

George Castle

Contributed by Chris Yandek
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The sport of baseball is very demanding on its writers who travel all over the country as they do their best to get new information to write about on a daily basis during the season. Baseball writer George Castle who covers the Chicago teams has written five books and has two new releases in *Baseball and The Media: How Fans Lose in Today's Coverage of the Game* and *Entangled in Ivy*.

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{audio}<http://thesportsinterview.com/mp3/George.mp3>{/audio}

One of the main things you talk about in *Baseball and the Media* is that many of the media don't spend enough around the baseball clubhouse anymore. Why do you think that is?

"I think there is a lot of cliqueness and clannishness among people that cover baseball, sports in general, but it seems to be endemic in baseball. I don't know why baseball coverage tends to breed arrogance among the people that cover it. I think because The Baseball Writers Association of America is a very elitist operation and feel that only those that cover baseball for a daily newspaper and cover an x number of games are worth a membership. That exclusivity limits the number of people who are voting for the postseason awards and the Hall of Fame. I just think not a lot of people are aggressive by nature. I think they feel there is safety in numbers. I just don't think there is a lot of editors that spur them on the old fashioned way of competing and trying to scoop the opposition just doesn't seem to exist at all anymore except in certain Eastern markets."

As a fellow media journalist, when you see these guys and know they are just normal human beings, isn't it easy to overcome everything else?

"Yeah, baseball players are just regular people with extraordinary gifts. They also tend to look upon media that don't understand the game and don't want to understand them as both players and people with disdain and suspicion. I think if you get to know ballplayers, and you can get to know them because baseball has the most access of any of the sports. You can access baseball players for the better part of three hours before each game where other sports have little or no pregame access. If you bother to get to know them, more often than not they will take you into their confidence and even accept you even though they make salaries befitting of Hollywood celebrities. I'd say only a minority have become so egotistical that they are not approachable."

Why do you think personally the media player relationships ended at the start of the 1980s?

"Well, because the media isn't on the team plane and before that the team train anymore. You don't spend a lot of hours together to get to know each other. The salary differential has widened, back in the 1960s a rookie was making the same amount as a middle level baseball writer, \$6000 a year. They don't stay at the team hotels so they aren't ending up at the bar anymore. A lot of baseball writers stay at Marriott hotels in order to build up Marriott points and of course the teams don't want them on the planes anymore. They wouldn't want to go on the planes because again they build up airline points."

You did an interview with Barry Bonds in 1996 and he said regarding the media, "They always embraced the son of a great family. So I rebelled against them." Do you feel Barry would be the way he is if he didn't have a famous father in Bobby Bonds under these same circumstances?

“Well, there are other second generation players that are very even tempered and are quality people. Growing up in a clubhouse should be an advantage. It should make you more professional. For whatever reason Barry became less professional. I don’t know if his father did not raise him right, maybe Bobby Bonds had some ego problems himself. I know that he had some problems with alcohol I believe later in his career. He passed away a couple years ago of cancer, but Barry brought this all upon himself. He has chosen long before he was linked with steroids. He has chosen to be hostile to the media, hostile to the public. It’s too bad because he could’ve been baseball’s ambassador, he’s from royal baseball bloodlines. Not only is his father Bobby Bonds, but his cousin is Reggie Jackson, and he is the God Son of Willie Mays. He could’ve been almost what Michael Jordan was to the NBA, but again he chose not to. It’s a big loss for baseball. In the end it will be even a bigger loss for Barry Bonds.”

You mention that relief pitcher Latroy Hawkins even showed you some racist hate mail in the book. Why do you think this kind of ignorance and racism still exists in baseball today when we as a society have gotten past that in other walks of life?

“I don’t think we have gone totally past it, but I think baseball players feed into the passion that people have. People take identities from their teams and they live and die with it. Of course when you have a player of color who has problems let’s say blows saves or strikeouts or something, the racist buried in a lot of people will come to the forefront, not only in terms of taunts at the ballpark, but in these letters. This was an extreme thing. Of course in Latroy’s case, he did not help himself because here is a man who grew up in the Chicago area, a Cubs fan, and when he saved his first game as a Cub he didn’t want to talk about it. I said, ‘Why didn’t you want to talk to the people who grew up with you that read my paper because my paper covers the area where you grew up?’ His answer was, those that I need to talk to and those I need to notify I will give them a call. He was just not media savvy. A very good teammate, his teammates liked him, but he became very standoffish in the media.”

