The Magic of Baseball (Keynote Lecture)

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Recommended Citation
Echevarria, Roberto Gonzalez (2000) "The Magic of Baseball (Keynote Lecture)," Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol8/iss1/9

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The Magic of Baseball

ROBERTO GONZÁLEZ ECHEVARRÍA

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

Wallace Stevens, Sunday Morning

I

It seems apparent that baseball is well on its way to becoming global. While the popularity of the sport in North, Central, and parts of South America and the Caribbean is a given, baseball is now being seriously played in some very unlikely places, such as Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Italy, France, and Germany. Japan has been a baseball power for quite some time now, as everyone knows. The causes of this expansion are no secret. Baseball spread to various parts of the world as the United States became a world economic and military power, just as soccer had on the heels (or feet) of British imperialism. Now that the United States is the only major power, it should not be surprising that baseball is expanding further and at a faster rate, though I doubt that it will ever attain the international currency of soccer. Will baseball be transformed by this expansion, and is the expansion itself a threat to the integrity of the cultures within which baseball finds new homes? Does baseball carry with it an American imprint, the way other aspects of American culture do? By American imprint I mean an American ethos, an American mind set, as well as American values that would affect the political, social, and economic makeup of the countries where the game is

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1. George Will has noted that Haiti, in spite of repeated invasions by the United States, and subject to no less cultural pressure from the North than Cuba or the Dominican Republic, has remained adamantly loyal to soccer. He quips that the Haitians must have an unshakable French identity that makes them immune to baseball.
played.

If we think of the history of other sports the answer would have to be an immediate “no.” Few remember or really care today about the English origins of soccer. How many know that tennis as we know it developed in France? I do not recall thinking that baseball was American when I played the game as a youngster in Cuba. Do games, like the languages disseminated by empires, lose the stamp of their original cultures as other peoples adopt them and make them part of their lives?

Unlike languages, however, games tend to remain pure because they do not reflect or adapt to a changing reality, and perhaps because play is essentially conservative and rooted in a deeper psychic structure than words, as Johan Huizinga persuasively argued in his classic *Homo Ludens.* This is what makes games exportable. Their original imprint is not American, British, or French, but human. That which is American, British, or French is the ability to disseminate the games, the economic and political vehicles, not the games themselves. Baseball has changed very little since the inception of the game, retaining (improbably) even the original distance between bases, as if the transformations of space beyond the diamond were irrelevant. The same is true, even more surprisingly, with the height of the hoop in basketball, which has remained at ten feet despite the dramatic increase in the size of the players.

If there is a deeper seal than that of the nation or culture in which a game is invented, what is it, and how does it interact with each new environment? This is what I would like to consider regarding baseball in our reflections about the globalization of baseball, a phenomenon that seems to be driven by market imperatives beyond the reach of argument or reason. Being resistant to change like all games, and hence inimical to the concept of progress that is arguably the prime mover of the modern West, the expansion of baseball could be a built-in form of opposition to it, which is precisely why it is exportable to other cultures. In other words, instead of advertisement for triumphant American-style capitalism, baseball (and presumably other team sports) would in this view be deeply antithetical to its most basic tenets. I dislike the mental gymnastics of dialects, but I do think that cultures are made

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up of forces at odds with each other. Baseball is one of the contesting forces of the West from within itself, a struggle that is manifest in the troublesome relationship the game has with ideology and morals, as games do everywhere. This is so because of the ritual nature of the game.

Let me clarify at the outset that I do not believe that sports should be included in the category of popular culture, first because I reject cultural hierarchies and object to downgrading the importance of games; and second because to think of games as popular culture would imply making them wholly dependant on economic factors. Now even most Marxists agree that the circulation of images—what used to be called the "superstructure"—plays as important a role as the economy in the makeup of our postmodern era. Besides, to view sports as popular culture means to deny them their sacred aura, to relegate them to the realm of the secular, which is precisely what I do not want to do because it is contrary to the nature of games. To place sports under the rubric of popular culture would also mean accepting periodizations, such as "late capitalism," that depend on a rectilinear conception of history whose basic tenet is progress, outside of which I believe games exist. This does not mean, of course, that sports do not have a history.

