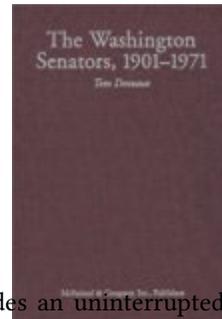


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Deveaux. *The Washington Senators, 1901-1971*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2001. 282 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0993-8.

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Most baseball histories fall into one of two categories. First, there are academic works usually penned by historians teaching at universities. Academic baseball histories are generally analytical and well-researched, and address theoretical and historiographical issues. These books typically place the history of baseball within the broader context of American culture and history. They often consider, for example, what changes in baseball tell us about broader shifts in American society or, conversely, how changes in American society and culture transformed the game. These heavily footnoted books, however, only rarely delve into the drama that takes place on the playing field itself. This information is provided by a second kind of baseball history usually written by sports enthusiasts who are not formally trained as historians. Academics often derisively, and sometimes unfairly, refer to this type of sport history as sports-page history because the authors avoid historical analysis and focus on retelling the day-by-day and year-by-year results of competitions. These result-oriented baseball histories are rarely footnoted nor concerned with the historiographical arguments that motivate academic baseball historians. The best books of this genre, however, are impressively and conscientiously researched, informative, and occasionally riveting narratives.

Tom Deveaux's *The Washington Senators, 1901-1971*, falls squarely within the latter category. Deveaux provides a detailed account of the two major-league baseball franchises that made the nation's capital their home in the twentieth century. There are books that address shorter periods of Washington Senators history in greater detail, such as Henry Thomas's treatment of the Walter Johnson years of the early 1900s and James R. Hartley's account of the second Senator franchise.[1] Deveaux's *Washington Senators* differs from these and other

historical works because he provides an uninterrupted narrative of the two Washington D.C. major league baseball teams, which were in the American League for a combined seventy years. Deveaux not only combines the work of Hartley, Thomas, and other historians of professional baseball in Washington, he also fills in the gaps left by these accounts. Deveaux accomplishes his stated primary goal, to provide "an unbroken account of the history of the Washington Senators during their tenure in the American League" (p. 1). Although Deveaux has not written the most detailed history of the Washington Senators (at least for some periods), he has provided the most complete history of major league baseball in D.C. in the twentieth century.

Deveaux is above all concerned with documenting the successes, and more often, the failures of the frequently hapless Washington Senators. During the first decade of the Senators' existence, writer Charles Dryden commented on the position of the Washington team when he penned the popular saying, "Washington—first in War, first in Peace, last in the American League," to describe the team's lack of success on the playing field (p. 16). Founded in 1901, the original Washington Senators were a charter member of the then-fledgling American League. The original Senators played in Washington, D.C. until 1960 when owner Calvin Griffith moved the team to Minnesota, and it became today's Minnesota Twins. In 1961, the year following the departure, the American League expanded and granted a team to the District of Columbia and the new Washington Senators were born. The second Washington Senators franchise stayed in the nation's capital just eleven years before the owner, Bob Short, moved the team to Arlington, Texas, and the team became today's Texas Rangers.

The book reads as one seamless narrative. The author painstakingly chronicles the plight of the Senators in precise year-by-year order, occasionally including day-to-day detail. Deveaux makes no effort to split the information into chapters based on specific historical developments in particular periods, but rather devotes one chapter to each decade. Except for the last chapter which focuses on the second Washington Senators franchise (1961-1971), the chapter distinctions serve no real purpose; they include no introduction or conclusion nor do they focus on any particular historical theme distinct from previous or succeeding chapters. The more important episodes in the Senators' history, such as the team's fabulous pennant drives in both 1924 and 1925, garner a great deal more space and attention than the club's less stellar years, like 1949, when the team finished a dismal forty-seven games out of first place. Deveaux's account of the franchise's only world championship series victory in 1924 is detail-laden, tension-filled, and engaging. The author also focuses a good deal of attention on the occasionally spectacular individual achievements of Senator players, such as Frank Howard's (Hondo) 1968 record-breaking home run streak. Hondo slugged a rarely remembered ten home runs in six games during his record setting year.

