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# Fantasy Baseball

Two books about classic World Series games, one for Red Sox fans and one for followers of the Yankees.

BY HARVEY ARATON

**T**HERE is no more intense and important rivalry in sports than the one between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox. Just ask the players, present and former; the fans of each team, so eager to characterize themselves as more rabid than the other ball club's, as well as more scornful; and the respective news media congregations, given to attaching near-October gravity to the season's first three-game series in April at Yankee Stadium or Fenway Park.

In the minds of Yankee folks and fans,

#### GAME SIX

Cincinnati, Boston, and the 1975 World Series: The Triumph of America's Pastime.

By Mark Frost.

Illustrated. 406 pp. Hyperion. \$26.99.

#### PERFECT

Don Larsen's Miraculous World Series Game and the Men Who Made It Happen.

By Lew Paper.

Illustrated. 421 pp.

New American Library. \$24.95.

competitive debate can always be scuttled by simply recounting the team's actual World Series successes, albeit on hold at 26 championships since the last one in 2000. But even before the Red Sox exorcised 86 years of curses and assorted catastrophes four years later, by winning the first of two Series this decade, New Englanders could cling to the belief that Boston's failures were so flamboyantly memorable that losing was beside the point. Contrary to what fans of the Yankees' winning machine might think, searing pain only heightened the passion and meaning of it all.

Mark Frost's "Game Six," the gripping story of the penultimate game of the 1975 World Series, does nothing to dispel the existential wonderfulness of Red Sox Nation, in addition to paying deserved homage to the winner of that Series, Cincinnati's Big Red Machine. As it happens, Frost's book soars compared with "Perfect," Lew Paper's densely researched re-creation of Don Larsen's unmatched postseason pitching feat: 27 up, 27 down in the fifth game of the 1956 World Series, won by the Yankees over the Brooklyn Dodgers.

An accomplished author ("The Match") and television writer ("Twin Peaks"), Frost also had more live material — in the amount of game action and in the number of participants still around to elaborate on it — than Paper did. But no matter how historic the innings or how earnest the reporting, basing nearly an entire book on one game demands a deft storyteller's touch, the ability to capture individuals

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Yogi Berra and Don Larsen, after Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series.

and explore issues while not straying too far from the field.

Frost achieves this stylistically and — given the partial subtitle, "The Triumph of America's Pastime" — convincingly. For the sake of the baseball purist, he never cheats on the strategizing during Game 6 or the dramatic moments for which it is best remembered: a game-tying three-run homer for the Sox in the bottom of the eighth by a flawed lefty slugger named Bernie Carbo and the immortalized blow off the left-field foul pole in the bottom of the 12th by the future Hall of Fame catcher Carlton Fisk, just after 12:30 in the morning.

While celebrating what he effectively argues was the greatest World Series ever played, Frost rarely surrenders to the standard temptation to rhapsodize about simpler times — relative to the performance-enhancement era the sport continues to grapple with. He reminds us that in 1903, when the term "World Series" was unofficially coined, there were suspicions of game fixing, and that information provided to the American League president — the aptly named Ban Johnson — was suppressed for 20 years.

Frost has a palpable fondness and respect for many of Game 6's principals and

is occasionally prone to overstatement: He claims that Carl Yastrzemski of the Red Sox "had more sheer guts and gritty work ethic than any man who'd ever played the game." That assertion wouldn't make it without a fight past the quintessential bulldog, Pete Rose, who was in the opposing lineup that night.

About a stunning catch made by Dwight Evans of the Red Sox on a ball hit to right field by Joe Morgan in the 11th inning, Frost raves, "No man had before or ever since made a better one at a more important moment." But Paper's book covers two spectacular World Series outfield catches — one by Willie Mays of the New York Giants in 1954 and, especially, another by Sandy Amoros of the Dodgers in Game 7 of the 1955 Series against the Yankees — that actually led to ultimate triumph. Again, the Red Sox won the epic battle but lost the war.

Frost leans heavily on Luis Tiant, the right-handed Cuban pitcher and the Red Sox starter in Game 6, and the Reds' charming and congenitally fretful manager, Sparky Anderson. These accomplished and eminently likable men give the book a narrative heart that Paper's lacks and help Frost build his case that the 1975 World Series was not only the all-

time best but one that was uniquely timed. In 1975, baseball's financial structure was about to undergo a radical transformation with the impending arrival of free agency, which would forever change the stakes for small-market teams like the Reds (as well as the Red Sox, given the imminent rise of the Yankees and their free-spending owner, George Steinbrenner). With the Super Bowl only eight years old — but growing up fast — the World Series could still claim to be the country's most galvanizing television event.

On screens across America, baseball was being carried to new competitive heights by African-American and Latino stars, firmly established if not equally compensated. Only nine years removed from Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color line in 1947 (eight and 12 years, respectively, before the Yankees and the Red Sox finally caved), Paper's story offers much more about the barrier crashers in Brooklyn and beyond, and about those who resisted them. However much is culled from previously written material, "Perfect" is rich in biographical data, devoting a chapter, or half-inning, to each of the players in the game.

This format, though, mostly succeeds in obscuring Larsen, who leads off the book but whose presence is soon after reduced to scant details at the end of chapters. Paper, who has written books about John F. Kennedy and William Paley, treats all the game's participants as equal contributors to the grand theater. But to paraphrase Yogi Berra, Larsen was the man who made this book necessary. Forever linked as battery mates on that crisp afternoon at Yankee Stadium, Larsen and Berra — both still alive — should have been Paper's dominant characters and voices.

Instead, Larsen's one-day ascension to greatness in an otherwise mediocre career is lost in the book's democratic rigidity. The repetition of careers-in-review begins to have an anesthetizing effect, reading like a series of Wikipedia pages. One is left no choice but to peek ahead from time to time, to find out how much longer until Larsen throws his next pitch. Once we get back to the action, the side is inevitably retired, much too quickly and without enough analysis, as the next batter steps into the box to face the biographer.

In "Game Six," Frost never takes his eye off the ballgame, embellishing it with illuminating insider details. That famous TV shot of Fisk, waving his game-winning home run fair as he skipped sideways down the first-base line? The network cameraman, stationed inside the Green Monster in left field, intended to follow the path of the towering fly, but instead "stood frozen in terror at his post, staring down at the biggest rat he'd ever seen in his life ... that had just crawled across his foot."

As Red Sox Nation came to realize across the decades, imperfection has its rewards. □