

Book Reviews

THREE NIGHTS IN AUGUST: STRATEGY, HEARTBREAK, AND JOY INSIDE THE MIND OF A MANAGER¹

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*The complexities are dizzying, the effort to prevent something perhaps encouraging the very thing you want to prevent, the system of pulleys and levers vengeful and sadistic, damned if you do and . . . damned if you do anyway. They are small choices, tiny ripples in the game, but they can also save a win.*³

Baseball's casual observers may find the game uninteresting, to say the least. To them, baseball is a simple game where pitchers pitch, batters bat, and fielders field the ball. Author Buzz Bissinger dispels this notion in *Three Nights in August*. Written in collaboration with Tony La Russa⁴—the St. Louis Cardinals manager and five-time manager of the year—Bissinger crafted an entertaining book that will educate not only the casual observer, but also the most dedicated baseball fan, on the complexities and intricacies of the game. Despite Bissinger's off-putting propensity for extravagant and over-the-top prose, those who read *Three Nights in August* to better appreciate the sport of baseball will not be disappointed.

During the 2003 baseball season, the Cardinals gave Bissinger “virtually unlimited access to [their] clubhouse and the coaches and players and personnel who populate it—not simply for the three-game series that forms the spine of the book but also for the virtual entirety of the 2003 season”⁵ This access provided Bissinger with great insight into the game of baseball from La Russa's perspective—an insight shared with the reader and unfettered by the usual rules of collaboration which would have allowed La Russa more editorial control of the book.⁶

Despite having ultimate control over the book's contents, Bissinger's admiration of La Russa clearly impacts *Three Nights in August*, which provides a mostly one-sided and very positive view of La Russa and his management style.⁷ Some reviewers find this a basis for criticism.⁸ One critic stated: “Bissinger never once argues with La Russa's choices, nor does he do much even to weigh them. Instead, he simply assumes that Tony La Russa is always right because, well, he's Tony La Russa.”⁹ This criticism is unwarranted. The subtitle of the book—*Strategy, Heartbreak, and Joy Inside the Mind of a Manager*—puts the reader on notice that the book will be from the manager's perspective. In fact, the very value of *Three Nights in August* is that it is written from a manager's perspective. While some readers might want a more unbiased approach towards La Russa and his management style, those who read *Three Nights in August* to better understand the intricacies of baseball and the strategy involved will find it well worth reading.

¹ BUZZ BISSINGER, *THREE NIGHTS IN AUGUST: STRATEGY, HEARTBREAK, AND JOY INSIDE THE MIND OF A MANAGER* (2005).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 153-54.

⁴ La Russa states that his motivation to collaborate on this book “came from the many conversations I've had with fans who wanted to dig deeply into the layers. They would light up when we talked about the complexities of situational at-bats, defensive positioning, and pitching changes, or when we discussed the psychological nuances of the game I saw that for fans, too, deeper knowledge could mean greater pleasure.” Tony La Russa, *Foreword* to BUZZ, *supra* note 1, at xix.

⁵ *Id.* at xiii.

⁶ Prior to writing the book, La Russa agreed that Bissinger would be allowed “wide latitude to report and observe and draw [his] own conclusion. . . . La Russa did not waver from the latitude that he promised La Russa has read what [Bissinger has] written [and] has clarified, but in no place has he asked that anything be removed, no matter how candid.” *Id.* at xiii - xiv.

⁷ Bissinger openly admits in the preface of the book “I came into this book as an admirer of La Russa. I leave with even more admiration not simply because of the intellectual complexity with which he reaches his decisions but also because of the place that I believe he occupies in the changing world of baseball.” *Id.* at xiv.

⁸ “Bissinger . . . is clearly enamored with the Cards' skipper. A little too enamored, frankly, which is precisely the problem with the book.” Brian Gunn, *Three Nights in August: A Review*, *HardballTimes.com*, Apr. 1, 2005, <http://www.hardballtimes.com/main/printarticles/three-nights-in-august-a-review>. “This isn't the first time Bissinger has fallen hard for a subject. A contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, his previous crushes include former Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell, in ‘A Prayer for the City,’ and the main football coach in ‘Friday Nights Lights.’” David Kipen, *Eccentric Book on a Baseball One-of-a-Kind*, *S.F. CHRON.*, Apr. 7, 2005.