You mention one player Oscar Gamble was traded after the 1969 season because he decided to marry out of his race.

“Well, I have to correct you. He dated outside of his race. That was a common problem with the Cubs then. They were a very racially backwards organization. The capital punishment for any African American player was being seen socially with a Caucasian woman.”

Why didn’t baseball at the time look at these situations and say isn’t there something wrong here regarding that standard?

“No, because baseball reflects society. I think until very...very recently interracial relationships were really frowned upon and caused a lot of consecration in society. Baseball is more conservative than society as a whole. Racially backwards organizations like the Cubs and Red Sox would not tolerate their African American players behaving out of a very

narrowly defined motive going about their business.”

That probably is not likely as often to happen today because where we are right now correct?

“Well, we are still not advanced. I remember being in a car dealership and an English woman was there and she says you people are 50 years behind us in terms of attitudes. In many ways she is right because we still have the sole Protestant work ethic attitude where everybody pulls themselves up by his bootstraps and everybody is responsible. You can be responsible for your actions, but if you can't get an employer to hire you, you cannot afford health care and we are left to fend for ourselves. That's why our attitudes are way behind what they should be, but getting back to sports, baseball is more conservative than general. Right now interracial relationships aren't going to be looked down upon. Don Baylor did not get public duff for his second wife being Caucasian, a very nice woman named Becky. He didn't get any problems from that. In that way we have advanced, but it's still there ready to bubble up from under the surface.”

Can we make the final conclusion from this book that rounded knowledge of reporters covering baseball is not where it should be?

“I don't think Chris that we can make a blanket statement, I think that they are a dying breed. I think you have to be a fan of baseball coming into the game to be well rounded. You have to like what you are doing. It's sort of like the players, they have to like too what they are doing and be willing to do it for free before they get a multi million dollar payoff. I think you have to like baseball and love the game in order to cover it.”

Your other book *Entangled in Ivy* looks at a lot of the Cubs history of the last 20 years or so. What's it going to take for the Chicago Cubs to make the playoffs this year?

“Starting pitching...starting pitching...and starting pitching. There is correlation between effective Cubs starting pitching and the team either contending and or making the playoffs. It doesn't matter what they do offensively. Last year they were a terrible offensive team and last on marginal base percentage, but could've been a contender in the weak National League Central if they had effective starting pitching. That is the bottom line. The Cubs have been messed up over the last few years because Kerry Wood and Mark Prior have been injured. When they didn't return they didn't have ready replacements from the minor leagues. If you are depending on Mark Prior and Kerry Wood, nobody can really fill in for those guys if they are continually injured. This year they are not waiting for them to come back. There is enough veterans to know what you pretty much are going to get.”

We'll get to Andy McPhail in a minute, but why was the payroll for one of the biggest fan base teams in the Chicago Cubs so low in the late 90s?

"He by nature isn't going to have the highest payroll in the game. A lot of people say it's the way he ran things in Minnesota. I just think it's the way he's philosophically slanted. He tied the Cubs payroll to the Cubs ranking in revenue. He also didn't feel you needed to have a lavish front office. Andy, according to many observers was old before his time. He is a good man in many respects, but running a 21st century modern team he lacked far behind and actually ended up with an understaffed front office. The Cubs ranked 29th out of 30th in office staffing. That hurt their talent evaluation and the whole process of give and take when you make player moves."

How much blame do you think can be put on Andy McPhail who was the general manager and team president for over the decade when it comes to the Chicago Cubs not winning as consistently?

"During about his time probably about 80 percent because contrary to what people think, the Tribune Company didn't dictate the payroll. You didn't have the payroll approved by Tribune secret executives. Andy McPhail had the power of the purse. He only needed one person in the Tribune Company, the corporate overseer to approve it. The player payroll was up to him. He just didn't feel you needed a large player payroll to win the World Series, forget about being equivalent to the Yankees or Red Sox, you need a player payroll to win. While McPhail was still in there, Chris, as President in September, I interviewed Jim Hendry last year. He said, 'We won't have a payroll as big as the Red Sox. We only need to have one as big as the Cardinals or the Dodgers and the teams we need to compete against. Well, with Andy gone, John McDonough, his successor as president had been taking quiet notes all those years and realized the team wasn't spending enough money and proved a radical increase in the amount of money being spent on players.'"

