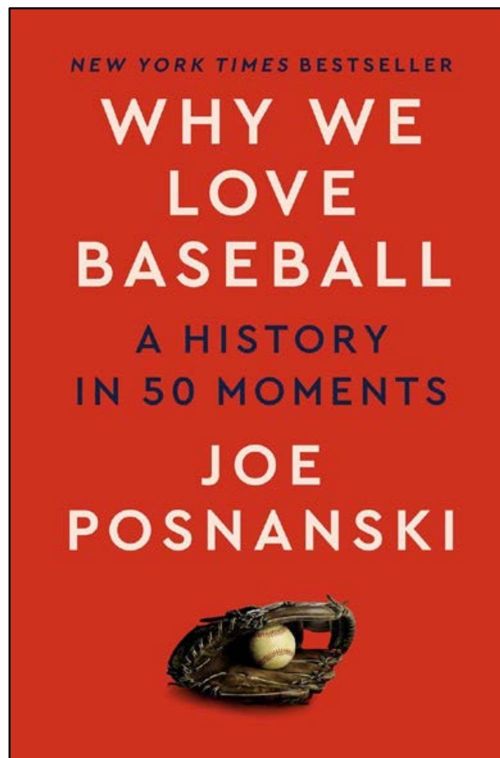
Brethren,

**IN PRAISE OF:**
**WHY WE LOVE BASEBALL**




Some of you may know that Sunny's and my favorite living baseball writer is Joe Posnanski, author of the treasured *The Baseball 100*[1]and a couple of other excellent baseball books. Just last month his latest masterpiece, entitled *Why We Love Baseball*, was published. It is, in a word, *fantastic*. MUST reading for any baseball fan.

This book purports to describe some fifty different great baseball events/moments/stories, but there are actually many more that are included. Sunny has already read the entire book, but I am savoring it by reading a single chapter per day, and I just finished reading chapter 30. To whet your appetites a bit, I include hereinbelow Posnanski's comments about the "inner game"—a term borrowed from the late, great Roger Angell—of baseball which describes all of the great moments and memories about baseball that are stored in our memory banks, and this is exactly how I think about it. I'm not sure that a day has gone by in the past fifty years that I haven't thought at least once about baseball or something related to baseball. It's what gets me through every winter, for certain.

Anyway, here's what Posnanski had to say about this:

[1] See *From the Bullpen,* Edition 4, 02/04/22.

"The inner game—baseball in the mind—has no season," the marvelous Roger Angell wrote, and it certainly has been like that in my life. I think about baseball all the time, all year round, often for no reason at all. Sometimes, to fall asleep, I count ballparks I have visited. Sometimes, to pass the time, I'll try to name World Series opponents going back as far as I can. Baseball numbers pop into my mind—.406 or 660 or 5,714 or 44—and I'll spend way too long lost in a baseball daydream about Ted Williams . . . or Willie Mays . . . or Nolan Ryan . . . or Henry Aaron.

"What are you thinking about?" friends and family will sometimes ask when I zone out like that, and it's hard to explain because, as Nick Hornby explains in his brilliant soccer book, *Fever Pitch*: "I rarely think. I remember. I fantasize. . . . none of this is *thought* in the proper sense of the word."

That's right. I often just melt into a memory of some beautiful baseball thing I've seen. I melt into a vision of Ken Griffey Jr. swinging the bat. Oh, how would you even describe that gorgeous thing? Junior's swing was violence and music, danger and candy, rage and sunshine. He seemed to swing the bat effortlessly, and yet it tore through the strike zone like Paul Bunyan's axe. I asked him once about his swing—a mistake, as it turned out, because Junior was not one for self-analysis or dreamy sportswriter inquiries. "I swing like I swing, man," he said, which, looking back, was all that needed to be said.

Baseball in the mind.

I melt into a vision of Rickey Henderson dancing between second and third base. Rickey stole 1,406 bases in his career: There's another wonderful baseball number (and a permanent one; no one is ever breaking that record). Most of those steals were of second base, but I always thought Rickey was at his artistic best stealing third, something he did an astonishing 322 times. As I lose myself in the memory, he is standing in the pitcher's blind spot, moving with the spot as the pitcher nervously tries to track him, and he is mesmerizing the infielder who is supposed to be holding him close, and by the time the pitcher begins the windup, he is already in full motion, a blur, halfway to third base.

I visualize Juan Marichal's beautiful high-kick windup, and I think about the story he told me. When he first signed to play professional baseball, Marichal threw sidearm. A minor-league coach named Andy Gilbert asked him to try throwing overhand. Marichal tried and found that the only way he could throw hard was if he kicked his leg up so high that it was at the same height as his head. "OK," Gilbert said, "but can't you kick your leg a little lower?"