⁹ Gunn, *supra* note 8.

The “Complex and Layered Game”¹⁰ of Baseball

In order to explore fully the strategy and the gamesmanship involved in the game of baseball, Bissinger and La Russa agreed that the focus of the book would be a three-game series; specifically, a three-game series between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Chicago Cubs in August 2003.¹¹ Within this framework, Bissinger does an excellent job of examining the “complex and layered game”¹² of baseball.

Bissinger’s pitch-by-pitch analysis offers readers the opportunity to appreciate the strategy, thought, and preparation that La Russa puts into almost every play. Prior to a game, La Russa seemingly spends endless hours studying not only the typical baseball stats,¹³ but also the individual match-ups between the teams.¹⁴ During the game, La Russa is constantly strategizing, trying to decide: where to play the infield with a runner on first,¹⁵ whether to pinch hit for the pitcher in the bottom of the seventh,¹⁶ or whether to use the hit-and-run.¹⁷ While some of the pitch-by-pitch analysis is excruciatingly detailed, it is this detail that helps the reader truly appreciate the intricacies of the game.

Three Nights in August is not simply a pitch-by-pitch analysis of every at-bat during the three-game series—something that all but the most ardent baseball fan would likely find intolerable. Instead, Bissinger weaves stories and discussions on a myriad of baseball topics into the pitch-by-pitch analysis. Bissinger explores topics as varied as La Russa’s response to one of his players being intentionally hit by a pitcher,¹⁸ Darryl Kiles’ death in 2002 and its effect on the team,¹⁹ La Russa’s personal sacrifices,²⁰ players and coaches stealing signs from other teams,²¹ and the evolution of the closing pitcher.²² These passages provide the reader with a broader and better understanding of not only the game of baseball, but also, La Russa and his role as manager.

Questionable Leadership

The central figure in *Three Nights in August* is, of course, Tony La Russa. There is no question to Bissinger that La Russa is one of baseball’s great managers²³ and he sets out to prove that to the reader. *Three Nights in August* clearly shows that La Russa is a great tactical manager²⁴ and some might argue that La Russa’s record²⁵ speaks for itself. Despite this, *Three Nights in August* raises concerns about La Russa’s leadership style, specifically his interaction with the players and his attitude towards the use of steroids.

¹⁰ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at xvi.

¹¹ *Id.* at xiii.

¹² *Id.* at xvi.

¹³ “[A]t-bats and hits and extra-base hits and walks and strikeouts and average for hitters, wins and losses, and innings pitched and runs allowed and hits allowed and home runs allowed by pitchers.” *Id.* at 18.

¹⁴ “[H]ow each of [La Russa’s] hitters has done against Cubs pitchers and how his pitchers have done against Cubs hitters, as well as the flip side: the individual performances of Cubs hitters against Cardinals pitchers and Cubs pitchers against Cardinals hitters.” *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 152-53.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 172.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 130-35.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 111-20.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 199-215.

²⁰ Arguably, the biggest personal sacrifice made by La Russa is time with his family. Since 1996 when La Russa became the manager of the Cardinals, he is separated from his family eight months of every year. His wife stayed behind in California with the children “to lead their lives while he led his. *Id.* at 100. On the wall of his office, La Russa had a plaque that read “We interrupt this marriage to bring you the baseball season.” *Id.* at 96.

²¹ *Id.* at 226-29.

²² *Id.* at 177-80.

²³ “La Russa represents, to my mind, the best that baseball offers” *Id.* at xv.

²⁴ La Russa’s ability to strategize and gameplan each play is evident throughout *Three Nights in August*. A great example of this ability is La Russa’s analysis of how to play the infield with a runner on third in the top of the sixth inning in Game 2. *Id.* at 152-54.

²⁵ “No one in the modern history of the game had managed for twenty-four *consecutive* years . . . – an amazing feat of security in a job that had no security. No one else had won the Manager of the Year *five* times, . . . , with each of the three teams he had managed” *Id.* at 3.

