

softball and the social scientist

What can softball and sociology learn from each other?

Editors' Note: The aging and undersized sociologist Edwin Amenta was placed in charge of his doormat New York City softball team, with a roster of marginally employed teammates, and sought to reverse its fortunes by way of an unorthodox approach to softball. This article is adapted from Professor Baseball: Searching for Redemption and the Perfect Lineup on the Softball Diamonds of Central Park (University of Chicago Press, 2007), a participant-observer account of his season. We pick up the story in early May, with his Pamela's Cantina team having won, unexpectedly and by small margins, its first three games against the league's toughest teams. But Amenta's teammates remain wary of his approach and their success.

In the winter, our manager, Zeus, a power-hitting Dominican shortstop, quit our team because he was fed up with the complaints of his teammates, and he hates to lose. When Zeus asked about candidates to replace him, my name kept coming up. In my three years on his Performing Arts Softball League team, which lost two-thirds of its games, I had established a reputation as friendly, dependable, and, I like to think, a source of good ideas. Also, because I often dispensed with the crappy team jersey and wore one from my vintage collection, I suspect my teammates sensed that I could afford to front the thousand-dollar league fee. If I wanted the team to win, I had my work cut out for me. Zeus had not only left for an opposing team, but took a good player with him. Then our fire-balling pitcher quit.

I'm no big fan of writing that treats baseball as a metaphor for life. As I tell my students in the seminar I call "Baseball and Society," the beauty of baseball—softball, too—is that it is nothing like life. Life is messy, ambiguous, complicated; baseball is neat, clear, elegant. In life, dramatic moments are rare and often difficult to identify when they happen. In baseball, drama is frequent, and everyone in the ballpark, even from the cheap seats, can spot a big situation. People can try out pet theories, and there are rapid and ruth-

lessly clear outcomes—reach base or make an out, win or lose, succeed or fail. Now I had a chance to test my ideas on the softball diamonds of Central Park.

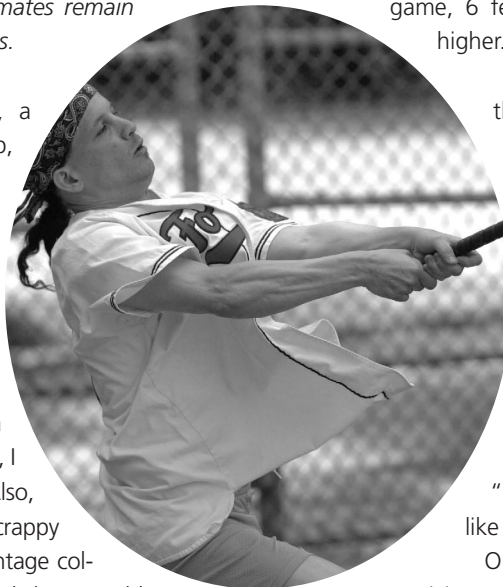
the manager is a spy

In my weekly e-mail newsletter to team Pamela's Cantina, I promote what I like to think of as "Eddy Ball." The idea is, essentially, better softball through sabermetrics, with a little sociology added to the mix. It has one core principle: Outs are really precious. In softball, a team has only 21 outs per game, 6 fewer than in baseball, and scores are higher.

In *Moneyball*, Michael Lewis argues that major league baseball is mired in something like a religious war. On one side are the insiders, former major leaguers and their fellow travelers who adhere to the so-called Book of traditional baseball wisdom. They believe that the best players have five physical "tools" that can be identified only by personal inspection, that amassing statistics like runs batted in (RBI) means a player is "clutch," and that time-honored plays like the sacrifice bunt are valuable.

On the other side are the outsiders, sabermetricians who have subjected the Book to systematic, empirical evaluation and have slowly forced their way into front offices through the strength of their analyses. They study players' performance records, focus on telling statistics like on-base percentages, and have found that no players are truly clutch and that the sacrifice tends to be counterproductive. The end of the old boys' club was signaled when the Boston Red Sox hired the quintessential outsider Bill James, a security guard who became a best-selling author and coined the term sabermetrics.