II

Team sports as we know them are a nineteenth-century phenomenon that was part of the process by which modern nations came to exist. No significant new team sports emerged in the twentieth century, only variations of the principal ones—softball from baseball, arena football from American football, a few strands of rugby, and so forth. On the face of the secularization of life that followed the Enlightenment, team sports came to take the place of religion as collective rituals celebrating and consecrating bonds of mutual allegiance and commonality of belief. Teams first had regional or institutional identification (schools), but eventually they attained a national scope, becoming part and parcel of the development of what Benedict Anderson memorably called "imagined communities"—groups of people who do not know each other but share beliefs, among them the belief that they share those beliefs. Team sports emerged in the post-Napoleonic era at the same time as

national armies were being organized and outfitted with uniforms, emblems—a whole heraldry representing their respective nations.

In this country, baseball really began to thrive after the Civil War, becoming a symbol of reunification, as Jules Tygiel argues in his superb Past Time. The nationalist genesis of modern sports and their connection to the military became self-conscious and deliberate in 1896, when the first modern Olympics were held and teams, like armies, represented nations. Teams with national or ethnic names emerged early and continue to exist to this day: Cuban Giants, New York Yankees, Atlanta Crackers, Boston Braves, Cleveland Indians, Boston Pilgrims, and so on. This heady mixture of sports and nationalism reached its paroxysmic climax in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, when nationalism showed its atavistic, irrational substratum. The spectacle was repeated often in the twentieth century, sometimes with tragic consequences, as in the 1972 Munich Olympics, when Israeli athletes were massacred. The elaborate staging of the Pan American Games in Cuba by Fidel Castro's regime went in the direction of kitsch, though the diversion of the country's scarce resources for athletic propaganda cost the people dearly.

These celebrations of the collectivity by the mock armies that national teams became show to what degree team sports reach back to their origin in sacred play and constituted a reaction to the secularization of social life in the wake of the Enlightenment. Baseball retains much that is ritualistic and religious-like in its rules and conventions. Because it is not institutionalized as a form of religion, and because its sacred elements are taken for granted and remain largely unexamined by participants and fans alike, I refer to this aspect of baseball as magic. Sports are a low grade or informal kind of cult, which is the reason why they retain primitive elements that socialization and institutionalization would curtail. The dissemination of baseball, its potential globalization, depends on this substratum that is accessible to other cultures in spite of the game's original American imprint. Sport is globalizable beyond ideology because it reaches back to this common core. For example, at the height of the Cold War, the Soviets were able to adopt basketball—another American sport—without fear that basketball would prove politically contagious. All cultures have games; and all culture, to refer again to Huizinga, is originally ludic. Or as he put it:

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The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it.\(^5\)

Games are a return to that birth, an irruption of the irrational into the reason propounded by the Enlightenment and by modern science applied to social policy and government. They propose a reason of their own that is independent of immediate need, remind us of the founding role the ludic plays in drawing up the laws of nations, and oppose the ideologies that would subject them to the rule of rationality and necessity.

And yet, one of the features of modern team sports is their complicity with political ideology, as if their unsettling powers had to be tamed, molded, and controlled by the State. Baseball was declared the national game of the United States, just as it was of Cuba, and the baseball industry continues to profit from the status of the game as a special institution entrusted with the preservation of American values.

How can a sport be a national game? Political ideology seeks to transform the irrational, essentially amoral nature of games into an edifying practice beneficial to mind, body, and community. The drunken, lecherous, unruly, and violent sports heroes have to be constantly disciplined because they are closer to the Dyonisian essence of play. Babe Ruth was the prime example. Hank Aaron, for all of his accomplishments, is too decent—too boring—to compete with the Babe in the pantheon of baseball heroes precisely for that reason.

Sometimes, in totalitarian regimes, sport teams act as toy armies that play out the fantasies of dictators and vent their paranoid fears. The recent

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\(^5\) HUIZINGA, \textit{supra} note 2, at 173.
baseball game staged in Havana, pitting Cuba against Venezuela, was a mock confrontation between Fidel Castro, who managed the local team, and his clone wannabe, Hugo Chávez, who pitched for Venezuela. This grim parody of Latin American politics reflects the role that baseball, and sports in general, play in patriarchal, totalitarian societies. Squads are led by dictators who are owners not only of the team, but of the nation itself. (Imagine Ted Turner or George Steinbrenner ruling the United States in addition to the Braves and Yankees, or Bill Clinton as manager of either team.) In the 1948 Amateur World Series played in Managua, Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza took the reigns of the Nicaraguan national team from Juan Ealo, his Cuban manager, convinced that he could rally it to victory. He could not. In the United States, baseball is touted as a reflection of American democracy, but managers—this is true to a greater extent with coaches in basketball and football—are treated like generals and praised for their disciplinary character, their spirit of sacrifice, leadership, and devotion to a common cause. John MacGraw was the “Little Napoleon.” All these possibilities exist because of the sacred origin of team sports.

