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The Devil at Shortstop

Leo the Lip was a brawler, a womanizer, a vicious prankster, an umpire baiter, a compulsive gambler—and a Hall of Famer. Edward Kosner reviews “Leo Durocher: Baseball’s Prodigal Son” by Paul Dickson.

By Edward Kosner
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Leo Durocher lives on in baseball lore and Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations for having proclaimed, “Nice guys finish last.” In fact, Durocher’s 51-year career as a player and manager was an emphatic refutation of his famous words. He was the antithesis of a nice guy—a combative, self-destructive monster of ego—and he finished last once anyway.

He thrived in a lily-white baseball world as vanished as the Sportsman, Checker cabs and the Andrews Sisters—long train rides for five-game series in Sportsman’s Park in St. Louis, baggy flannel uniforms, bean balls and spitters and clubhouses teeming with mobbed-up gamblers. But Durocher was a legend in his own time as well as in his own mind.

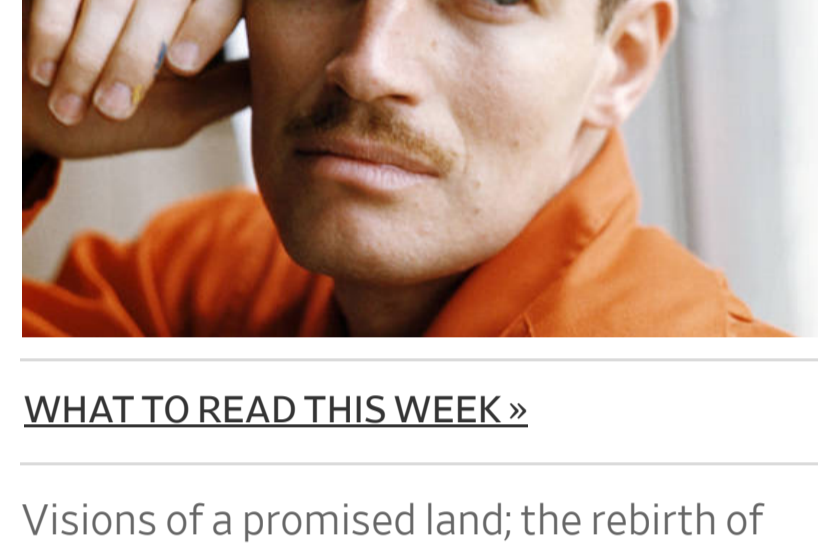
He was a Zelig of baseball, uncannily present at many of the game’s classic moments. A compact shortstop with quick reflexes and a quicker mind and mouth, he won the 1928 World Series with Babe Ruth’s Murderers’ Row Yankees and endured obloquy for stealing the Babe’s watch; he was the raucous captain of the 1930s St. Louis Cardinals’ “Gashouse Gang”; at Ebbets Field in 1939, he played in the first baseball game ever televised.

LEO DUROCHER

By Paul Dickson
Bloomsbury, 357 pages, \$28



Leo Durocher as manager of the Dodgers, 1942. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



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With Branch Rickey, he broke the major leagues’ color bar for Jackie Robinson with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. He was the manager of the 1951 New York Giants when Bobby Thomson hit the “shot heard round the world” against Ralph Branca to win the National League pennant against his old team, and he was the skipper in the first game of the 1954 World Series against the Cleveland Indians when Willie Mays made his back-turned catch off Vic Wertz 450 feet from the plate at the Polo Grounds. His career finally began to unravel in 1969 when his Chicago Cubs, ahead by nine games in mid-August, epically choked in the stretch and lost their bid for the pennant to the “Miracle” Mets.

Stars like Babe Ruth had appeared in occasional movies, but Durocher, always dapper and reeking of cologne, had a decadeslong parallel life in show business. He married a gorgeous movie star, Laraine Day, and palled around with Frank Sinatra, George Raft and Danny Kaye. In wartime, he flew tens of thousands of miles on tours entertaining the troops. He turned up regularly on the Jack Benny and Fred Allen radio shows, then segued into television with guest shots with Mr. Ed, the talking horse, and the Munsters.

A brawler, vicious bench jockey, umpire baiter and compulsive gambler, Durocher was such a regular in baseball’s hall of infamy that he wasn’t named to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown until 1994, three years after he died.

Leo the Lip published two autobiographies and has been the subject of other books and countless magazine pieces. Now he’s getting the kind of biographical treatment reserved for movie idols and successful pols. Strenuously researched and studded with footnotes, Paul Dickson’s “Leo Durocher: Baseball’s Prodigal Son” is an unflinching portrait of a brilliant bastard. Mr. Dickson gives the devil his due and leaves no doubt why so many people could

respect Durocher’s baseball genius and still hate his guts. For younger baseball fans unacquainted with Durocher, think Billy Martin on steroids.

