

Take Me Out To The Ball Game

by Valerie Brown

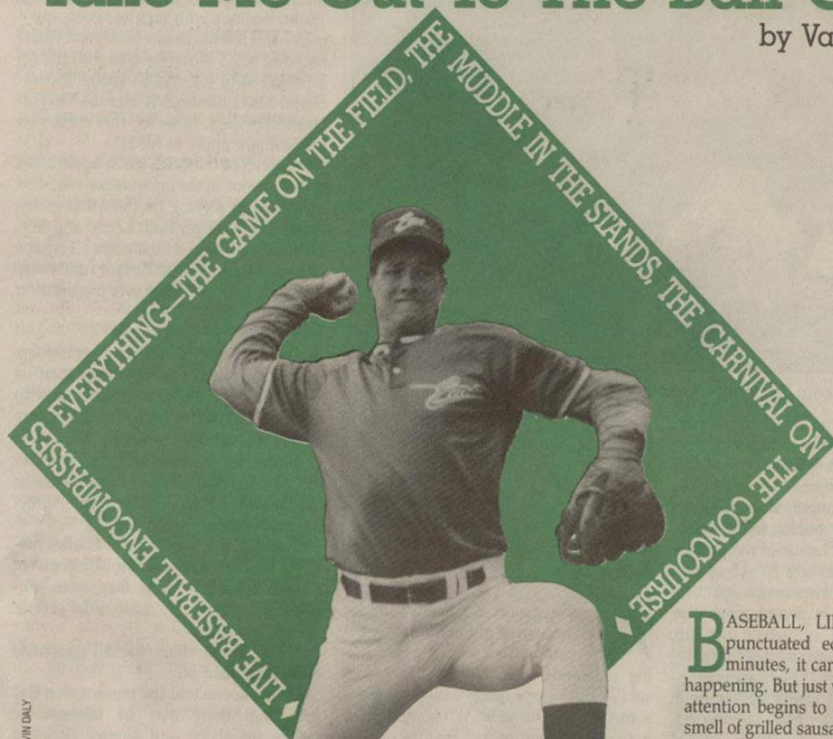


PHOTO BY MICHAEL KEVIN DALY

Ems pitcher Kris Glaser.

BASEBALL, LIKE EVOLUTION, IS punctuated equilibrium. For long minutes, it can seem like nothing is happening. But just when the average fan's attention begins to drift, seduced by the smell of grilled sausage and the thought of a cold beer, that's the moment the guy with the home team's worst batting average shoots one past the usually-implacable visiting shortstop, and the hapless fan, standing in the beer line with his shorts sticking to the backs of his thighs, hears the feral roar of his compeers and knows he has missed one of the moments he came for.

But that's all right, because baseball is also more than the sum of its parts. Going to a baseball game isn't simply keeping an eye on the wordless drama between the batter and the pitcher. Neither is it maintaining the meticulous numerology of the scorecard, nor deciphering the ludicrous sequence of pats and twitches known as signs in order to second-guess the manager's strategy. Live baseball encompasses everything—the game on the field, the muddle in the stands, the carnival on the concourse.

As the human attention span devolves ever closer to that of a gnat, the slow pace of baseball ought to mean its extinction. But it persists. That it survives in an age of proliferating cable channels and a remote zapper is nothing short of a miracle.

Luckily for the game, time passes differently in a baseball park. There's something about being there on a warm summer evening that relaxes time and gives people the chance to be silly, to alternate fierce concentration with an amiable inattention. In short, baseball is fun.

THE BOYS OF SUMMER HAVE HIT Eugene's field of dreams again this year, wearing uniforms the colors of the sky and the grass. There have been Emeralds here for most of this century. For a brief period in the mid-50s the Eugene team was known as the Larks, but switched back to the Ems in 1956, according to Ems general manager Bob Beban.

That was the year the Northwest League was founded. In 1969 the Ems became a Pacific Coast League triple A team but returned to their niche in the Northwest League in 1972. The Eugene team is part of the Kansas City Royals organization.

