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American Jews & America's Game: Voices of a Growing Legacy in Baseball by Larry Ruttman (review)

Rob Edelman

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in 1975, Ryan Kurosaki, a Sansei (third generation) from Hawaii, became the first Nikkei major leaguer, appearing briefly with St. Louis. Other Nikkei followed with more extended careers; Len Sakata played for eleven years with the Brewers, Orioles, Athletics, and Yankees.

Major League Baseball has since recruited outstanding stars from Japan—players like Hideo Nomo, Hideki Matsui, and Ichiro Suzuki. Nikkei players have garnered less attention, but Kurt Suzuki and Travis Ishikawa have enjoyed more than the proverbial cup of coffee. Don Wakamatsu, son of a Sansei father and an Irish American mother, even became manager of the Seattle Mariners in 2009. Perhaps to demonstrate the normality of today's Nikkei in baseball, Wakamatsu was fired in 2010 when the Mariners faltered.

Nikkei Baseball joins several related books reviewed in the Fall 2012 issue of *NINE: Transpacific Field of Dreams: How Baseball Linked the United States and Japan in Peace and War*; *Kenichi Zenimura: Japanese American Baseball Pioneer*; and *Banzai Babe Ruth: Baseball, Espionage, and Assassination During the 1934 Tour of Japan*. In this company, *Nikkei Baseball* makes its own distinct contribution, although it is not without some deficiencies. In his endeavor to cycle through every Nikkei community, era, team, and league, Regalado is often repetitious. *Nikkei Baseball* is not a rapid read and, for the most part, the crack of the bat and the drama of the game are absent. It is more for the student of sociology than the baseball fan, but it surely brings the evolution of Japanese American baseball under a bright light and a magnifying lens.



Larry Ruttman. *American Jews & America's Game: Voices of a Growing Legacy in Baseball*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. 510 pp. Cloth, \$34.95

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To describe *American Jews & America's Game* as a tome would be no overstatement. The five-hundred-plus-page volume offers a who/what/when/where/why of Jewish participation in the national pastime. Happily, author Larry Ruttman does not restrict his reportage to famous Jewish ballplayers. Yet another account of Hank Greenberg's Jewishness or Sandy Koufax's grandeur, while not unwelcome, would be a been-there-done-that endeavor. While Ruttman does offer profiles of those two Hall of Famers, he also relates the stories of other Jewish major leaguers, from such high-profile players as

Al Rosen, Ken Holtzman, and Kevin Youkilis, to Steve Hertz, he of no hits in four big-league at bats, who eventually became a successful high school and college coach.

Ruttman adds women ballplayers to the mix, via Thelma “Tiby” Eisen and Anita Foss of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). Some of his other subjects need no introduction: Marvin Miller, Bud Selig, Theo Epstein, Roger Kahn, Murray Chass, Donald Fehr, Jerry Reinsdorf, and Andrew Zimbalist. Congressman Barney Frank recalls that, back in the 1950s, “I was a Yankee fan, and it pained me that there were no Jewish Yankees” (57). Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz notes, of his Brooklyn childhood, “We wore yarmulkes in the house, but on the street it was baseball caps, it was baseball gloves” (80), and “Of course, I had no doubt that I would eventually replace Pee Wee Reese as the shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers” (81). Some are biologically linked: baseball scribe Ross Newhan and his big-leaguer son David, whose different approaches to religious practice make for a fascinating read. Additionally, Ruttman charts the baseball experiences of a rainbow of Americans whose names may not be recognizable. They include Sol Gittleman and Jeffrey Gurock, university professors; Howard Goldstein, a lawyer and Jewish baseball memorabilia collector; Michael Paley, a rabbi and scholar; Leon Feingold, Israel Baseball League player of the year; Marvin Goldklang, a minor-league team owner and minority owner of the New York Yankees; and Darren Harrison-Panis, a fledgling baseball executive and team owner.

Ruttman reports on his subjects’ backgrounds and the manner in which their Jewishness has affected their lives and careers. In this regard, *American Jews & America’s Game* is as much about American Jewish identity and the anti-Semitism that pervaded the country in decades past as it is about Jews and baseball, and this adds depth and dimension to each chapter. With the exception of Greenberg, who passed away in 1986, Ruttman interviews all his subjects; Greenberg’s story is told via conversations with those who are connected to him, starting with son Steve, daughter Alva, and Ralph Kiner. Meanwhile, Ruttman—in what he describes as “one of the most memorable conversations of my life” (129)—has a revealing chat with a reluctant-to-be-interviewed Koufax and fills out his portrait by conversing with Norm Sherry, the Dodgers catcher credited with helping to transform Koufax from prospect to ace.

Prior to reading a chapter on an individual with whom I was familiar, I asked myself: What will I learn about this person that I do not know? More often than not, Ruttman offers observations that transcend the obvious. For example, Ron Blomberg has his asterisk in baseball lore as the first-ever designated hitter. Predictably, he grew up idolizing Mickey Mantle. But he also is a product of the American South, and Blomberg describes the experience of

being not only a “southern Jew” but a Jewish athlete coming of age in a culture that was rife with anti-Semitism (243). On a lighter note, Elliott Maddox, an African American who converted to Judaism while in his mid-twenties, talks of his budding appreciation for Jewish-style cooking—and rugelach (a Jewish pastry) in particular. He also discusses how he came to be drawn to Judaism as well as his multifaceted relationships with Marvin Miller and Ted Williams, “two legendary but polar-opposite baseball icons” (278).

I was particularly drawn to the chapter titled “Stuart Sternberg: From Canarsie to Tampa Bay by Way of Wall Street” (439–48) for a personal reason: I know the Canarsie section of Brooklyn all too well, having spent part of my childhood hanging out there. For sure, the saga of Sternberg and his rise from working-class Brooklyn boy to Tampa Bay Devil Rays owner is a classic American success story. However, prior to reading this chapter, I figured that it would be a litmus test for the general veracity of *American Jews & America’s Game*. For openers, Ruttman gets it right when he labels Canarsie a “backwater” (440) and quotes Sternberg describing Manhattan as “the great golden city, like Oz” (441). But the point here is baseball. So it is a pleasure to read about Sternberg’s feeling for the sport—“There is no such thing as a boring game,” he insists (447)—and, in particular, his youthful fascination with Sandy Koufax, to the point where he even named his son Sanford.

Perhaps Ruttman is overly enthusiastic in his assessments of many of his subjects. The AAGPBL’s Eisen and Foss are not just “courageous, liberated, and talented” but also “feisty, charming, and humorous” (36). Al Rosen is “feisty, fearless, and supremely talented”; his “character, intelligence, and unassuming courage . . . mark him as a man among men” (68). Donald Fehr is “earnest, thoughtful, skeptical, and upright” (282). Andrew Zimbalist is “gracious and cerebrally lithe” (353). Leon Feingold is “extraordinarily handsome, personable, and charismatic” (356) and also “accomplished, athletic, fascinating, and articulate” (362). And so on.

When Ruttman observes that Darren Harrison-Panis is “typically Jewish in his sense of ambition and pride” (461), he is stumbling into stereotype. And there is the occasional misstatement: he describes Betty Comden, who with Adolph Green penned screenplays and books and lyrics for Broadway and screen musicals, as a “playwright” (297); and he notes that Tom Hanks was cast as Jimmie Foxx in *A League of Their Own* (307), when Hanks in fact played a fictional character, Jimmy Dugan, who reportedly is loosely based on Foxx. But despite these imperfections, *American Jews & America’s Game* is a generally illuminating and enjoyable read.

