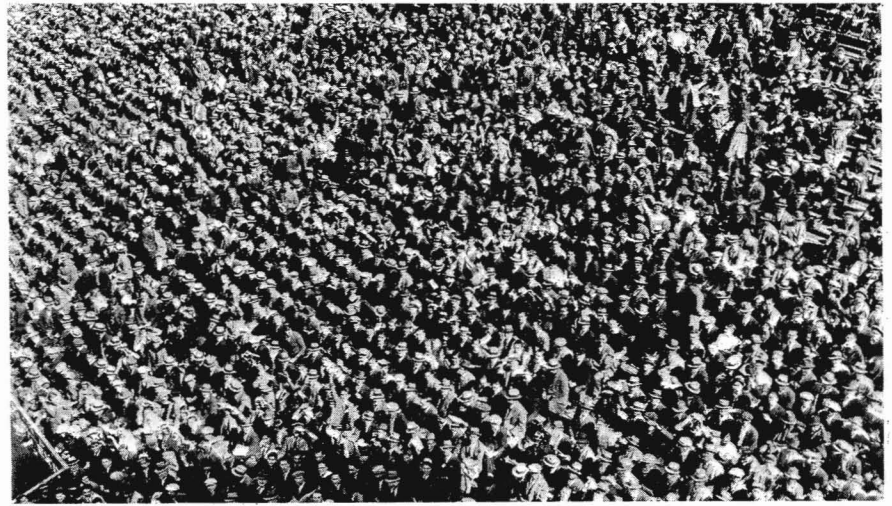


A BASEBALL FAN



By Roland Chapdelaine
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A baseball fan is a unique individual.

He's someone who stops to watch little kids play in the streets.

He's someone who reads the minor league averages in *The Sporting News*.

He browses through the book department, stopping at titles like *Tom Sawyer*, thinking it says "Tom Seaver," and "The Magnificent Yankee," thinking it's about DiMaggio.

A baseball fan always reads the sports section first.

He always says "We won" or "We lost," never "They."

He takes his young son to the ballpark on weekends, intending to teach the little fellow about baseball. But instead, he spends most of the afternoon on line at the concession stand, buying hot dogs, peanuts and soda for his son.

His fondest memories of his own father and his uncles are of the times they took him to a ball game in his youth. And every time he returns to the ballpark, you'll see him turn and glance at the spot where they used to sit.

A baseball fan's memory revolves around the sport. He got his first job the day before the All-Star Game; so it must have been July. And his little son was born the year Reggie buried the Dodgers; so it had to be 1977.

A baseball fan can tell you more details about ballplayers of the past and present than Howard Cosell can. He knows when the managers or the umpires have blown it; and he knows the cure for every hitter's slump. (If you don't believe me, ask him.)

Forget what he does for a living; following baseball is his life's work. It's the one inseparable link with his childhood. For whatever else in his life changes, the game remains the same. The pitcher throws the ball, the batter hits it, and the crowd roars.

Baseball consumes him year 'round.

When he's not watching a game, he's cultivating the memories of seasons gone by, collecting whatever memorabilia will bring those memories into sharper focus. He lives, breathes, eats and sleeps baseball. The biggest questions of his life all begin with "Who's better . . . ?" If you cut him open, you'd find his heart has red stitching and is stamped "Official League."

The worst time of year for a baseball fan is the winter. It's too cold and depressing. He follows the other sports; but it's just not the same.

Then the pitchers and catchers begin showing up in the grapefruit league. Starting rotations. Infield prospects. Predictions. Spring is here and baseball's back! The baseball fan comes to life again. And all the losing seasons of his life haven't dampened his enthusiasm one bit.

His idea of paradise is a hot day, a cold beer, and a big doubleheader.

But you'll never find him in the field level boxes; that's for the corporate executives and the celebrities. No, you'll find him in the top rows of the upper deck, smoking a cigar, sipping a beer, scribbling notations on his scorecard and yelling himself hoarse. And you'll find him there from Opening Day until the last game in October.

And you'll never see him leave the park until the final out is made. He's seen too many ninth inning rallies to believe that any game is over before it's over.

You can't convince him that any ballet can be as graceful as a perfectly-timed hit and run, that any stage play can be as dramatic as a game-winning homer, or that any painting can be as serenely beautiful as a ballfield, especially in the late afternoon, when the summer sunshine gives the outfield grass a golden radiance.

The baseball fan has simple tastes.

All it takes to make him happy is a pennant race.

He has been described as everything from a "loyal follower" to a "wild animal" to "the biggest sucker in history." But he knows what he is. He is the backbone of sports. Before football, basketball, hockey and soccer became big business, the baseball fan was out in the bleachers root, root, rooting for the home team. And despite franchise shifts and strikes, free agency and rising prices, he's still there, still rooting with his youthful enthusiasm, in greater numbers than ever before.

He is *the* superstar. He runs the show. He pays the bills. Without him, there are no leagues, no teams, no stadiums, no players—no baseball.

It's his sport. And this is his time of year.