Games, like theater, stage the major predicaments of human life, such as the fickleness of fate, the vulnerability and limitations of the body, our helplessness before natural and cosmic forces, our innate penchant for evil. Similarly, games provide the stage for our responses to these human predicaments: courage, virtue, cunning, the ability to organize in groups to multiply our individual strengths, leadership, the capacity to follow rules and rulers, and our poise or lack of it in the face of good fortune or terrible adversity. The way games deal with these large issues is akin to religion in that no tangible gain ensues from them, no solutions are reached, and no profit attained. Praying or winning an athletic contest has no demonstrable concrete effect, except for the psychological and sometimes physiological ones. (“You can't eat medals,” somebody once told me in Cuba.) This is one of the reasons why games can take the place of religion in the modern era.

Another is the conservative nature of play and religion. I use “conservative” here in its strongest sense. The rules of games, like doctrines, are resistant to change: they are a projection of the past into the future. Both contribute to group bonding by providing a common memory as well as a
collectively agreed upon set of rules. Those memories are peopled by heroes and martyrs to whom we owe feelings of group solidarity. This is the reason cults develop around athletic figures, their relics are collected and treasured, and shrines such as the Hall of Fame are erected in their honor and memory. Recent examples of this are Roberto Clemente, a martyr because he died while on a humanitarian mission, and Mickey Mantle, whose conversion to the good after a life of dissipation turned him briefly into a secular saint.

We must distinguish between ceremony and ritual, and in this way further discern the difference between ideology and the deeper structure of sport that I am talking about. Ceremonies are those events or acts deliberately staged as part of the spectacle of baseball, but not inherent to the game, whereas the game itself is ritual. A ritual is the execution of certain prescribed actions that are coherent only onto themselves and answer or address supernatural forces beyond rational comprehension. Rituals involve the body of the officiants and other participants, such as spectators, and induce a collective state of higher consciousness by the exercise of physical activities, the consumption of mind-altering substances, or both. In a ritual, conventional morality is suspended, and otherwise reprehensible or proscribed actions, such as killing animals or people, are performed. Liturgical objects are often employed.

In baseball, ceremonies are historical events, such as throwing out the first pitch, awarding trophies or rings to players, or having a “day” in honor of somebody, like a famous player. There are many patriotic ceremonies attached to games: marching bands, raising flags, military planes flying over the stadium, and, of course, playing the national anthem. Playing the anthem, which only began during World War II, is a ceremony proclaiming that the strife on the field takes place under the overarching protection and harmony of the nation, to which players on both teams belong. Because they do not partake of the conservative element of the game itself, these ceremonies have varied over time and are more subject to changing styles and to the diversity of ideologies. The mock match between Venezuelan and Cuba mentioned before shows that these ceremonies can be collapsed into the game's ritual. The American tradition of having the president throw the first ball of the Major League season is another instance in which the ceremony approximates ritual, or at least evokes it—the leader himself, not his proxy, the manager, or the pitcher, hurls the first ball. Ceremonies are part of the ideological appropriation of games by the states and are often at odds with the game itself.
A fan walks into a stadium and is not surprised to see twenty-four men dressed in fairly outlandish fashion (I am also counting coaches and umpires), two of whom are wearing heavy masks, spread over a field arranged as a square contained by a quarter circle, with a smaller circle in the middle, throwing around a small white ball. One of the men, standing on a small square outside one of the main boundaries, is going through a bizarre set of motions, scratching or caressing various parts of his body, having a twitching fit, or tugging maniacally at ill-fitting parts of his clothing. An anthropologist from another planet, however, would realize at once that he or she was in the presence of an elaborate ritual, with costumes, liturgical objects, prescribed individual gestures, and choreographed group movements. We, as fans, do not have the proper distance to notice this because we are also caught up in the proceedings, and because the game of baseball is too familiar to reveal deeper structures to those involved as players or spectators.

The most evident and all-encompassing ritualistic component is the space itself, both the stadium and the layout of the field. The stadium contains locker rooms, off-limits except to officiants, who don there the appropriate garb for the ritual, and the press, which records it. There has been a desecration of these once holy places, but they still retain the aura of the sacristy, where the priest and acolytes put on their liturgical garments. It is here, too, that the players imbibe (more about this later). Since the stadium is something shared with other sports, however, I will concentrate on the field.

