

Opening Day: Cleveland, the Indians, and a New Beginning. By Jonathan Knight. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004. 200 pp. Paper, \$14.95, ISBN 0-87338-815-1.)

Writing a narrative about one's favorite sports franchise can be a steep hill to climb for an author wanting to connect with a mainstream audience. The most sincere testimony to such a love affair does not guarantee relevance, or even the interest of those outside the flock. In *Opening Day: Cleveland, the Indians, and a New Beginning*, however, Jonathan Knight has navigated the recent history of "The Tribe" in an engaging manner that can enlighten, and be appreciated by even the non-baseball fan. For this book is as much about the Indian fans of Northeast Ohio as it is about the team itself.

The core of the book surrounds the first game played at Jacob's Field, Cleveland's sparkling jewel of a new stadium, on Opening Day, 1994. Knight attributes far more importance to this contest with the Seattle Mariners than merely the christening of a new ballpark. Unlike other major league cities opening new stadiums in recent years, Cleveland's taxpayers opened their wallets just in time to keep its ball club from leaving for a new home. Many sports fans can tolerate years of ineptitude on the field, or a bad stadium in which to watch their team. Indian followers endured forty years worth of both. From 1955-1993, Cleveland's diamond heroes acquired an intimate relationship with the American League's second division, missing the playoffs throughout. The fans and player's view from the cellar was made more depressing as the Indians played in one of the most soul-less and barren ballparks in major league history, Municipal Stadium. Decades of underachieving squads played in front of miniscule crowds rattling around a cavernous tomb of a facility contributed to a climate of futility that bolstered the city's unwanted 1970's nickname, *The Mistake on the Lake*.

But Cleveland has turned the corner, economically and psychologically, from being a target of jokes, and Knight presents this baseball game as a symbolic but significant turning point in the city's psyche. Finally having a beautiful stadium which combined nostalgia and modern comforts, the team could attract sufficient attendance to hire top tier players who could bring the club championships. From the 1994 season forward, the Indians exorcised seasons of failure stretching back before many of its modern fans were born, winning multiple division crowns, and reaching the World Series twice.

Knight begins his story at the end of the 2001 season, when the Tribe had just completed another first place finish, aware that the team's successful streak had almost

run its course, with a period of rebuilding looming. The author describes a spontaneous show of mutual appreciation between the players and fans for the previous eight seasons. This account is both touching to the reader and a refreshing counterbalance to modern headlines weighted down by college athletic scandals, rape trials involving professional athletes, Olympic steroid stories, and the like. Both the team and fan realized that an important era had come to a close, one in which Cleveland's people placed their trust in a new stadium, and their team repaid this gesture with a long stretch of on-field success that began that single day in April seven years earlier. Clearly, the relationship between a city and its team can be a positive and inspiring one.

The bulk of the book is an account of the game itself, and the athletes who took the field for a moment Knight feels is the most significant in Cleveland sports history. This is not an implausible conclusion, given that most of the championships won by great Browns and Indians teams occurred before the city's reputation of decline was fully entrenched. Although fans who attended or watched this game could not have known it at the time, within one year their beloved Browns would be gone to Baltimore, with a similar fate possible for the Indians if not for the building of Jacobs Field.

The author's attempt to paint the inning by inning progress of the game as an allegory for the team's and city's future will be more convincing to a reader who, like Knight, is a die-hard loyalist to a team. Those outside this realm of American culture may strain to take an interest in the depiction of the game's ups and downs, especially if they are not familiar with the Mariner and Indian players. To stay with this progression of hits, outs, and errors, the reader must accept the original premise that the devout Indian fan's interpretation of one game's result could set the tone for the future of the team, and its relationship with its supporters. Fans of the Red Sox and Cubs, two teams snakebitten by fate even longer than Cleveland, will smile in rueful understanding. What should pull in the attention of all readers are the flashbacks interspersed among the game story. These accounts of several previous opening days in Indian history, the author persuasively argues, were historically significant in their own right, whether because they involved the opening of Cleveland's first two ballparks, or the arrival of new players or managers expected to turn the team's fortunes around.

To whatever extent fate played a role in the Indian's dramatic late inning, come-from-behind victory that April day ten years ago, it was a positive one in contrast to numerous scenarios since the 1950's when Tribe fans had little to talk about but next year. If Cleveland had not won that day, this book would never have been written, of

course. Even a writer as introspective as Knight would not have been able to make a compelling story out of a defeat, no matter how many victories followed in its wake.

The author has written an insightful account of a day when both a team, and its long-suffering fans, broke free from a trying past. Anyone who accepts popular culture as a valid window of historical inquiry will find *Opening Day* an enlightening read, no matter what their favorite franchise is, or preferred sport. The loyalty Americans invest in their hometown teams will make the book ring a familiar tune far beyond Cleveland.

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