Like my teammates, I want to win. It may not be everything or the only thing, but it is what the team is trying to achieve. Everyone wants a taste of what they have seen in World Series locker rooms and sports films. For me, winning



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also opens the way to a giddy sociability that might be called big-league fun—something I know about only by reading books like Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* or Jim Brosnan's *The Long Season*. As I imagine it, this involves a lot of good-natured but hard and irreverent teasing at the expense of teammates and yourself.

But the kind of big-league fun my teammates seek is somewhat different. Much of the satisfaction of adult softball comes from players' fantasies of being like big-league ballplayers. If the distance cannot be closed through professional-quality play, softball players can still identify with the big leaguers by aping their attitudes. So my teammates tend to be more faithful to the Book than are baseball insiders. My teammates are also fans of baseball and fans of our team. And, like most fans, they base their judgments almost entirely on what they see. Someone who dramatically blasts a homer or makes a good catch earns much credit—showing the skills that insider scouts so value—no matter how many pop flies he has hit or fielding chances he has missed.

Because stat-heads are rare in softball and my views are so different from those of my teammates, I often feel as if I were a spy on my own team. I never talk about "Eddy Ball," or, for that matter, "sabermetrics." The last thing I need is for one of my teammates to ask, "Who do you think you are, 'Professor Baseball?'" So instead of setting out tenets, I advance my views by example and by praising acts consistent with Eddy Ball—on the field and in the newsletter. But there are, of course, tenets.

first, principles

One Eddy Ball precept is that a player should never sacrifice. Since bunting is illegal in softball, this means "Don't make an out to advance a runner." To me, if there is anything worse than making an out, it is making an out on purpose. The term sacrifice itself is Orwellian. It imbues the act with an air of nobility, as if the player were doing something at great personal expense to benefit the team. But the cost is to the team, not the player. On a sacrifice fly, which scores a runner from third base, the batter doesn't get charged with an at bat and gets a free shot at an RBI, a statistic that is less than worthless because it seduces players into hitting easily caught fly balls. These premeditated pop-ups are sacrifices only in the sense that they offer

In 2005, Edwin Amenta posted a .535 on-base percentage in the Performing Arts Softball League and flashed some serious leather around second base. Read Professor Baseball for more on how his rookie managerial season turned out. He took the photos for this article.

up a team's chance to win on the altar of conventional baseball wisdom. Yet my teammates see the sacrifice as not only noble but smart, having had it drilled into them by Little League coaches and the Gil Thorp comic strip.

Eddy Ball also incorporates several ideas that depart from the macho credo of the average softball player. A key injunction is "Don't be afraid to walk." Good softball teams can usually convert free passes into runs, but my teammates, like most softball players, tend to think walks are for pussies. Sabermetricians love the walk, too, but other Eddy Ball precepts apply only to softball. A counter-intuitive one is "Don't be afraid to hit the ball on the ground." With the short distance to first base and uneven fielding talent, a ground ball often leads to the greatly



underappreciated softball play: reached base on an error. In the stats I compile for personal use, that counts as a hit. Another anti-macho, anti-standard sabermetrics Eddy Ball injunction—"Don't try to hit home runs"—is based on logistics. In Central Park these efforts usually result in fly outs because the New York Clincher softball is very soft, and, with no fences to contend with, outfielders can play as deep as they like. Like sabermetricians, I value the big inning, but in Central Park softball a big inning is far more likely to emerge from an error and a walk or two, sandwiched between a couple of singles, than from a three-run homer.

In the field, the central defensive tenet of Eddy Ball is essentially the obverse of the offensive injunctions—"Avoid the big inning." Pitchers should have decent stuff, but definitely avoid free passes, which fill the bases and take the fielders' heads out of the game. A routine play in baseball often becomes an adventure in softball, so fielding talent is crucial. I try to retain or recruit an entire team of shortstops and left-center fielders, because I want players who can make plays and play different positions as the need arises.

Everyone else—the guys who can hit, but can't field—I have shunted to the undemanding side of the softball defensive spectrum: catcher, designated hitter, extra hitter.