According to Bissinger, “La Russa believes that in virtually all situations, human nature dictates results and that his role as a manager is to recognize the impact of human nature and take the best advantage of it.”²⁶ From this statement, the reader would expect *Three Nights in August* to reveal La Russa as a leader who understood his players, a manager who over the years learned “how to manage the space between a player’s ears.”²⁷ But, “[i]f anything, La Russa comes across as brooding and lonely, unable to reach ‘difficult’ players like Garrett Stephenson and J.D. Drew.”²⁸

Throughout the book, La Russa denigrates the majority of today’s baseball players.²⁹ While La Russa is quick to point out the exceptions—most notably Albert Pujols,³⁰ his overall attitude towards today’s baseball players appears to be that “for today’s players, winning is ‘third or fourth on their list behind making money and having security and all that other BS.’”³¹ La Russa seemingly ties the problem with today’s players to the fact that players are so well-compensated that they have little reason to put forth extra effort in most situation because they already earn an excessive amount of money.³² La Russa, who puts such store in human nature, fails to understand that his complaints about young baseball players are surprisingly parallel to the complaints about the younger generation that many managers have in workplaces where excessive salaries are not an issue.³³ A general stereotype about the younger generation as a whole, or Gen Y³⁴ as they are often called, is that they are “an overindulged, spoiled, and disengaged group that looks at the world through a prism of self interest.”³⁵ La Russa’s belief that the root of the problems with the young players stems solely from excessive compensation limits his effectiveness as a leader. In order to be a more effective leader, La Russa needs to look beyond his own personal beliefs to determine what other factors may be motivating his young players.

La Russa’s limitation as a leader of young baseball players is illustrated by his attitude towards J.D. Drew. Drew is a talented baseball player whose attitude and seeming unwillingness to play to his full potential is a source of constant consternation for La Russa during the 2003 season.³⁶ La Russa decides that the reason Drew does not play to his full potential is that he is so well compensated that there is no reason for him to put forth a full effort.³⁷ “[Players] settle for some percent under their max. If you have the chance to be a two-million-dollar-a-year player, they might settle for 75 percent of that. In the case of J.D., if you have the chance to be a twelve-million-to-fifteen-million-dollar-a-year player, you settle for 75 percent of that.”³⁸ From what is written in *Three Nights in August*, La Russa never considers that there might be other factors at play, factors he might be able to manipulate to get Drew to play to his full potential. Ironically, La Russa acknowledges his own limitations when “he wonders whether it would be better for someone else to open [Drew] up to the seduction of his limitless talent”³⁹ In 2004, the Cardinals traded Drew to the Atlanta Braves where he seemed to thrive under the management of Bobby Cox.⁴⁰

²⁶ *Id.* at 19.

²⁷ *Id.* at 23 (describing the Cubs’ manager, Dusty Baker).

²⁸ Gunn, *supra* note 8.

²⁹ *Three Nights in August* is filled with negative generalizations about today’s players that Bissinger attributes to La Russa, including: “Few things infuriate La Russa more than the modern player’s steadfast refusal to play the game right.” BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 238. “There are a lot of players that don’t really want to dig deep enough to try to win.” *Id.* at 181 (quoting La Russa). “Most seasons, players do what they have to do and plug along because when you have talent, you can plug along. During the *free-agency* year, their intensity picks up, and they’re like hungry rookies again, eager to prove themselves and to avoid injury.” *Id.* at 159.

³⁰ “[T]here was nothing quite like Pujols. Players like that don’t come along once in a lifetime; they never come along. Yet Pujols had another quality that La Russa treasured even more, maybe because he himself had come of age in the game during the 1960s. It was selflessness in this ultimate age of selfishness, a joy in others’ accomplishments that exceeded whatever joy Pujols took in his own accomplishments.” *Id.* at 150-51.

³¹ *Id.* at 160 (quoting La Russa).

³² La Russa, *supra* note 4, at xx.

³³ In a 2004 presentation to the prison corrections community, one of the professors at the FBI Academy highlighted some of the most common complaints by correction managers, including: “They’re not willing to pay their due.” “They [are] materialistic. . . .” “[They’re not] willing to go that extra mile. . . .” Nick Nicholson, Ph.D., Professor, FBI Academy, Promoting the Next Generation, 5th Annual Innovative Technologies for Community Corrections Conference, June 15, 2004 (on file with author).

