



‘The Roger Kahn Reader’ Review: The Joys of Summer

The icons of midcentury sports: Stan Musial, Early Wynn, Mickey Mantle, Jackie Robinson.



Bob Gibson pitching for the St. Louis Cardinals against the Boston Red Sox in the 1967 World Series. PHOTO: NEIL LEIFER/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED VIA GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*
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‘Old School’ is one of the more irritating pet expressions in today’s vocabulary. Garroting on “The Sopranos” is old school. So is hitting behind the runner in baseball and the fastidious serial Oxford comma. When appropriately applied, however, it can be a term of honor: Roger Kahn, the great sportswriter, is old school—and proud of it. Indeed, the Roger Kahn Old School of Sports Journalism should be established in his name.

Mr. Kahn has written 20 books, including two novels. But he is best known for the title of one of them: “The Boys of Summer,” his elegiac 1972 account of a father and son and the Brooklyn Dodgers of Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Carl Furillo, Duke Snider, Gil Hodges and the rest. He is 90 now, but based on the snap of his preface to “The Roger Kahn Reader,” an anthology of magazine and newspaper pieces from his long career, he’s lost nothing off his fastball. “While the internet obviously uses words,” he writes, “it is not really about writing. Flash, cash, dash, and gash summarize the internet, which has popularized such terms as ‘upskirt’ and ‘nip-slip.’”

Roger Kahn is all about words and a sensibility that respects athletes, especially baseball players, for their sublime skills, but especially for their love and dedication to their exacting sport. He is remorseless about racism, cruelty and hypocrisy, but above all appreciative of talent and integrity.

He started by covering the Dodgers in old Ebbets Field in the mid-1950s and hasn’t stopped. Over the years, he’s written for Sport magazine and Sports Illustrated, Newsweek, Esquire, the Saturday Evening Post, the New York Herald Tribune, the New York Times and others. The pieces in this collection cover the wide range of his interests and sympathies, especially Jackie Robinson and some of the black ballplayers who followed him to the majors—Joe Black, Don Newcombe and Vic Power, the Gold Glove first baseman traded away by the Yankees because, he said, he was too fond of the company of white women.

In these pages, you’ll meet some of the icons of ’50s, ’60s and ’70s baseball—among them, Hall of Famers Stan Musial, Early Wynn, Mickey Mantle and Bob Gibson—and you’ll hear them talk as never before. “I love the competition,” says Gibson, the St. Louis Cardinals ace. “Me with the ball. The hitter with the bat. I love that. And all the rest is horses—t. Except I like the money.” Stan the Man guilelessly describes why he can hit any pitcher: “I pick up the ball right away,” Musial tells Mr. Kahn. “I don’t guess. I know.” The author explains: “He had memorized the speed at which every pitcher in the league threw the fastball, the curve, the slider. He picked up the speed of the ball in the first 30 feet of its flight, after which he knew how the ball would move as it crossed home plate.”

He goes to South Bend, Ind., for Esquire in 1974 to examine why football resonates so strongly at Notre Dame, shrine to Knute Rockne and the Gipper. Instead of interviewing Ara Parseghian, the famed football coach, he talks to an associate professor of English named Les Martin. As football Saturday approaches, Martin tells him, he has some fun with his rah-rah students: “I suggest that football is a prolongation of a public rite, a sort of fertility rite really. The opposing team’s end zone is the sacred grove where, in this rite, one attempts to bury the head of the god.”

And he calls on Don King, the boxing promoter and ex-con, in his Rockefeller Center aerie the next year. Gazing out at the Hudson River and the harbor, the impresario with the weird upswep do holds forth fluently and enthusiastically on Voltaire, Machiavelli, Shakespeare and Frantz Fanon. “I’m a PhD from the ghetto,” he tells his visitor. “I read everything in the prison library. I took extension courses. Still, lots of people figure I’m just a n—.”

He’s also adept at what George Plimpton, the author of “Paper Lion” and other books, called “participatory journalism.” He plays a set against Roy Emerson, the retired Australian champ, winning exactly two points and giving the weekend hacker a visceral feel of what it’s like to stand across the net from a tennis god.

Elsewhere Mr. Kahn does: “Sports tells anyone who watches intelligently about the times in which we live: about managed news and corporate politics, about race and terror, and what the process of aging does to strong men.” That sentence could have been written last week, but it was actually published in 1970—46 years before Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, knelt in protest during the “Star-Spangled Banner,” convulsed the sport and gave Donald Trump a new rallying cry.

Roger Kahn is a liberal, but he’s no prude or bleeding heart. He has no real problem with athletes who drink and carouse, and he admires the relentless aggression of pitchers like Early Wynn and Bob Gibson, who made the brushback pitch a precision weapon. He’s equally impressed with the courage of batters who master their fear of deadly projectiles aimed at their skulls and of hockey goalies facing maiming pucks. He has no use for the scrappy manager Billy Martin’s manipulation of his players or for Martin’s role model, the brassy, egocentric Leo “the Lip” Durocher. He spends time with the gimpy retired Mickey Mantle and lets him complain about his ex-teammate Jim Bouton, who tatted on Mickey’s boorish lasciviousness in his best seller, “Ball Four.”

Indeed, Mr. Kahn can be an acid critic of other sportswriters. He gives pride of place in his pantheon to Red Smith, the longtime columnist for the Herald Tribune and later the Times. And he reveres John Lardner, the son of the illustrious Ring, who wrote a midcentury sports column for Newsweek. But he disdains the “chipmunk” school perfected by Jim Bouton’s ghost writer Leonard Shecter and others who focused on the peccadilloes of sports figures rather than their performance and profoundly shaped today’s sportswriting.

Spending a few hours with “The Roger Kahn Reader” is like a time-machine voyage back to a smart world of authentic heroes, colorful but not obnoxious characters, just causes, smart talk and love of the games. Roger Kahn helped create that world and reanimates it here for our pleasure.

—*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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