The baseball diamond is a partial circle encompassing a concentric square, with home at the vertex of the large triangle that contains both, and a base at each of the other three corners. Both the outer quarter circle and the square contain the concentric inner circle of the pitcher's box (so called because it was once a rectangle). The baseball diamond is a mandala, the enigmatic conjunction of the square and the circle, both figures full of hidden implications of their own (see Figure 1). Their superposition is a symbol of cosmic and individual unity.

The mandala, in Buddhist tradition, is a schematic representation of the cosmos characterized by a concentric organization of geometric figures, each of which contains an image of the deity or an attribute of the deity. The concentric figures of the mandala are the image of the two complementary and
Figure 1
finally identical elements of a higher reality, the manifestation of an original innate reason, that uses images and ideas belonging to an imaginary world. The mandala attempts to go beyond the opposition between the one and the multiple, the scattered and the unified, the differentiated and the undifferentiated, and the outside and the inside. In Jungian psychology, the mandala is a symbol that represents an effort to reunify the self. In Cuba, we express the unpredictable quality of baseball by invoking a kind of mandala when we say resignedly: "La pelota es redonda y viene en caja cuadrada"—"The ball is round, but comes in a square box." That the baseball diamond, a nineteenth-century American invention, shares this Oriental mystical design is clear evidence that the ludic nature of the game is linked to a universal mind.

The baseball diamond is an enigmatic field of dreams that parcels out space into fair and foul. Fair is the area in which the rules of the game, particularly those involving the ball, are active; in foul territory only some of the rules apply (a fly ball, if caught outside the foul lines, is an out). This designation of a sacred or hallowed ground is typical of ritual; it is here that magic prevails in a special or sacred time. Games, like rituals, place boundaries not only in space but also in time. Events can occur only within the prescribed territory and within the designated period of time. Anyone who has been lucky enough to watch a baseball game from the press box knows that someone always calls out the exact time of the first pitch. This is for the benefit of journalists who need to record the event with specificity, and also for the official scorer who must keep track of the exact duration of the contest. But it is also a way of marking off the start of sacred time of play, like the bell sounding to begin a boxing fight, or the whistle a basketball or a football game. Of course, the game is first started by the umpire's cry of "Play Ball," which tells the players that sacred time is on. The only way to stop it is to call time out, to lift the barrier between ordinary time and the time of play.

Within that magic circle of time and space, the game of baseball involves a basic pattern of exile and return that makes it quite different from other games, but very much like religious lore. In most team sports—football, rugby, soccer, basketball—the metaphor for war is quite crude. Each team, like an army, strives to occupy the other's territory. The agon of primal competition could not be more manifest. (These are what Clark Griffith recently called "the back and forth games.") In baseball, however, scoring involves running around the bases—a square pattern—away from home to
return home. In the process, the opposition is trying to tag the runner with the ball and send him back to the dugout without reaching the plate. At the deepest level, the run around the bases to return home reproduces the very pattern of life: "ashes to ashes." Less abstractly, it is remindful of the epic, those stories of heroes who are but a step away from consecration. They are Ulysses or Aeneas returning home after the Trojan War. They are Moses leading the Israelites into exile in search of the Promised Land, which he was unable to reach (he died on third).

But the duration of a game, like the field, is special; it blends asymptotically in infinity with real time, meaning that because a baseball game can last forever as long as there is a tie, it becomes potentially one with the time outside of it, which is also without end. (This is the reason why baseball games occasionally have to be ended by an outside measure of time, such as a curfew.) Originally, baseball parks had no fixed boundaries, so that the outfield could conceivably merge with the horizon, or in urban areas, mingle with other spaces. This peculiar characteristic of baseball puts it even more at odds with the idea of progress than other sports that do not spill their ritualistic essence into real life. But infinity is suggested in all games involving balls by the very roundness of this liturgical thing around which the game centers.

The baseball is a magical object that must have antecedents in popular tradition and parallels in primitive societies. All circular or spherical items, which wrap onto themselves, have that mystic quality that issues from the self-contained: rings, orbs, and globes. Round objects offer less resistance to surfaces than squares, moving more freely as a result, hence the wheel. The spherical conjures visions of perfection, of homogeneity, of that which winds up its trajectory to the beginning, and is therefore an image of eternity, of that which is always itself, limited and self-enclosed. Take a baseball in your hand and follow the seam with your finger, feeling each of the one hundred and eight stitches as you go. After some graceful whorls you will return to the point of departure. Doing this can conjure feelings of timelessness. While you hold the ball, reflect upon its size and shape: it is made to the measure of your hand, any hand, no matter what the variations. It is made for liturgical functions that are performed by that part of the body that is most human and therefore most expressive. There are hand languages, and there is a way to handle a baseball. Watch how ballplayers, particularly pitchers and catchers in the bullpen, handle balls: they squeeze them, knead them, juggle them.
Football and soccer are different because the ball is also propelled by a limb that is lower and of lesser dignity and expressiveness: the foot. Feet are made to kick, not to fondle. They are crass and lack dexterity: their main function is to keep you upright. But we write, paint, caress, and do crafts with our hands.