I love Chapter 4, which is titled It Wasnt Bartman's Fault because you go into many reasons why the Chicago Cubs lost to the Florida Marlins and it wasn't this one fan. Tell me about that.

"The Marlins were a very opportunistic team and they knew the Cubs bullpen was in bad shape and that they would have to stretch Mark Prior and Kerry Wood beyond their endurance to keep them in the real game. The real problem was setup in mid season when the Cubs bullpen beginning to collapse through ineffectiveness in injures. I twice asked Jim Hendry, the general manager, if he was going to look for additional arms to improve his bullpen and twice he said I liked my bullpen. Turns out he needed to bring in a couple of arms because his bullpen became unreliable the further you went into the playoffs. That forced Dusty Basker to shorten his bullpen, not use half the relief pitchers at his disposal, and stretch Mark Prior and Kerry Wood too long in games. That played right into the Marlins hands."

You go very into detail about how the Cubs facilities aren't as big space wise compared to many other teams. Though the ball club doesn't seem to think it's a factor in their on the field performance, what are your thoughts on the facilities having been around the clubhouse and do you think the Cubs will ever get a new stadium?

“The Cubs facilities are terrible. Anybody that works in Wrigley Field knows it is a tough time there. It's fine if you are going a few times a year there as a fan. It's like going to an old museum and stepping back into time 30, 40, or 50 years. Anybody who works there be it players, ball club employees, or media, it's a grossly substandard facility. Andy McPhail didn't think the players especially needed a bigger clubhouse. He felt that their priority was women's washrooms and other accouchements for the fans. Andy was wrong. You are playing by 21st century standards. With most of the new ballparks opened, you have big locker rooms, you have plenty of room to move, and you have big lounge areas. What the players don't want is the press being in their face the entire time. If they have no place to go or scarcely any place to go other than their lockers, the press are milling around all the time. I like the access, but I put myself on the other side and the other front. The players simply don't want to end up being monitored by the media and they want to get away from people, you don't have that at Wrigley Field. As far as a new stadium, very...very tough, the Cubs just spend 15 million dollars to improve the bleachers. I think they do need a new stadium. I don't know where you would build a stadium. A lot of the Cubs appeal is tied into Wrigley Field to rebuild on the same site. I don't know how you could do that.”

Finally, will baseball get past this performance enhancing time and will the drug test policies get better?

“I think so. The union has shown more of an ability to cooperate with baseball and to clean up the game. I think that any time Congress interferes with baseball, baseball was long advantaged with an Anti Trust Exemption, but when it comes under the scrutiny of Congress, they will run for the hills, and try to improve the drug policy. I don't think baseball totally ignored it. I just don't think they thought of it as an urgency, but now I think that everybody is on the same page. They want to purge the game of drugs and with the government oversight the way it's been, baseball has no choice, but to keep going forward and more strict drug policies. There is no turning back.”

You can purchase a copy of Entangled in Ivy and find more information at the link below

<http://www.sportspublishingllc.com/book.cfm?id=894>

You can purchase a copy and find more information about Baseball and the Media at the link below

<http://unp.unl.edu/bookinfo/5102.html>

About George Castle

George Castle is a lifelong Chicagoan who has covered baseball in that city via newspapers, broadcast outlets and books since 1980. Since 1998, Castle has authored nine baseball books: "I Remember Harry Caray," "Sammy Sosa: Clearing the Vines," "The I-55 Series: Cubs vs. Cardinals," "The Million to One Team: Why the Chicago Cubs Haven't Won a Pennant Since 1945," "Big Leaguers Advice to Little Leaguers," "Throwbacks: Old School Players in Today's Game," "Where Have All Our Cubs Gone?" and "Baseball and the Media and "Entangled In Ivy: Inside the Cubs' Quest for October." Castle has covered the Cubs, White Sox, Bulls and Bears for The Times of Northwest Indiana, the Chicago area's fourth-largest daily newspaper since 1994. In addition, since 1994 Castle has hosted and produced his own weekly hour-long syndicated baseball radio show, "Diamond Gems," now aired on 40 stations nationwide. His co-host is longtime sports-talk show stalwart Les Grobstein. Castle also has done work for NBC Sports and ESPN.