

It's Baseball Season Once Again. . .

Reviewed by Dana Bliss

The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship

By David Halberstam

New York: Hyperion, 2003

Hardcover: \$22.95

Summer of '49

By David Halberstam

New York: Perennial Classics, 2002

Paperback: \$13.95

First Published in 1989 by William Morrow

In the era of the free agent, when multi-million dollar contracts and endorsement deals have become the norm, superstar marquee players now dominate professional sports with a level of control that was unimaginable only a few years ago. Michael Jordan earned a reported \$33 million during his last season with the Chicago Bulls in 1998. It is rumored that British football star David Beckham recently signed a staggering \$100 million, life-long contract with the sporting goods giant Adidas. And then, of course, there's A-Rod.

In December of 2000, Alexander Emmanuel Rodriguez signed a 10-year contract with the Texas Rangers for the unprecedented sum of \$252 million, thus catapulting himself onto the list of highest-paid entertainers in the world. Because after all, what are professional athletes, if not entertainers? Given the state professional sports today, it is sometimes hard to remember that at one point each and every one of these millionaires was just a kid playing a game with his friends. And sadly enough, in one of our culture's great ironies, it can be argued that it is the fans themselves who have created this atmosphere through our unflinching willingness to pay inflated ticket prices and our tendency to get swept up in the drama surrounding the marquee players. By doing so, we alienate these stars from their teammates, managers, friends, and family, just as we progressively alienate ourselves from the game. And yet, even amidst the current climate of superstardom, intense media pressure,

and runaway salaries, one can still find examples of the kind of friendships like those forged in little league. In *The Teammates*, Pulitzer Prize winning author David Halberstam paints the portrait of a friendship that began in the 1930s and continues today, the kind of friendship that can remind a fan that these millionaire entertainers are also boys having the time of their lives.

Halberstam's story centers around four members of the powerful – yet harrowed – Boston Red Sox teams of the post-war 1940s. Johnny Pesky, Dom DiMaggio, Bobby Doerr and Ted Williams were four of the best players on a string of the greatest Red Sox teams to ever be assembled. Dominic Paul DiMaggio, younger brother of the tremendous Joltin' Joe, was signed by the Red Sox in 1937 and never wore another uniform, playing center field in the majors for eleven years. Robert Pershing Doerr is considered by many to be the best second baseman ever to play in Fenway, where he was a defensive anchor from 1937-51. John Michael Pesky played shortstop and third base for the Sox from 1942-52, before finishing out his career in Detroit and Washington. And finally, Theodore Samuel Williams, the greatest hitter in baseball, spent an incredible nineteen seasons in Boston, interrupted only by his service in the Navy during World War II. That four such talented and venerated players remained on the same team together for a decade was symptomatic of a different age, when it was common for a man to spend his entire career in one city. That these men found in one another lifelong friendships that would outlast their many seasons together might be unique in any era.

The Teammates opens in the fall of 2001 when, as we quickly discover, Ted Williams is dying. Dom and Johnny decide to drive down to Florida to see their dear friend one last time, and although Bobby Doerr is Oregon caring for his wife, and is unable to make the trip across the country, he is with them in spirit. The book is a blending of two interconnected journeys, as the old friends retell funny stories from their days as ballplayers, revisit old arguments, and replay big games pitch-by-pitch to pass them time and distract their thoughts from what will await them at the end of their drive.

Some of the more amusing anecdotes and baseball moments discussed are drawn from the magical 1949 season when Doerr, Pesky, Williams, DiMaggio, and the Red Sox were in an unnervingly close pennant race with their archrivals, the New York Yankees. That year the Red Sox's season, as Ted Williams would often recount years later, ended with a "dying quail blooper" hit by Yankees rookie Jerry Coleman. A more detailed (and more heartbreaking) examination of that same hit comes at the end of another of Halberstam's books, *The Summer of '49*, which chronicles that year's tumultuous seasons for both the Yankees and the Red Sox. This earlier work, first published in 1989, closely follows both teams from the close of the 1948 season through the remarkable finish of the following year when Coleman ended Boston's hopes of a pennant with his three run blooper.

In *The Summer of '49* Halberstam again balances two stories within one text, on the one hand moving chronologically through the season, while interspersing well-placed digressions into each players' experiences. And, while these asides offer some interesting background

information about the members of the two teams, this book is really about the depth of the game, about pitch selection, a manager's late-inning moves, the players' instincts in the field, and ultimately why baseball is so great. But beyond even the recounting of pivotal games in the season, Halberstam seems fascinated by the supporting characters in the story. For instance, we learn that Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey, in addition to being a terrible drunk, would put on a uniform and take a private batting practice, with only a handful of bench players, nicknamed the "ass-kisser all stars," and local kids shagging balls. Halberstam also devotes a surprising amount of time to exploring the unique dynamics that the sportswriters had with the players, particularly a writer for the Record named Dave Egan, who is described as "gentle and kind when sober, he became, when drinking, a monster, a man with the foulest tongue imaginable." As the season progressed, so did Egan's drinking, which only exacerbated the bad blood between him and Ted Williams, against whom Egan fostered a terrible grudge that he perpetuated in his articles.

On the other hand, *The Teammates* centers on the four friends, and the book rarely strays from their story, if only for a short diversion or reminiscence. These four men played together on the Red Sox for almost a decade before Ted was called back to service at the start of the Korean War. Bobby Doerr retired from baseball at the end of the 1951 season, after a back injury took away what was left of his competitive spirit. From 1950-52 Boston saw three different managers, the last of whom, Lou Boudreau, is credited as doing "more damage to the Red Sox as their manager than he ever did playing against us in an Indians uniform." A good case in point would be his decision, only 25 games into the 1952 season, to trade Pesky to the Detroit Tigers. The same year Boudreau benched DiMaggio in favor of a younger player, and Dom, having lost the will to play for such a team, retired at the start of the following season. So it was that Ted Williams returned to a very different team in 1953, after his close friends and teammates had all gone their separate ways. But Ted stayed with the Sox, playing another six seasons of ball before finally hanging up his cleats in 1960. Though their time as professional baseball players and teammates ended in the early 1950s, their friendship would continue into the new millennium, bringing us back to 2001 and the end of the drive to Florida. When the three companions arrive at the hospital, Halberstam recounts the shock of seeing their friend Ted, the once mighty hitter and cocky ball player, so frail and worn down in a wheelchair, and it's a scene that reminds the reader about the more painful side of close friendship. But his friends liven him up, and Ted jokes and laughs with them, chatting about old times and new players, catching up on their families and lives, reminding each other of the deep friendship that has endured long beyond their great seasons.

So, will friendship continue to be a part of professional baseball, or will the kind of relationships forged in little league get pushed farther and farther into the background by the increasing pressures of the modern game? At the time of this writing, the 2004 season has just begun, introducing us to Red Sox and Yankee teams with many new faces, mixed in with a few old ones returning for another season. Will new friendships emerge as established players bond with their new teammates? And will older friendships outlast this past winter's trades as players move around the league? Of course. But it is easy to romanticize the days when a young kid signed up to play ball, with a starry-eyed look and a pure love of the game, and then played out his career with a core group of guys, grateful for the chance to play a game with his friends, and get paid to do it. In these two books, Halberstam guides us on such a nostalgic trip, and makes us glad to go along for the ride.

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