Marichal could not. The windup became a part of baseball history. "First he'd kick you in the face," his teammate Orlando Cepeda said, "then he'd throw the pitch by you."

My mind is always ready to dive into a baseball reverie. Right now, as I write these words, I'm looking at a bobblehead doll. It is of Trea Turner sliding. His left hand and left knee are on the ground, and leaning left, like a speed skater making a sharp turn.

So yes, of course, I see the slide again. It happened August 10, 2021, the Los Angeles Dodgers playing in Philadelphia. With Turner on second, Dodgers' catcher Will Smith lined a single to right field. Turner is one of the fastest players in baseball. He rounded third and headed home.

Bryce Harper's throw was late. Turner slid anyway. Only . . . it wasn't exactly a slide. It was more like he transformed into a powerboat and skimmed over a clear lake. A baseball slide, by its very nature, has a limited range; eventually your body stops sliding. But Turner's slide seemed like it could have gone on forever. He

touched home plate with his left hand and then just kept on going. Only then, in one motion, he popped to his feet, rotated his body 180 degrees, and began walking casually in the opposite direction, like he was James Brown at the Apollo.

"I'm not necessarily trying to be cool or anything," he told ESPN, which is *exactly* what made it so cool.

Ah, but the coolest thing in baseball, I think, is simply Roberto Clemente throwing a baseball. I am too young, alas, to have seen Clemente play live. I wish that I had, because even over grainy film, the wonder of Clemente rushes through, no matter what he is doing. Simply watching him run is thrilling.

Clemente. The name evokes so many emotions because Clemente was such a force.

"You know what my goose-bump moment of Clemente is?" his biographer David Maraniss tells me. "It was when he talked to his parents in Spanish on national TV after that 1971 World Series. It captured everything about Clemente: Puerto Rico, pride, and baseball."

Yes. And then to watch him throw a baseball? It's life-changing.

I think of two throws specifically, both from the 1971 World Series. Clemente was already 37 and, in his own mind, diminished. How magical were those throws? Let's put it this way: Neither one even recorded an out. Still, they will endure forever.

The first throw came in Game 2 of that series between Pittsburgh and Baltimore. Baltimore's Boog Powell lifted a fly ball to right field. Clemente was playing Powell deep and toward center, so he had a long run to the ball. The Orioles' Merv Rettenmund was on second base, and when he saw how far Clemente had to go, he tagged up.

Clemente ran to the ball and caught it on his left hip—"That was Clemente's version of the Willie Mays basket catch," Bob Costas says—and in one motion he whirled his body all the way around and fired to third. The throw was so unexpectedly wonderful that Pirates' third baseman Richie Hebner, who had wandered off the bag, had to rush back, and he could not quite get the tag down on Rettenmund.

"Was that your best throw ever?" reporters asked Clemente. He scoffed.

"No," he said impatiently. "Clemente of two or three years ago—he's out."

The second Clemente throw happened in Game 6. The score was tied, and Mark Belanger stood on first. Baltimore's Don Buford rifled a double into the right-field corner. Belanger looked like he would come all the way around to score.

Instead, Clemente fielded the carom and then turned and, with no momentum behind him, fired a throw that still makes the jaw drop. The website FanGraphs put some numbers on it—the ball flew 295 feet and traveled at 98.6 mph—but even those gaudy numbers do not quite capture the awesome feeling of watching it. The baseball bounced a few feet in front of the plate and jumped up to the catcher, like a child greeting a parent returning home from work.

There was no play at the plate. Belanger, who knew a little something about the man in right field for the Pirates, had stopped at third base.

Every single chapter of *Why We Love Baseball* that I have read so far has been interesting, if not fascinating, if not goosebump inducing. This is why it is taking every ounce of self-discipline that I can muster to read only one chapter each day, because it would be easy to speed through the entire book in a single afternoon. But don't just take my word for it, read what Posnanski had to say about Nolan Ryan facing Bo Jackson for the seventh time in their respective careers after Ryan struck Jackson out the first six times:

BO JACKSON (MAY 23, 1989)

"I'm going to get him this time," Bo told his teammates. He had faced Nolan Ryan six times in his young career. He had struck out all six times. This time would be different, Bo promised. This time.

The situation didn't matter. The Rangers already led the Royals 10–2. But it is moments like these that make baseball sublime. You had a titan on the mound, a folk hero at the plate—yes, this is certainly why we love baseball. They battled back and forth until the count was full.