Like Martin—who as a player was banished to Kansas City by one Yankee owner and fired as a manager five times by another—Durocher was a skinny, working-class sandlot kid who bit and scratched his way to the major leagues. He grew up in Springfield, Mass., the child of French-Canadian immigrants. (The name was often pronounced “Doo-roo-shay” but got Anglicized into Rocky.)

He was, by all accounts, a brilliant fielder, routinely turning plays that dazzled fans and other players. At bat, he was a banjo hitter. Babe Ruth called him “The All-American Out” and said that he would hit .400 as a switch-hitter—.200 as a lefty, .200 as a righty. Still, Durocher could come through in the clutch, winning one key game by throwing his bat at a pitch and hitting a blooper into short right field. Teammates loved him, and opposing teams despised him for his relentless, profane bench-jockeying. He played 17 seasons, toward the end as a player-manager, and wound up hitting .247 with a grand total of 24 home runs. The Babe knew what he was talking about.

It was as a manager that Durocher’s talents and demons combined into a tragic, combustible brew. Over the years, he played the bad boy only a father could love for a succession of general managers and owners, among them Rickey and Buzzie Bavasi of the Dodgers, Horace Stoneham of the Giants and Phil Wrigley of the Cubs, all of whom fired and rehired him so many times that nobody could keep score. Unreliable, disrespectful, insubordinate, a shameless liar, hated by the umpires he cursed and kicked dirt on, Durocher survived because he could fire up a mediocre team and draw fans to the ballpark with his antics. He managed the Dodgers, Giants, Cubs and Astros over 24 seasons, winning three pennants and one World Series and, yes, finishing last in 1966 with the Cubs. His 2,008 victories place him 10th on the all-time list.

Many of his own players hated him, too. His 1943 Dodger team mutinied on him. His Cubs clubhouse was a war zone. He called one star pitcher, Fergie Jenkins, “a quitter” and another, Ken Holtzman, “a kike” and “a gutless Jew.” He once provoked fan favorite Ron Santo into trying choke the life out of him and relentlessly demeaned “Mr. Cub,” Ernie Banks.

He had lobbied for Jackie Robinson to be promoted to the Dodgers but feuded with him as a player and long afterward. But he was gentle with Willie Mays, who joined the Giants as a 20-year-old in 1951 and went 1-for-26 (.038) in his first weeks. Stoneham fired the Lip at the end of the 1955 season. During the last game of the year, Mr. Dickson writes, Durocher pulled Mays into the tunnel behind the dugout. “He placed both hands on his shoulders and said: ‘I want to tell you something. You know I love you, so I’m prejudiced. But you’re the best ballplayer I ever saw. . . . Having you on my team made everything worthwhile.’” Mays wept.

Durocher managed his teams from the third-base coaching box to be closer to the action. He was celebrated for once saying that if he were playing third base and his mother rounded the bag, he’d trip her to keep her from scoring. It also put him closer to his antagonists in blue. The predictable result was that Durocher’s teams came up on the wrong side of close calls. When he wasn’t screaming “Dummy, dummy, dummy” and much, much worse at the veteran ump Jocko Conlan, he was alienating the newspaper writers and broadcasters who covered his clubs, even legends like Chicago’s Jack Brickhouse. Managing the Dodgers, he once banned 27 of the 30 writers on the beat.

So when Durocher got in trouble—and he was always in trouble—he had few allies. Gambling was not his vice. Unlike Pete Rose, who later admitted to having bet on baseball as a manager but hit on his own Reds, Durocher claimed never to have bet on baseball, but he played poker for high stakes, cashed in on tips on fixed horse races, and liked to hit Las Vegas with his buddy Sinatra. He had a nodding acquaintance with mobsters like Bugsy Siegel and Joe Adonis. All of this came to the attention of A.B. (Happy) Chandler, the Kentucky pol who succeeded the revered Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis as baseball commissioner in 1945. Chandler fielded complaints about Durocher’s familiarity with gamblers and mobsters, including one from Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy, who happened to be a friend of the commissioner’s. Leo the Lip insisted on his innocence—but Chandler suspended him for the 1947 season, and Durocher carried the stain for the rest of his life.

His romantic life was equally messy. Married four times, he was sued for alienation of affection by a jealous husband. Toward the end, he had a 26-year-old blond dancer for a girlfriend and, Mr. Dickson reports, was treated to a penile implant by Sinatra.

All of this contributed to the legend that Mr. Dickson has so adroitly researched, annotated and debunked. The authenticated Durocher turns out to be even more fascinating—and impressive, in a way—than the mythical one.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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