The magic of the ball is at the core of the game. The ball has invisible powers that play crucial roles and exert control over the players' bodies, and over their success or failure. For instance, if a player touches an opponent with the ball in his hand or in his glove, that player is out. The ball communicates a curse or spell to the enemy that renders him temporarily out of the game. The function of the bases here is also magical because their power is invisible but effective. Having any part of the body in contact with the base protects the player from the disabling harm cast by the ball. The base is a refuge or talisman that guards against evil. At first base the ball’s spell is transmitted through the first baseman’s body to the bag itself, if it is done before the runner gets there and is “safe.” Safe from what? Safe from the spell contained in the ball that runs like an electrical charge through the opposing player “covering” the bag. After the runner arrives safely at first, he can be put out if touched with the malignant ball by the first baseman. One can see that the object of the batter is not only to propel the ball away from the defensive players (“hit them where they ain’t”), but away from his teammates on the bases. If the ball touches a runner in fair territory he is out, which is why at third base he takes his lead in foul ground, where the spell does not work if he is hit by the ball. Fair territory is active in terms of spells and cures, whereas foul is inactive, a curious inversion, to be safe if on foul ground and in danger if on fair ground. “Fair” and “foul,” I emphasize the words, determine the ball’s field of magical action, as it were.

There are many other instances in which the ball has similar magical powers. For instance, if the pitcher drops it in the act of winding up or throwing, or simply in contact with the rubber, and there are runners on base, he commits a balk. Fielders try with all their might to prevent the ball from touching the ground, as if it would be defiled in the process, in order to render the batter out. The ball has a sacred aura that, if not respected, results in punishment. This is the reason why the pitcher rubs it adoringly, and handles it according to a series of reverential gestures. With a man on base, he sets at a stately pace and often with some flair. He performs these gestures to show that he is not deceiving the runner. This is the moral reason. But it is also as
if he were warding off the evil that the ball is capable of communicating. He is appeasing it, as it were. Has anyone noticed that when the pitcher raises the ball he is like a priest in the act of consecrating the host? If he adds a little of his own saliva or some other ointment, he not only wants the ball to behave in a certain way, but also to add a further magical touch to the rubbing. The ball, after all, is covered with leather, dead animal skin, not unlike our own; it has the disturbingly pleasurable feel all leather objects have because of their familiar origin. Has anyone noticed how much the seams on a baseball look like a suture?

The pitcher’s task is to make the batter miss the ball, to prevent his defiling it or desecrating it, and for the ball to travel over home plate at a certain height. I have already spoken of the enigmatic meaning of home, an irregular pentagon that irradiates sacredness, the point of departure and arrival of the journey around the bases. The strike zone is magic because it is so ethereal, undefinable, translucent: it is a virtual space created by a consensus of arbitrary rules. Dressed in dark clothes like a high priest, the umpire determines what is and what is not a strike: he is the supreme authority who conducts the ritual according to the rules and decides the significance of the trajectory of the ball. When he raises his hand to call a strike, the umpire decrees that the ball has crossed a vertical projection of the plate’s shape, cut horizontally by lines emanating from the batter's knees and chest. (Baseball is the only game that I know where the size of each player has an effect on the application of rules, as if the basket were lowered for shorter players in basketball.) The path of the ball in relation to the batter’s body and the imaginary shape of home establish if the ball is a strike or not, as determined by that austere authority figure, the umpire. Bodies, zones, space, lines, and objects communicate among themselves, generating meaning by virtue of the invisible energy invested in the ball. The umpire’s gestural code sanctifies the actions and ensures their effect on the bodies of the players. The player touched by an opponent with the ball, or the batter who whiffs, returns to the dugout, to the bowels of the earth, where he is interred, though not permanently.