Deveaux demonstrates an impressive command of detailed information throughout the book. His narrative includes, for example, background information not only on the better known star Senators like Walter Johnson, Joe Cronin, and Frank Howard but also an endless string of long-forgotten journeymen players. If readers remember a particular favorite but lesser known Senator player, there is probably information on him in this book. The narrative is enlivened with thoughtfully considered quantitative and biographical information, demonstrating the prodigious amount of research done in statistical guides, secondary literature, and newspapers.

The author also carefully recounts the construction of the Senator teams from year-to-year. Deveaux eagerly retells the array of Senator signings, releases, and trades in great detail. Numerous transactions are explained and analyzed, including the signing of Walter Johnson; scouting and signing of a surprisingly large assortment of Cuban-born players in the 1930s and 1940s; and the trade for the Detroit Tigers volatile thirty-game winner, Denny McClain. Deveaux obviously relishes his role in analyzing and evaluating Senator acquisitions, signings, and trades and non-trades. He reports, for example, that the 1969 Senators passed up a chance to trade third baseman Ken McMullen for Nolan Ryan, then a young and promis-

ing but not-yet-matured pitcher. Deveaux bemoans that "of all the past bonehead deals the Senators had swung, and would yet swing, it is likely that those they did not consummate at the end of the 1969 season [for Ryan] hurt them the most" (p. 245). Similarly, he appraises the Senators 1948 trade of future hall of fame pitcher Early Wynn and catcher Mickey Vernon to the Cleveland Indians for pitchers Ed Klieman and Joe Haynes, and power hitter Eddie Robinson, as "what might easily be considered the worst deal in the entire history of Washington Senators baseball" (p. 173). Interestingly, the impetus for the trade, sometimes called "Thelma's Deal," was apparently the desire of Thelma, the daughter of Senators' owner Clark Griffith, to return to Washington, D.C. from Cleveland. Joe Haynes, one of the Cleveland players that came to the Senators in the trade, was Thelma's husband.

Thelma's trade demonstrates just how much the Senators under one-time manager (1912-1920), and long time owner (1912-1955), Clark Griffith were run as a small-time family business. For roughly the first fifty years Clark Griffith dominated and shaped the Senators. As evidenced in Thelma's deal, business and player decisions were often considered within the range of narrow family interests. Nepotism ruled the day and the Senators' front office was inhabited by Griffith's sometimes competent, but other times not so able, relatives. Griffith even had relatives who played for the Senators and occasionally invited players over to his house for meals. He also had a surprising amount of loyalty to ex-players. Griffith hired a slew of ex-Senator players to manage the team between 1911 and 1954. The general lack of Senator success during this period must be viewed within this context of non-baseball decision-making influences.

As Deveaux focuses on the game itself, he misses opportunities to consider questions relevant to academic baseball histories. For example, the rich description documenting the family nature of Griffith's Senators contrasts sharply with today's corporate ownership patterns. The time frame of the book includes the period when these changes took place and are evident in the motivations for the move of the original Senators in 1961 and then the expansion Senators in 1971. A number of questions surrounding how and why these changes occurred, such as stadium capacity and building, local market size, and changes wrought by radio and television revenues interest academic baseball historians. Another fruitful topic described, but not analytically explored, is Congressional threats to attack major league baseball's odd anti-trust exemption and how major league baseball was coerced, to some extent, to keep a team in the District to

stave off these threats. This is at least part of the reason that Washington was awarded the first American League expansion team after the original Senators left for Minnesota, despite the fact that the original franchise had lacked popular box office support for much of its sixty years.

Although academic baseball historians might be disappointed that Deveaux does not contend with the larger issues like those mentioned above, he has accomplished exactly what he set out to do in *The Washington Senators, 1901-1971*. He has written a readable and sometimes riveting account of Washington Senators baseball. He

focuses primarily on the competition and the construction of Senator teams throughout this unbroken narrative. Fans of Washington Senators baseball will surely delight in Deveaux's coverage of the team and its rich if often disappointing history, including its lone successful championship run in 1924, its seemingly endless string of failed seasons, and its players.

Note

[1]. Henry W. Thomas, *Walter Johnson: Baseball's Big Train* (Phenom Press, 1995); and James R. Hartley, *Washington's Expansion Senators, 1961-1971* (Corduroy Press, 1997).

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