Flexibility may yield even larger benefits. George Herbert Mead, the only famous early sociologist to discuss baseball, thought that its fielding positions and rules promoted self-development and social awareness. Learning the game leads children to put themselves in someone else's shoes and, in the process, to appreciate the roles that others play, to identify more strongly with them, and to have more respect for the team.

In terms of player attitude and outlook, Eddy Ball asks players to remain calm and alert rather than getting worked up. Being relaxed helps you play better. Most hitters are slightly anxious, but have batted many times before and always know the count, so it is counterproductive to tell them how "big" they are in a clutch situation or that they should "protect" with two strikes. Players with an excessive desire to win are prone to repeating this self-defeating, fan-like advice, loudly and from close range.

the third way

During the off season I dropped a few players who had bad attitudes, felt entitled to positions they could not play, or were unable or unwilling to get on base. The last quality was easy to see, as everyone's stats appear on the league's Web site. A couple of others, irked at how I was playing them, quit after the first game. I kept a lot of unorthodox but agreeable and productive players who were good in the field. To round out the squad, I added a few similar but overlooked players, some from a coed league and a pickup game in Greenwich Village, and two guys who play in half a dozen leagues, but had Mondays free. With Zeus gone, I am our shortstop as well as our leadoff man and pitcher of last resort.

And during my brief tenure as manager, at least on the field, it has been "so far so good." By the second week of May, we are undefeated, edging on consecutive Mondays the three teams that have dominated us for years.

Still, my teammates mainly identify with the pros and believe in the Book. Sociologists might view the clash between my approach and that of my teammates as one between rational and traditional authority, two types of legitimate domination identified by Max Weber. I apply

science, logic, and evidence in seeking efficient means to achieve our common goal: winning. My players, by contrast, are traditionalists, suspicious of any deviation from conventional wisdom. But it is not that simple. My teammates see themselves as rational and the Book as a textbook based on a century and a half of baseball experience. Indeed, in 1904 when Weber visited the St. Louis World's Fair—and, as far as I know, did not catch a ballgame—the conventional wisdom was called "scientific baseball." My teammates view new, sabermetric ideas as crackpot, the softball equivalent of cold fusion in a jar.

After the season began, I realized that the only way to establish my authority and legitimate my approach was through Weber's third basis of authority—charisma. This does not mean having a magnetic personality or a hot body so much as being seen as magical, with extraordinary, inexplicable powers. My teammates would not accept my ideas if I expounded them, but they will play along with me as long as my magic remains powerful—in other words, as long as we keep winning.

Our streak is making me bold, and today I have an Eddy Ball lesson in mind. My teammates have been pressuring me to name starters for each position and set a batting order. Players think this is how it ought to be, because that is how it is in professional baseball. In addition, they want to have assured places on the field and in the batting order, ones that correspond to their self-images as

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players and their sense of how batting orders should look. I have resisted. Sabermetric research shows that batting orders are insignificant. More important, once a starter is named, it becomes difficult to move him to a different position, however much it might benefit the team. Players regard set positions as their property and see any change as both a theft and an insult. As social scientists know, other things being equal, people tend to react more

negatively to loss than positively to gain. My plan this afternoon is to rotate our infielders and outfielders every inning, as in volleyball. My teammates may not become better people, but they may be better prepared to help the team win if called upon later in the season to play another position.

evening the odds

I think I can get away with this today because we are



facing a team originally called the New Guys, which joined the league two years ago. The New Guys lost their first 20 games, but could not have had more fun, cheering each other on in ways I had not seen since grade school. Their low reputation is evening the odds today, however, because some of our more tightly scheduled players have decided that playing them is a waste of time. Billy, the junkball, control pitching ace I recruited, who plays on several teams and at night serves as a front man for a theme metal band, told me that he wants to play only in “serious” games. Other guys are taking the day off too.

With Billy away, the pitching start goes to Dog, our second-string hurler. A retired teacher, he defers to Billy and seems thrilled when he gets the opportunity to get in the game. Dog is on the small side, bald, with rheumy, basset-hound eyes. For a retiree, he is in excellent shape, riding his racing bike around Central Park several times a week, and he has the arm and the pitching profile of a young man. Like Nuke LaLoosh, Tim Robbins’s character in *Bull Durham*, Dog throws a hard, heavy ball, but has only a modest command of the strike zone. At catcher, I slot in the good-natured Big Artie, a playwright and a troubleshooter for an on-line horseracing information service, who can play anywhere. I plucked him from the same sleepy West Village pickup game that Zeus rescued me from three years ago. I hope he can guide Dog through the game, as Kevin Costner’s wise Crash Davis guided Nuke.