³⁴ Generation or “Gen” Y typically includes those individuals who were born between 1977 and 1997. BusinessWeek Online, *Welcome to the Gen Y Workplace*, May 4, 2005, http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/may2005/nf_200504_4640_db_083.htm.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 32.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* (quoting La Russa).

³⁹ *Id.* at 33.

⁴⁰ “Drew had over 500 at-bats for the first time in his career, hitting .305 with thirty-one home runs and ninety-five RBIs.” *Id.* at 264.

La Russa also demonstrates questionable leadership when it comes to the use of steroids in baseball. La Russa acknowledges the use of steroids by his own players, but tries to rationalize it by saying that the steroid use by his club was “‘not excessive’ when compared to other teams.”⁴¹ This same type of rationalization can be seen in La Russa’s response to the question of whether Mark McGwire used steroids. While La Russa was willing to acknowledge that McGwire used a steroid precursor, La Russa continued to believe that McGwire never used steroids.⁴² After McGwire’s testimony before Congress,⁴³ many believe that “the only conclusion you could draw was that [McGwire] had obviously taken some sort of substance.”⁴⁴ According to Bissinger, La Russa “approached various minor-league players in hopes of discouraging their steroid use”⁴⁵ and made some effort to educate his own players.⁴⁶ However, La Russa sidesteps any responsibility for dealing with the steroid problem, saying that only the owners and the players’ union were in a position to deal with the problem.⁴⁷ One is left to wonder what would have happened had a manager with La Russa’s record publicly denounced the use of steroids five or ten years ago.

Over-the-Top Prose

For the most part, *Three Nights in August* is well-written. However, the extravagant and over-the-top prose used by Bissinger, while entertaining at times, is detracting.⁴⁸ In one passage he writes, “He was Rasputin in red Banlon, the angel of death in a Polo shirt with little red birds on the front.”⁴⁹ This passage refers to Barry Weinberg, the Cardinals trainer, who was calling La Russa to report a player’s injury.⁵⁰ In another passage, Bissinger writes, “He is Kline’s eternal nemesis, the psychotic ex-girlfriend who sends you creepy notes through the mail to remind you she’s still around.”⁵¹ Here he refers to Kenny Lofton, a batter, who is facing the Cardinals pitcher Steve Kline.⁵² These are just two of the shorter examples of the extravagant prose that can be found throughout *Three Nights in August*. These sections are very distracting and add little, if any, value to the book.

Conclusion

La Russa and Bissinger collaborated on *Three Nights in August* in order to increase the baseball fan’s understanding and enjoyment of the game.⁵³ Despite the over-the-top prose, *Three Nights in August* succeeds in giving the reader a true understanding and appreciation of the game of baseball. While some readers may still find baseball less than interesting even after reading this book, it is hard to imagine a reader of this book watching a baseball game and not being able to at least appreciate the intricacies involved in the game.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 161.

⁴² *Id.* at 163.

⁴³ When questioned about whether he used steroids during congressional hearings, McGwire refused to answer saying that he was “not [at the hearings to] talk about [the] past” and that his attorney advised him that he “[could not] answer the questions without jeopardizing . . . [himself].” CNN.com, *McGwire Mum on Steroids in Hearing*, Mar. 17, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/03/17/steroids.baseball>.

⁴⁴ Dermot McEvoy, *Lights to Nights*, PUBLISHERS WKLY., May 2, 2005 (quoting Bissinger).

⁴⁵ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 162.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 161-62.

⁴⁸ “What I like best about Bissinger isn’t his reporting skills, which are solid, or his stories -- like the one about Tom Seaver predicting an entire pitch-by-pitch at-bat as surely as Babe Ruth ever called a home run shot -- but rather his erratic, sometimes overheated but often quite enjoyable prose. He writes as if he has a random word generator in his head, which spits out perfect left-field metaphors and Yogi-worthy malapropisms with equal ease.” Kipen, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁹ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 199.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.* at 246.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ BISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at xvi; La Russa, *supra* note 4, at xix.