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‘A Season in the Sun’ Review: Those Weren’t the Days

During Mickey Mantle’s Triple Crown season, the FBI was investigating an attempt to extort the slugger for a supposed affair.

Mantle batting in 1956, the year that he won the first of his three MVP awards.
PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

By Edward Kosner
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Real baseball fans—even some younger ones—know that Mickey Mantle was a Potemkin village of a superstar. Greedy club owners and complaisant sportswriters contrived a persona for him as a mash-up of Li’l Abner and Paul Bunyan, a devoted family man and humble Hall of Famer. But, as the authors of a new biography concede, the great Yankee slugger was actually a “moody, angry, hard-drinking, philandering, flawed man.” His magnificent body was a fragile facade as well. He blew out a knee in his rookie season and played 17 more seasons with an assortment of injuries worthy of an orthopedic textbook. The fans loved him anyway—and still do.

There is already a bulging shelf of books about Mantle, including more than a half-dozen ghosted autobiographies, memoirs and reminiscences. Now two academics—Randy Roberts, a Purdue historian, and Johnny Smith, a professor of “sports, society, and technology” at Georgia Tech—have produced “A Season in the Sun,” an ambitious but pretentious book that tries to cast Mickey in a new light by focusing on the 1956 season. That’s the year Mantle won the Triple Crown with the most home runs, the most runs batted in and the highest batting average in either major league.

A SEASON IN THE SUN
By Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith
Basic, 276 pages, $28

“In 1956,” the authors write, “Mantle moved to the center of America’s imagination because he dramatized the daily struggle for individual achievement. Etching his name into the record books, he emerged as a symbol of American progress. His life bridged two worlds: the city’s modern commercialized culture and the folklore of baseball’s bucolic origins, a romantic ideal where country boys like Mickey played the game in unkempt fields. His success story promoted the myths around baseball’s meritocratic values and shaped his heroic status. Mantle’s hardscrabble origins reminded the country that anything seemed possible through baseball.”

Now, that’s a heavy burden to bear even on Mickey’s broad back, thickened by breaking rocks as a boy at the lead mine outside Commerce, Okla., where his father toiled until the work basically killed him at 40.

To transform Mantle into a resonant socio-political-psychological symbol of mid-20th-century America, the professors begin by sketching out his early years in Commerce and his streak through the Yankee farm system until his major-league debut in 1951 at just 19. Mickey awed the scouts and coaches at bat and in the field. It was a given that he would soon replace Joe DiMaggio in center field and in the heart of the batting order. But Mantle was a taciturn bumpkin. Joltin’ Joe praised him to reporters but dismissed him to intimates as a “rockhead.”

After a few false starts, Mantle became a regular toward the end of the season—three months before his 20th birthday—and played right field in the World Series against the Giants. In the second game, trying to avoid DiMaggio chasing a ball into the right-center-field gap, he caught his spikes on the cover of a drain and tore up his right knee. Today surgeons could have rebuilt it. There was no such hope in Mickey’s day—and he was never really right again. Over the next four seasons, he played well but never quite redeemed his extravagant promise. Then came 1956.

The authors contend that Mantle found “joy” that Triple Crown season. This newfound delight, they argue, should recast the conventional wisdom that Mickey was a boorish sorehead who never enjoyed his accomplishments or the fame and comparative riches they brought him. They try to make their case in a detailed reconstruction of Mantle’s ’56 season but wind up reinforcing the standard view of Mickey.

On opening day, he hit two titanic home runs over the center-field wall and out of Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., totaling 1,000 feet or more on the fly. For days afterward, writers swarmed his locker to talk about his feat and how he compared with other stupendous sluggers. “I’m no Ruth, Gehrig, Foxx, Williams or whoever they say,” Mantle muttered. The whole business was “right silly.” And his play didn’t galvanize Yankee fans, who had booed him unmercifully in his first seasons. In May, he homered and threw a runner out at home from center field in a 9-2 victory over the Tigers at Yankee Stadium. There were only 6,771 fans in the stands and over 60,000 empty seats.

As he had nearly from the start, Mantle caroused after games at home and on the road with bad-boy Billy Martin, the runty but pugnacious second baseman, and Hank Bauer, the pug-nosed, ex-Marine outfielder. Married to his hometown sweetheart, Mantle had a long-running romance with Holly Brooke, a beautiful redhead seven years older than the 24-year-old slugger, and many one-nighters with other women who pursued him, or at least didn’t resist his pursuit. In the middle of the season, the Yankee front office learned that the FBI was investigating an extortion plot involving a supposed liaison with a married woman. From Billy Martin, Mantle came to appreciate “greenies,” amphetamines to jolt the hungover system at game time. Martin and Mantle, the authors write, would race “around the locker room . . . playing practical jokes on their teammates, and behaving like circus clowns.”

Still, Mantle’s numbers piled up. At midseason, he was running comfortably ahead of Babe Ruth’s pace from 1927, when he hit 60 home runs, and was also leading both leagues in batting average and runs batted in. Then he fell into a slump as epic as his slugging. Ruth’s record seemed more unobtainable with each strikeout and pop-up. Ted Williams of the Red Sox, the best hitter in baseball, was closing in on Mantle’s batting average, and the Tigers’ young sensation Al Kaline threatened his lead in runs batted in. Mickey might wind up second in two of the Triple Crown categories.

An instinctive hitter, Mantle seemed helpless to help himself. Then, in mid-September, as suddenly as it had set in, the slump lifted. Over the last weeks of the season, Mantle hammered the ball as he had at the start. He never eclipsed Ruth, but he led baseball with 52 home runs, a .353 batting average and 130 runs batted in. In those pre-internet days, he had to wait until late on the last day of the season to learn whether he had clinched the triple crown. “For the first time in what seemed like months, Mantle smiled,” the authors write, “relaxed, satisfied, fulfilled.” The World Series against the Dodgers was almost an afterthought, but Mantle provided another great moment in sports in the fifth inning of game five when he sprinted toward the left-center-field wall to snare Gil Hodges’s drive and save Don Larsen’s perfect game.

Mantle had other great seasons after ’56, but there were many low points. He was on hand with Bauer, Martin, Whitey Ford and others at the notorious Copacabana nightclub brawl the next season. Confidential magazine, the TMZ of its time, exposed his long affair with Holly Brooke. In 1961, he wound up going to “Dr. Feelgood,” Max Jacobson, for his cocaine-laced ministrations. A decade later, Yankee pitcher Jim Bouton portrayed Mantle as a roistering boor in his memoir “Ball Four.” By the time he died at 63 in 1995, Mantle was a cirrhosis- and cancer-ridden husk.

“A Season in the Sun” is annoyingly repetitious and full of overwritten digressions about Ruth (“the Great Gatsby of baseball”), Williams and Casey Stengel. Many of the same sportswriters who created the mythic Mantle are quoted over and over as authoritative witnesses to aspects of his career. Here and there, traces of a joyful Mantle do appear. “I wish everybody in America could have that feeling just once,” he muses about rounding the bases to cheers after a home run. But these are overwhelmed by professorial pontificating about the significance of it all. “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” as Freud didn’t say. Sometimes a baseball star is just a baseball star. That should be enough.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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