ForeWord Reviews

SPORTS & RECREATION

Ed Delehanty in the Emerald Age of Baseball
Jerrold Casway
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One of the charming qualities about baseball is that a fan from a hundred years ago would easily recognize the modern game. Little has changed: there are still four bases, nine innings, and "three strikes, you're out."

Ed Delahanty is also recognizable-a stereotypical player who could have had a better career had he been able to control his demons. Not only did alcoholism ruin his career, it no doubt contributed to one of most bizarre and storied deaths in sports history.

The author, a history professor at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland and an expert on early modern Irish history and nineteenth-century baseball, tells this sad and compelling story in his second book (his first was Owen Roe O'Neill and the Struggle for Catholic Ireland).

Delahanty, the oldest of five brothers who played in the majors at the dawn of the twentieth century, was a star player (he is a member of the Hall of Fame) primarily for the Philadelphia Quakers (later, the Phillies) from 1888-1903. He was the Babe Ruth of his era, a power hitter before such a category was in vogue. That his teams never lived up to expectations must have been frustrating for such a competitor. "The drink" eventually played a crucial role in Delahanty's life. Ultimately, it was the suspected contributor to his death, which occurred under mysterious circumstances after he was put off a train because of his rowdy behavior.

Aside from the biographical aspects, this book is a lucid examination of the "behind the scenes" complexities of the national pastime. As a business, baseball was still suffering growing pains while Delehanty was playing. Team owners in the National League, which was established in 1876, tried to take advantage of the players (who were often lacking in formal education) by keeping salaries low and binding them to the team through carefully worded contracts and tacit agreements amongst team executives.

It wasn't long, however, before rival leagues sprang up to challenge the old guard.

Delahanty was one of scores of players who jumped from team to team, looking for the best deal and finding themselves in a world of legal difficulties. He became increasingly despondent over his waning skills and the consequent impact on his ability to earn a living.

As the title suggests, the book also looks at the influence of the Irish on baseball. In “the Emerald Age,” men such as John McGraw, Dan Brouthers, and Connie Mack accounted for a disproportionate percentage of the game’s practitioners. This is not an uplifting story, but it is essential for understanding how difficulties in a
fledgling sport led to the unfortunate downfall of a great athlete.

Ron Kaplan