With four men AWOL, I was counting on the outfielder, personal trainer, and would-be actor Krishy to be our tenth. Krishy is a talented player and nice guy I found languishing in the East Village Softball Association. But he calls to tell me that his dog has shit all over his apartment, and he is reluctant to leave her. He asks me to call our

teammate Q to see if he would give them a lift. But Q, an outfielder and a drummer frequently on tour with the Allman Brothers, informs me that dogs, even those without diarrhea, are unwelcome in his ride, a Mercedes-Benz SLK convertible. Also, one of Q’s friends was kicked off the team and another quit, and he is hoping that I will need to reinstate them. So we will be short a player, and so much for my volleyball rotation scheme. I wonder if I have made some key miscalculation. I think I have put together a contending team, but I had not reckoned with the possibility that it would not show up to play. I have no theories about how to get my teammates to come to the park.

Even more disconcerting is that the New Guys have a new attitude. This team wants to win. They practice religiously and already have an upset to their credit. Last year’s New Guys could be counted on to have at least two women in their lineup—women can play in the league, although they rarely do—but this year’s version has just one, who is today the odd woman out, visibly irked about not getting to play. When they perform the pre-game, hands-in-circle group shout—“Win!”—I have a flash of recognition. With their newfound seriousness and their improved but not-quite-talented-enough-to-contend roster, the New Guys remind me of our team last season.

Our chatterbox outfielder Swanny, an underemployed stagehand, pulls our team together to respond in ceremonial kind. In our understaffed state, we must apparently



fight seriousness with seriousness. Or maybe since I failed to field a complete team (the absentminded professor, unable to take care of business), Swanny feels the need to take charge. He gathers the team to put its hands together, and everyone joins in but me. This children’s routine is

the antithesis of Eddy Ball. We bat first, but cannot convert our adrenalin surge into runs. Through four innings we produce nothing but goose eggs.

But that is all the New Guys have to cheer about. Even with only three outfielders instead of the standard four, we are steady on defense. In part this is because of our outfielder Bobby, a blues drummer. He is short and rail-thin, and is often called Little Bobby (even though Big Bobby left the team two years ago), with long stringy brown hair held in place by a bandana and a soul patch. He is a young man of few words (thirtysomething still counts as youthful here) and spits a lot, like the “doomed” catcher played by the young, too-small, baseball-challenged Bobby De Niro in *Bang the Drum Slowly*. Little Bobby is a left-handed hitter with middling power but excellent speed. By drilling grounders and getting a quick jump out of the box, he pressures infielders. Zeus considered Bobby too unschooled and mainly used him as a designated hitter, but I think Bobby has the potential to be a great outfielder. He has speed, agility, and his father’s vintage Wilson A2000 mitt. Bobby is self-effacing to a fault, never played organized baseball, and does not act the part.

In *Moneyball*, Lewis describes how the Oakland A’s outfox better-financed opponents by recruiting players who perform well but do not look the way ballplayers are supposed to and do not impress scouts with their physical tools. For the A’s, that meant picking up slow, pudgy guys with some pop and even better plate sense. In softball, however, the overweight slugger is overvalued. Undervalued are players who hit a lot of singles, reach on errors, are fast and skilled enough to make more plays than most, do not act the way softball players think major league players act, and have no entrenched attitudes about the game. That is Little Bobby. Today he is covering a lot of territory in right field, proving his value to all.

answered prayers

Dog is pitching well, but in the bottom of the fourth with one out, he falters, walking three batters to load the bases. I am saying soothing things from shortstop, while wondering why he doesn’t just throw a strike. There is, as baseball announcers say, nowhere to put the next batter, but Dog serves him four balls anyway, and the New Guys take the lead, 1-0. A liner into one of the big gaps between the outfielders will break the game open. Dog paces around, rubbing his neck—he had no idea he was getting the call today and spent yesterday in the Hamptons boogie boarding. His pitching has obviously gone well outside the bounds of Eddy Ball precepts. From left field, Q yells, “Eddy!” His look of irritation is evident even through

his wraparounds, and he is holding his arms out with his palms up and thrusting his face forward, the international signal for “Will you yank this wild man?” But I am reluctant to replace him with the last pitcher on the depth chart—me. I haven’t pitched since last fall, and the mainstays of my repertoire are a changeup and a medium-speed fastball with no movement.

