

H-Net Reviews

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Kevin Kerrane. *Dollar Sign on the Muscle: The World of Baseball Scouting*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. 360 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-7789-2.

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Books and magazines with the words “baseball” and “scout” in their titles fall into several well established categories. First come the myriad statistical digests of baseball flesh, books like STATS Inc.’s annual *Scouting Notebook* and *Minor League Scouting Notebook*, fodder for fantasy leaguers everywhere. Then, far less populous but still remarkable, appear the real-life tales of scouts in the bushes—books like Jim Russo’s *Superscout* and Mark Winegardner’s *Prophets of the Sandlots: Journeys with a Major League Scout*. Fitting in an even tighter niche are the inside-dope books professional wannabes, books like Al Goldis and Rick Wollf’s *How to Make the Pro Scouts Notice You*. And then there is Kevin Kerrane’s *Dollar Sign on the Muscle*, a rich and lively book on major league scouting that transcends the narrower publishing categories.

First published in 1984 by Beaufort book and reprinted in 1989 by Simon & Schuster, *Dollar Sign on the Muscle* makes its third appearance in 1999 with the University of Nebraska’s Bison Books. The author has added about twenty-five new pages of “Afterword” in the Bison edition, commenting on recent changes in scouting, the passing of great scouts, and the careers of players Kerrane first saw on amateur diamonds in the early 1980’s. The University of Nebraska undoubtedly choose to publish the new edition not because of any startling additions in the afterword, but because Kerrane’s *Dollar Sign* remains a minor classic of baseball writing, a literate, funny, and absorbing book on the profession and lore of scouting.

Dollar Sign is the only book I know that provides a historical overview of scouting, from the early days of the bird dogs, to Branch Rickey’s development of ivory-hunting scouts, to the postwar era of scouts as salesmen, and to the modern era of the Major League Scouting Bureau, radar guns, cross-checkers, and international scouts. It is also the only book I know that contains so many great tales and extended quotations of dozens of major league scouts. While Kerrane began his research

for the book with the Philadelphia Phillies, and many portions of the book are heavily indebted to that organization, he ventured far in interviewing some of baseball’s legendary scouts.

The legends include Hugh Alexander, Howie Haak, Jim McLaughlin, Birdie Tebbetts, Spud Chandler, Ellis Clary, Leon Hamilton, Jocko Collins, Ed Katalinas, and many more. The dean of them all, Uncle Hughie Alexander, began scouting in 1938 (yes, 1938, as the youngest scout in major-league history) and is still working more than sixty years later—a baseball record for endurance as daunting as Ripken’s consecutive-games streak. Interviewing Alexander, for example, Kerrane was able to reflect back to the early days of bird dog and ivory-hunting scouts, to men like Cy Slapnicka, the deft Indians scout of the 1920’s who became notorious for playing fast and loose with contracts. Interviewing the tobacco-spitting “Big Daddy” Howie Haak, to take another example, Kerrane delved in the postwar period of “salesmanship” scouting, telling the tale of Haak’s competition with Joe Devine to sign Gino Cimoli in 1948. And almost all of the old-time scouts had a story, usually wry and acerbic, about Branch Rickey.

For every great scout Kerrane interviewed, he recorded glove-fulls of verbatim reminiscences. Reading these passages, one enters into the keen minds, the gritty language, and the professional formation of the scouts. A terrific interviewer, Kerrane indulged the scouts’ nostalgia enough to hear great tales of the past—how Haak signed Lino Donoso in a Mexican warehouse in 1953, or how Spud Chandler, after winning an MVP Award in 1943, couldn’t get a raise from the Yankees’ George Weiss. Yet, also an acute student of the game, Kerrane examined scouting models, like McLaughlin’s diagram of “The Whole Ball Player,” or scouting cliches, like “the good face,” with rapt attention. Again and again Kerrane asked what use an apparently subjective category like “the good face” could be in the objective ranking of players’ baseball potential, and he detailed the surprising

answers of Gordon Goldsberry, Al Campanis, and others.

Although *Dollar Sign* has aged well, like a fifteen-year veteran, some parts of the book readily show its age. One of the most obvious anachronisms is the title itself, based on the old scouting practice of estimating possible bonus prices for prospects. The old Phillies scouting manual required scouts to put a “dollar sign on the muscle,” and player evaluation forms included a blank for the dollars recommendation. Scouts from the 1950’s to the 1980’s jotted notes like “I like him \$30 K” or “a \$30-K prospect” in their reports. Now in the era of multimillion-dollar bonuses, agents like Scott Boras are writing down the dollar figures, and the signability of draft choices has become a vexing problem for lower-budget teams. Scouts no longer put a “dollar sign on the muscle” in their reports, although they certainly enable baseball GM’s to do so.

In spite of its reprint status, Kerrane’s *Dollar Sign* is still provides a most revealing look at baseball scouting. As the “Afterword” notes, young scouts continue to admire the legends (although fewer of them now want to do the grueling travel for year after year). “Decades from now,” Kerrane writes “some crusty old guy will be behind a backstop trying to convert numbers into a qualitative recommendation, and to do that he will have to draw on memories, feelings, and values. He might even chew tobacco, say horseshit, and believe in the good face” (p. 333). If writers, like ball players, can be said to have “the good face,” then Kerrane probably has it, along with great stuff and masterful control. And that’s “no horseshit!”

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