Tagging is another aspect of baseball that has clearly magical overtones. In football, physical contact has a real effect on bodies: a tackler brings down his opponent, literally knocks him down on the ground with the potential for actual injury being quite genuine. In baseball, on the other hand, the effect of physical contact is supernatural. There are children’s games, such as the aptly
named game of tag, in which tagging has the same function and effect as it does in baseball. Tagging puts you out of the game temporarily. At home plate, it prevents a player from scoring. Between bases, it denies him the protection the bag offers. I say that the effect is magic, not symbolic, because tagging does not take the place of hitting, as it does in touch football. In baseball, tagging is similar to religious beliefs and practices, such as the power French and English kings were supposed to have to heal the sick. Some saints were reputed to have had the same faculty, which extended to their clothes or relics. Tagging has the reverse effect in baseball, but the mechanism is the same: it presumably communicates to the body touched an energy that renders it lifeless. Tagging is make-believe killing because the dead come back.

Throughout a game of baseball, there are many deaths and resurrections, with journeys to the region of the dead in the depths of the earth (the dugout) and returns to the playing field at the end of an inning. (Versions of such journeys to the underworld, of course, are present in Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Cervantes.) There are also sacrifices in baseball, when a player, either by bunting or hitting a fly ball advances or scores a runner. His trip to Hades is a voluntary immolation. A more permanent voyage to the land of the dead occurs when a pitcher is taken out because he has failed to hold the opposition. This kind of death, perhaps because it is that of the principal player, is accompanied by some outward forms of mourning. The pitcher hangs his head as he relinquishes the ball, over which he has lost control or which he has allowed to be pummeled, and usually walks back to the dugout with an air of penitence. But the most significant deaths and resurrections happen as the teams exchange places on the field at the end of an inning. Having restrained their opponents temporarily, a team retreats to the dugout as if to regain strength from the earth itself to come out swinging, transformed from defense to offence. This death-resurrection pattern in baseball is related to the overall cycle of exile and return implicit in the run around the bases discussed before.

Uniforms too are very much a part of the baseball ritual, particularly in the emblems that signify the team's relationship to the community—symbols of the nation, the region, the ethnic group, and so forth. At the most basic level, the distinctions by colors and the association with animals reach back to totemic practices in primitive societies in which certain groups identify with animals that are ferocious, cunning, or loyal. Rhetorically, uniforms are
allegorical; ritualistically, they are part of the liturgy. In the beginning, uniforms also had functional characteristics. Knickers and long stockings were worn so as not to trip by catching one's spikes in long pants and cuffs. The socks were heavy to offer some protection from the ball, and trousers and jerseys were padded for the same reason, as well as to allow players to slide in them without being scraped. The traditional flannel uniforms had the same purpose, and they also absorbed perspiration. But uniforms are the required garment to cloth the body in symbols for ritualistic purposes. They are the liturgical garments of the officiants and signal loyalty to a group and antagonism against the other team wearing contrasting colors and symbols. Uniforms erase individuality in favor of group identity, although the emergence of numbers in the twenties and eventually names on the back in the sixties and seventies worked against this tendency.⁶

Numbers allowed for the possibility of further linkage with cultural codes whose origins are kabbalistic, though this is more explicitly so among Latin players.⁷ The only Latin player I know who wears number seven is Iván Rodríguez. I am sure that others have rejected that number—which became synonymous with Mickey Mantle in this country—because in Spanish el siete, the seven, means el culo, the asshole. In Cuba, in the numerological system derived from African and Chinese sources, it also means “shit.” No Cuban would wear number eight, because it means death in the same code, and only José Canseco, removed from his Cuban roots, wears thirty-three, which means tíaosa, or buzzard, and suggests death and bad luck. Again, no Cuban player would pick forty-seven, because it means “fairy,” or homosexual. Many—including Hall of Famer Martin Dihigo—do choose seventeen because it is the number of Afro-Christian deity Babalú Ayé, or Saint Lazarus in Catholic doctrine. I suspect that in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan there may be similar numerological codes that feed into the ritualistic nature of the baseball game.