The Ems are a perfect small-town baseball team, and the Northwest League is a lively circuit. Teams from Medford, Bend,

Boise, Spokane, Yakima, Everett, and Bellingham play what's known in the business as short-season Class A professional baseball. The Ems have pulled in around 100,000 fans per summer for the last six years, outdrawn only by Spokane and Boise, according to Beban.

The Northwest League is one rung up from the bottom of professional baseball. The only thing lower is the Rookie League, whose players are mostly high school or early college-age. Starting out in the Northwest League is a giant step toward fulfillment of a childhood dream for any player.

"Some of these people have played in the Rookie League," says Mike Mishell, Ems public information director, but from the big leagues' point of view, "most of them are raw talent." Their average age is 20, and they must work their way through Class A long season, Double A, and Triple A minor leagues before having a hope of hitting the majors, according to Mishell.

It will be a long haul. This summer, the Ems play 77 games in 79 days. For two and a half months they'll be living and breathing a game they already know intimately.

BY THE TIME A PLAYER REACHES the majors, he's probably been playing baseball for 20 years. That's far longer than doctors and attorneys spend training for their professions. Baseball is so ingrained in American culture that players learn it by osmosis, from family and friends as well as from coaches and physical education teachers.

"I've done it my whole life," says catcher Paul Sanders, "since I was four or five." Sanders, 22, is the youngest of six children and a former Oregon State Beaver. Growing up in Kennewick, Washington, he learned the game from three older brothers who played college ball. His twin brother plays on the Orioles Class A team in West Virginia.

Roger Landress, also 22, has been pitching since he was eight. It was "the excitement of winning" and "the pats on the back" that drew him into the game. He's been passing the finer points of pitching on to his eight-year-old brother in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

Even after so many years of experience, the romance of the game still lights up the players' faces. They make no bones about their eagerness. Although Sanders confesses to a soft spot for the Cincinnati Reds, he would play for "any team. It does not matter one bit."

The dream of reaching the big leagues is tempered by a surprising realism. Neither Sanders nor Landress has ignored the possibility of being weeded out. In fact, both have already used their gifts to develop something to fall back on.

"When I started out young I realized I

had a little talent, and later on I found out I could get scholarships," Landress says. Baseball money helped him earn a degree in marketing, and he's already had more than one job offer.

Sanders is about two terms short of a degree in business administration from Oregon State University and plans to finish in the off season.

Having plenty of games under their belts also helped this year's Ems change from a crew of talented strangers into a functioning baseball team in the short week before the draft and the first game of the season.

"Baseball is baseball," Sanders says. Like blues musicians, baseball players work in a form so ritualized, so tried and true, that they can step into a game anywhere and know just what to do. During practice, the Ems repeat their fielding and batting drills in silent, companionable concentration.

Even the coaches appear serene. Standing on a chair behind the batting cage, Royals' traveling instructor Jerry Cram confines his remarks to an occasional "Nice and smooth, now" and "Don't push it, what's there is there." At third base, manager Tom Poquette mimes a run to

home plate. Each player in turn carefully copies his irregular staggering take-off, eyes on the imaginary throw, and the transition to full-out sprint.

TO THE KIDS HANGING OVER THE bleacher railings collecting autographs, these newly-minted Ems are already heroes. And perhaps they are to all of us. We see them poised at a turning point, primed by a lifetime of preparation



and unjaded by either disappointment or success. The second rung of the professional ladder may be the best place to watch this most American of all sports. It's the only place where the players' technique and enthusiasm are approximately equal, and the fans can share their joy up close.

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We can all revel in the satisfying crack of the hardball hitting the bat's sweet spot, and the *thoop* of the glove sucking the ball into itself. We don't have to squint at the game through the eyes of a network sports camera, or see the game's equilibrium artificially punctuated by sophomoric beer commercials. We can be entertained by the total experience, from the double play to the line at the bathrooms, from the swarms of kids in the bleachers to the swarms of bugs in the ballpark lights.

Jacques Barzun got it right in 1956 when he said, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game—and do it by watching first some high school or small-town teams." ■