Compelled to act on my principles, I send Dog behind the plate and Artie to second base. I move Cookie, my mild-mannered assistant manager and a trombonist pressed into service most days as a computer technician, from second base to third, and Penny the filmmaker from third to shortstop to replace me. I take the ball. I intend to force the New Guys to hit it and hope my teammates can field it. I miss with two fastballs. When I let slip a changeup for ball three, I am thinking, “Wow, we’re going to lose to the freaking New Guys—and it’s going to be my fault.” Cookie urges me on, neutrally enough, “C’mon, Eddy,” and I am thinking, “Why doesn’t he shut up?” I somehow manage to get a nothing ball over for strike one.

I wave the outfield to play deeper, and to calm myself, repeat under my breath, “Voros McCracken, Voros McCracken,” the hypnotically named sabermetrician who became famous for arguing that pitchers have little influence over whether balls put in play are hit safely. The idea is plausible for the majors, where the average players are excellent, way out on the tail of the normal curve of talent. In weekday New York softball leagues, however, the pitchers vary from college level to tee ball. I dispatch another grapefruit right down Broadway—might as well be putting it on a tee—and the batter turns on it and rips it head-high at Cookie, who gets his glove up in time to avoid cosmetic surgery and fires to first for an inning-ending double play. My prayer answered, I head to the bench, with my Mitchell and Ness, turn-back-the-clock, game-used Columbus Red Stixx jersey soaked through at the armpits and in need of dry cleaning.

We fail to score in the fifth, but I am getting my fastball over the plate and thus can use my changeup to upset the New Guys’ timing. The defense and I retire the first two, and I feel a surge of power. My arm emits a little, non-ironical fist pump when the third guy lunges at the changeup and lifts it harmlessly to Penny.

Penny leads off the next inning with a triple, and, trying to show by example that there is no need for a sac fly or a suicidal grounder to the right side, I work a walk. Dog does the same, and a couple of bleeders later we take a 3-1 lead, with a display of softball right from my unwritten textbook. We set them down again and pour it on in the seventh. My magic remains powerful. But when I set them down again to end it, I am feeling not so much overjoyed as relieved.



After the game, our players surround the ageless drink-seller, Panama, who emerges from nowhere at the end of each game with his cooler and sales pitch, "Win or lose, we booze." Gatorade is two dollars; Coronas are three. Cookie is gently razzing me about having almost killed him. The New Guys are dejected, knowing they let us off the hook and pointing fingers, their lone woman teammate having long since departed.

Say goodbye to *gemeinschaft*, gentlemen, and welcome to the iron cage of rationality.

recommended resources

Pierre Bourdieu. "Sport and Social Class." *Social Science Information* 17 (1978): 819-840. This piece spawned an entire sociological literature on sport.

Jim Bouton. *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues* (World, 1970). The finest first-person account of a season by a major league ballplayer.

Mark Harris. *Bang the Drum Slowly* (Bison Books, 2003 [1956]). Some great novels have had baseball as their subject or backdrop, and this is one of the best.

Michael Lewis. *Moneyball* (Norton, 2003). A prominent think-journalism book on the application of sabermetric ideas by major leaguers, and the ensuing controversy.

Alan Schwarz. *The Numbers Game: Baseball's Lifelong Fascination with Statistics* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2004). A history of baseball-analytical ideas by way of their innovators.

The Baseball Prospectus Team of Experts. *Baseball Between the Numbers: Why Everything You Know about the Game Is Wrong* (Basic Books, 2006). Up-to-date work in sabermetrics written for the average reader.

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