ForeWord Reviews

SPORTS & RECREATION

High Heat: The Secret History of the Fastball and the Improbable Search for the Fastest Pitcher of All Time

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If, as Ted Williams famously said, “Hitting a baseball is the hardest thing to do in sports,” then the fastball is the most devastating weapon. While hitting a fastball may not have been that difficult for “The Splendid Splinter,” it’s downright scary for most of us, and practically impossible for even the best hitters in the game. In *High Heat*, seasoned baseball author Tim Wendel turns his attention to hard-throwing hurlers to find the fastest pitcher in baseball history.

This is no armchair investigation. Wendel treks across the US, visiting ballparks, an aerodynamic testing lab, and baseball’s Valhalla, Cooperstown’s National Baseball Hall of Fame, where he sifts through the artifacts of pitching legends.

Especially intriguing is Wendel’s frank and frightening examination of the beanball, which uncovers a taboo subject in a game dominated by macho athletes: fear. Pitchers have long intimidated batters by throwing the ball high and tight, often with devastating results. Hall of Fame third baseman Brooks Robinson explained the fear simply: “Your heart might be in the batter’s box, but your ass isn’t.” The career-altering and -ending injuries outlined here include those of Tony Conigliaro, Dickie Thon, and Ray Chapman.

As Wendel searches for the fastest of the fastest, he dissects the usual suspects: iconic American farmboys Walter Johnson and Bob Feller; dazzling late bloomer Sandy Koufax; fiery Lefty Grove; the workmanlike Nolan Ryan, whose fastball could be recognized by its sound; modern slingers Roger Clemens and Randy Johnson; and Negro Leagues legend Satchel Paige.

The diminutive Billy Wagner threw the ball as hard as anyone ever recorded on a speed gun. Buried in Division III college ball, Wagner’s fastball miraculously jumped from the low 90s to 100 mph. “You just can’t figure how a guy that small can throw the ball that hard,” marveled one scout. As a consequence, Wagner went on to become the top closer in the major leagues, striking out batters at a record pace.

Readers will also enjoy the stories of lesser-known pitchers like Sam McDowell, Steve Dalkowski, Ryne Duren, and the tragic J.R. Richard. At the conclusion of *High Heat*, Wendel

selects his top ten fastball pitchers, a list that may surprise and which will certainly spawn debate.

High Heat is more than just a cursory ranking of baseball's fastest arms, it's a fun and fact-filled flip through baseball's record books that brings to life the players we previously only knew from our baseball card collections.