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Ken Burns' Baseball: A Review

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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After eighteen and a half hours of baseball from Ken Burns it may be foolish to try offer some observations on this work in just under five minutes but I'll try.

It certainly must be clear to anyone who watched it all, that this was too much time to devote to the subject especially in one sweep. Burns' Civil War masterpiece was only eleven hours, and it was much more consistently compelling than this one.

However, taken as a whole, the mood and richness of the entire piece is quite impressive. The accumulation of time and memory which one feels in the series speaks to the power of the film to convey a sense of why baseball is the national pastime. The importance of baseball as an intergenerational pastime is clearly felt in the comments of so many who find in baseball a set of memories connected to childhood, family, and especially to their fathers. Both sons and daughters offer testimony to the importance of that connection, and the recollections of Doris Kearns Goodwin were especially moving and penetrating in talking both of her father and her children.

The series is at its best when it chronicles the intense pennant races and the moments of high drama. Those from recent years are relived, and the ones from the more distant past are reminders of the many legendary tales of the game.

As the poet Donald Hall says near the end "baseball is the place where memory gathers," and the testimony of the participants in this series clearly shows the brilliance of that insight.

Burns' work has been particularly strong in dealing with the Negro Leagues and the segregation of baseball. It is clearly a showcase for Buck O'Neil who has been witty, charming, brilliant, gracious, and totally disarming with his understated insights. O'Neil, who was known to Satchel Paige as Nancy, was in turn a player and manager in the Negro Leagues, and then became a scout for the Negro Leagues and then the major leagues.

I was struck by the comments of Bob Feller who denigrated the skills of Jackie Robinson and black players, and then downplayed the catch by Willie Mays in the 1954 World Series. The only thing I can say for Feller is that he has been sadly consistent on these opinions over the years.

It must also be said that Ken Burns did not discover Jackie Robinson and his saga. This story has been told many times, by Robinson himself, and by historian Jules Tygiel in his award winning book *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* with greater depth, insight, and historical perspective than Burns.

It is surprising to see Billy Crystal cast in the role of baseball expert, and a wonder as to what could be so important about the baseball career and private life of Mario Cuomo that so much time is given over to him. Another tiresome commentator is George Plimpton whose relevance to this enterprise is known only to Ken Burns as he has no particular insight and no particular expertise.

On the other hand the comments of Daniel Okrent are often right on the money as he too emerges as one of the better commentators. So too Studs Terkel who brings a Chicago color to the commentary, which is much needed in a field overcrowded with New York and Boston myopiads. If I don't hear another word in my lifetime about the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn it will be too soon. Enough already, stop your whining, its been nearly forty years.

The late innings are filled with more great baseball footage, some excellent material on Bob Gibson, Curt Flood, and Pete Rose and is highlighted by the playing of the National Anthem by Jimi Hendrix. But the film fails to capture the mood of the Sixties nearly completely.

There is more Red Sox scar tissue and the necessary stops to look at Clemente, Brooks and Frank Robinson, Henry Aaron, Marvin Miller, the death of the reserve clause, Reggie and George without much Billy, and a few good World Series highlights. All of this done without sufficient fire.

Near the end Burns decrys the materialism in the game, the emphasis on money, the growing distance between fans and players, the selling of autographs and the massive salaries. All of this might have made evoked some sort of romantic feelings of loss, except for the fact that two nights earlier Ken Burns himself was on one of the cable shopping channels hawking all sorts of paraphernalia from "Baseball," the miniseries.

Say it isn't so, Ken! Say it isn't so!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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