There is one component of the ritualistic essence of the game that reveals like no other its conflict with nationalism and its appropriation by patriotic ideology: the consumption of mind-altering substances. The practice cleaves

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⁷ Baseball’s “numerology” has often been discussed, particularly all those threes (strikes, outs, bases) and multiples of three (nine players, twenty-seven outs). To my (literary) mind, it is as if the inventor of baseball had been a devoted reader of Dante’s Divine Comedy.
a space between ceremony and ritual, between the celebration of the game as inherently beneficial and the game itself as essentially amoral. Ritual often, if not always, involves the ingestion or absorption of drugs. There is a vestige of this in the wine the priest drinks in the Catholic mass. In other cultures, *chicha*, chocolate, tobacco, opium, and a whole array of drugs are used ritualistically. At a symbolic level, the partaking of some of these substances is a form of communion with the land, with the earth on which a culture lives and from which it feeds. In the Mediterranean, the grape gives us the wine, hence its use by Christianity. But taking mind-altering substances is also a means of reaching an irrational state propitious for communication with the sacred sphere; it is a way to cancel reason and abandon oneself to a form of ecstasy, a heightened state of pleasure that exacerbates the body’s ability to feel or perform by diminishing judgment. Drugs also provide access to the realm of the illogical and the forbidden— forbidden under normal circumstances, which needless to say the ritual is not. Try tagging, or touching somebody, particularly of the opposite sex, outside a game situation and you will most likely get into trouble.

Team sports, but most specially baseball, have enjoyed a very intimate relationship with mind-altering substances, particularly alcohol and tobacco. Teams, like the St. Louis Cardinals, have been owned by beer factories (Anheuser Busch), and there is currently a team in the Major Leagues quite brazenly called the Milwaukee Brewers. If you watched the World Series on television, you could not miss the Budweiser blimp circling the stadium. In Cuba, the principal baseball stadium from 1930 to 1946 was *La Tropical*, owned by the brewery of that name, and in Venezuela, one of the best-known professional teams was Cervecería Caracas. There are many other examples. In the forties and early fifties, Tampa had a team called the Smokers in the Florida-International League (see Figure 2), and tobacco advertisement and sponsorship of major-league baseball was common until very recently. Tobacco companies distributed baseball cards, and a cursory glance at American magazines from the thirties, forties, and fifties will show baseball players, like Joe DiMaggio, advertising cigarettes. Some may remember or have seen pictures of the Chesterfield add in the Polo Grounds center field, and the huge Marlboro billboard on the scoreboard of Shea Stadium, both strategically located for the television camera behind home plate. Chewing tobacco has been a sine qua non for baseball players; it has been their badge. Bulging cheeks and spitting have been a part of the game, it seems, from the
Figure 2
very beginning. Baseball is the only sport I know where the consumption of a mind-altering substance during the contest is allowed and common.

Alcoholism has been rampant among baseball players, clearly because the game is a form of physical gratification that leads to others, and also to alleviate the enormous pressures of performing in front of thousands of people and being constantly in the public eye. But also, it seems to me, because of the ritualistic nature of the game. A potential martyr, even a fake martyr, is expected to imbibe in order to withstand the pain, or to transform it into a perverse kind of titillation. Some players not only drink after games, but before and during games. Bert Haas, that idol of Habanistas in the Cuba of the 1950s and a major-leaguer, told me that he used to take a few shots of whiskey before a game to perform better. Hall of Famer Paul Waner is reputed to have admitted that he brought whiskey to the park, and to have said: “When I’m sober, the ball looks like an aspirin... when I’m drunk the ball looks like a fuzzy grapefruit.” Haas told me of quite a few players who drank before games in the Majors, and the story of Grover Cleveland Alexander is public knowledge. Confessions by Mickey Mantle and others in recent years have revealed that Haas, Waner, and Alexander were not exceptions. The use of amphetamines, or greenies, was rampant in the 1960s, as we learned in Jim Bouton’s Ball Four, also for the same purpose of enhancing performance and altering mood. Today, these drugs have given way to more powerful ones such as cocaine. In the Cuba of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, players were fond of marijuana, or “Mexican cigarettes,” as nonagenarian baseball entrepreneur Emilio de Armas told me. One of the leading pitchers, Manuel Garcia, was known as “Cocaina,” not because he used the drug, but because he anesthetized batters with his junk. But, as with their counterparts in the music industry, Black Cuban players were surely familiar with the stuff.

Recognition of the incompatibility of the cant that proclaims baseball as American as apple pie and the reality that it is truly as American as Budweiser beer has been slow, as have been efforts to disassociate the game from these practices, including chewing tobacco. The reluctance and sluggishness of the

process are not only due to financial pressures, but also to the essence of the game as ritual and inherent predisposition to the use of mind-altering substances, including, their consumption by the spectators at games. One of the forms of audience participation in team sports spectacles is to get intoxicated in order to raise to the players’ level of fervor, aggressiveness, and even hostility. In poorly controlled situations, the ritual may eventually lead a drunken crowd to surge onto the field and turn the ritualistic battle into a real one, something that has happened not a few times everywhere.