Ryan then faced a choice. He was set up to throw his knee-buckling curveball. He knew Bo couldn't hit it; Bo had all sorts of trouble against curveballs. All Ryan had to do was flip a curve, get Bo to chase, and that would be the end of that.

But Ryan could read Bo's eyes, which seemed to say: "Come on, old man, you're supposed to have the best fastball ever. Let's see that fastball."

No, Nolan Ryan wasn't about to throw a curveball.

He threw the hardest fastball he had in him. And there was nothing wrong with the velocity; it was plenty fast. But the location was—well, nowadays they call that kind of pitch *middle-middle*. It was right where Bo Jackson wanted it.

"As soon as it left my hand," Ryan would later tell reporters, "I knew I was in trouble."

Bo Jackson swung as hard as he could. He always did. When the bat connected with the ball, the sound was like the liberation of Paris. Jackson hit it to straightaway center field, the deepest part of the ballpark, and none of the outfielders even moved. There was no reason to move. The ball soared over the fence and two-thirds of the way up the bleachers; nobody had ever hit a baseball there before.

As Jackson rounded the bases, he looked over at Ryan and offered a smile that said: "I finally got you!"

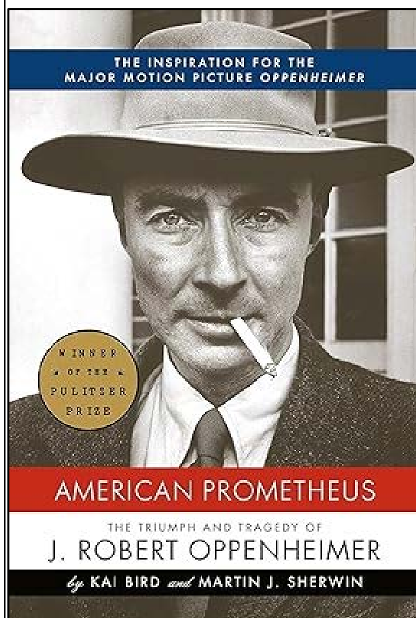
Ryan was not amused. He glared back. After the game, someone asked Ryan if it was the longest home run that he ever gave up. He was not about to give Bo the satisfaction. "You don't pitch twenty-two years and not give up longer ones than that," he said with an edge in his voice.

The next day, though, when Ryan came out to stretch, he looked around the field and couldn't find any of his teammates. Then he looked up in the stands and there they were, sitting way off in the center-field bleachers, where Bo Jackson had hit the home run.

"Hi, Nolan!" they shouted, and he could barely even hear them.

"OK, yeah," Ryan would admit, "he really did hit that one a pretty long way."

Awesome, right? And there's lots more where that came from. I am making careful notes about each chapter and will continue to share some of the best nuggets with all of you in future *FTB*s editions.




**BOOK REPORT:**
***AMERICAN PROMETHEUS:***
***THE TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY OF***
***J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER***
By Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin
*Alfred A. Knopf New York 2005*

Before going to see the movie *Oppenheimer*, I decided to read the book which inspired the motion picture, entitled: *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin and published in 2005. Because of the extraordinary length of his amazing career, and because of the very technical nature of his work, the book is a bit of a slog and at 588 pages, no small commitment.

A book report on this definitive work about a brilliant, amazing man could run ten pages, but I will confine myself to just a couple of _______________ points:

Oppenheimer was chosen at the tender age of 39 (check this out) to organize and run the Los Alamos project to develop the atomic bomb, and was present together with others when it was successfully tested at the Trinity test site 60 miles northwest of Alamogordo, New Mexico.

When used against the Japanese in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945, it was arguable that the Japanese were already virtually defeated, and that the atomic bombs were actually deployed to forestall a Soviet share in the occupation of post-war Japan.

As matters escalated, Oppenheimer refused an offer for him to return to Los Alamos and work on the hydrogen "Super" bomb, which was nevertheless developed. Truman rejected Oppy's argument against building a Super bomb.

In a meeting with Truman in October 1945, Oppenheimer felt that the president was not comprehending the deadly urgency of his message and while nervously wringing his hands, stated, "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands." This comment angered Truman, and by one account, Truman pulled out his handkerchief from his breast pocket and offered it to Oppenheimer, saying, "Well, here, would you like to wipe your hands?" Later on, Truman described him as a "cry-baby scientist."

Much later, in 195__, Oppenheimer had to endure a lengthy ordeal—essentially a trial—when it was decided that he should no longer have security clearance because of his past association with and sympathy for certain communists.

Now, I am anxious to go see the movie.