V

Games are transportable and not tied to culture, climate, or landscape. Los Angeles, Miami, and Tampa have professional ice hockey teams. In the beginning, ice hockey required the Canadian climate where the game originated, but technology has made it accessible to any climate. The same is true of baseball. Efforts to link baseball to the seasons are part of the American ideology of sports, but there is no necessary connection between the game and spring. I remember bantering with my dear and much-missed friend Bart Giamatti about his famous quote:

It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep the memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops. Today, October 2, a Sunday of rain and broken branches and leaf-clogged drains and slick streets, it stopped, and summer was gone.11

There are in those words elegant echoes of the opening lines of T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland (“April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land”) and even of the first lines of The Canterbury Tales (“When in

April the sweet showers fall/And pierce the drought of March to the root”).

Bart was not a professor of English for nothing. I chided him because for me, growing up in Cuba, baseball began in October, the season heated up around Christmas, and wound up around Carnival time at the end of February. My baseball calendar was the reverse of Bart's, but it was as deeply ingrained as his, though I have not taken the time to elaborate a seasonal mythology, perhaps because Cuban seasons are not that distinct. Besides, has anything memorable been said about October?

My point is that the important temporal element of the baseball game is the lapse between “play ball” and the last out, the sacred time of ritual, and that period is, by its very compactness, self-contained and transferable regardless of the latitude. Bart was a myth-maker of American baseball, but baseball is not inherently American. It is human and universal in its ludic essence, and now belongs to countries and cultures that are not American. The question then remains whether cultures can inflect games such as baseball with their own particularities, while the games themselves remain essentially the same. It seems clear that there are differences inflected by various cultures in important components of the ritual, such as the gestural code, and the ethos attached to winning and losing.

In concluding, I focus on losing because it is, to my mind, more important than winning in relation to the deep structure of the game that I have been talking about. This is so obviously because in life there are more defeats than victories. Religious beliefs and rituals arise to cope with the fact that we all grow old and die, that we lose dear relatives, that there are unforeseen personal and collective catastrophes, and that, when all is said and done, we cannot really understand the workings of fate. Life is also made up of conflicts and contests from which the majority of individuals do not emerge victorious. Losing is a fact of life, perhaps the harshest and most common fact of the human condition across cultures and throughout time. The sublimation of loss without recourse to real violence is what makes sports different from the war they represent, and representation or mimesis is perhaps the most human of qualities, as Aristotle maintained in the *Poetics*. To continue with Aristotle, as spectators in tragedy we are purged of profound emotions, such as fear, by witnessing unspeakable failure and catastrophe on stage, and this is also the case with sports.

But mourning loss differs from culture to culture, and this has often created friction in major-league teams with Latin American players. Latins
and Americans react differently to losing a ballgame. Americans cry, become sullen and silent, act as if totally dejected, and occasionally resort to violence, some of it self-inflicted, some of it directed against inanimate objects, such as water coolers. I think that this follows from a deeply Protestant sense of guilt and a feeling of the incommensurability of fate, of doom ordained by a stern God. It is Ahab succumbing to the white whale and cursing it as he plunges to his death. For a Latin player to act like the Americans would mean to concede too much to the victor, to show that he has not only defeated you, but that he has also broken you. So Latin players, in their own cultural context, not after they have been assimilated to American ways, act with defiance, even gaily, so as to diminish the magnitude of the loss. There may be violence directed against the other team, but sullenness, dejection, and a general air of defeat are to be avoided at all costs. Spanish honor is at stake. A loss of face would be worse than losing the game. I have read of incidents in which American managers and players have criticized or even berated Latin players because of their “improper” demeanor after a loss. To the Americans, it looks as if the Latins do not care, which is not the case at all. They care, but in a different way. I am anxious to find out how players deal with failure in such a ceremonial and honor-clad culture as Japan, what the code for mourning dictates.

Globalization may bring about the erasure of all those unique modulations that baseball has in each of the cultures in which it has taken root, and the major leagues, that is the American way, may prevail in those aspects of the game that are not inherent to the game itself. Since even the minor differences between the two major leagues are now being abolished, the homogenizing process may very well continue to spread throughout the world. The game will not change, but its context very well may. This, I believe, will be a loss and its achievement will be at the expense of local customs, some of which are worth preserving. But the game itself will not change, and the game itself will not be the agent of cultural homogenization. The agent for that will be the corporate or political vehicle for the game, which fortunately is subject to change and can be affected by our collective efforts.