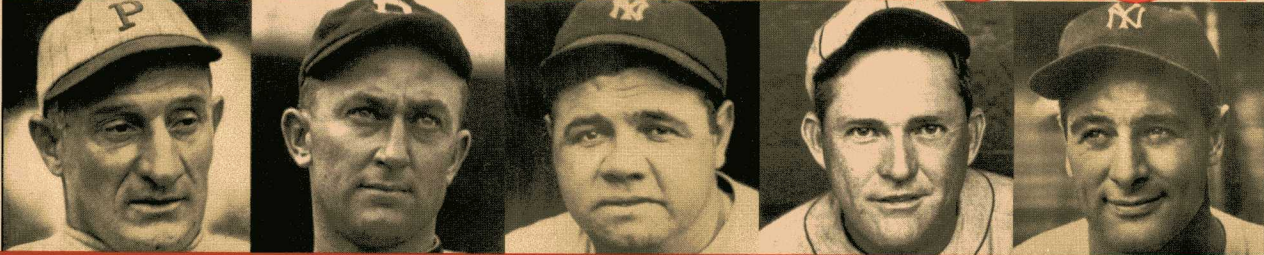


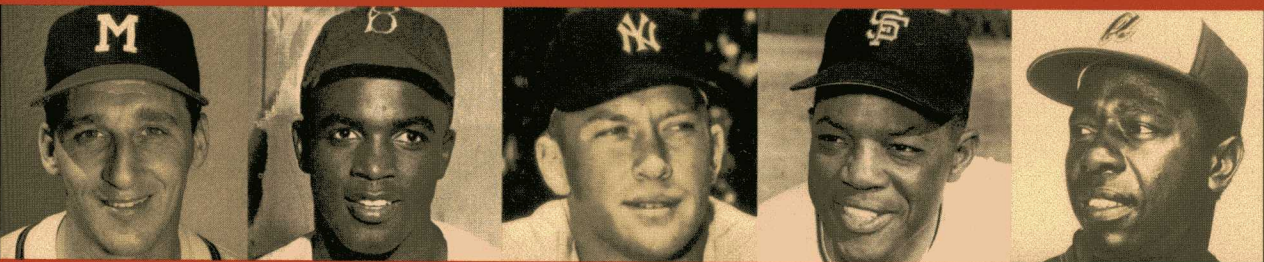
THE BEST OF BASEBALL DIGEST



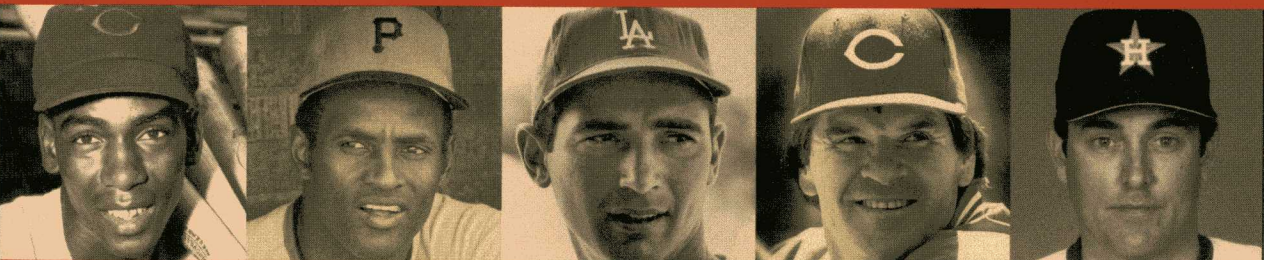
MORE THAN 60 YEARS OF CLASSIC BASEBALL STORIES BY THE



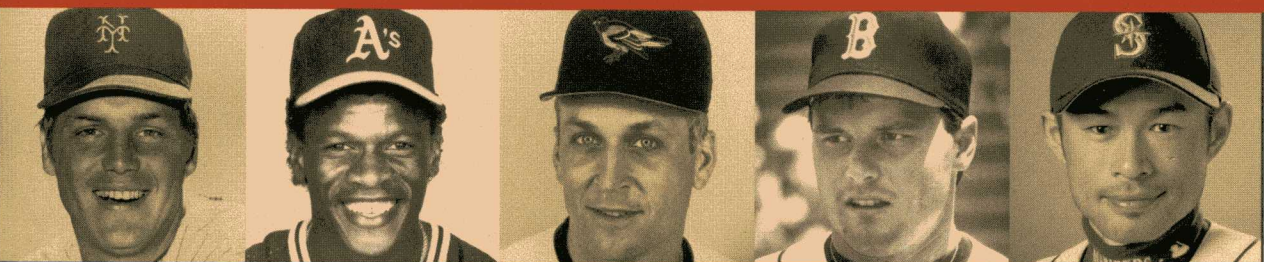
GAME'S LEADING WRITERS—ALL THE THRILLS, STRANGE PLAYS,



TERRIFIC PLAYERS, MEMORABLE PERFORMANCES,



DARK MOMENTS, AND HUMOR OF THE GREAT AMERICAN GAME



EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KUENSTER

walls, not less. So the next time you celebrate the old ballparks, save a kind word for Baker Bowl, League Park, Griffith Stadium, and Braves Field. Reputations to the contrary, they deserve it.

[1996]

The Day I Collected Babe Ruth's Autograph

BY JOHN DEEDY

When I was growing up in the 1930s in central Massachusetts, baseball cards were for play. We pitched them against walls or a flight of stairs until the corners were rounded and the cards so bent that they fluttered instead of sailing crisply toward their target.

Autographs of the stars? We collected them, sure, but we pinned them to the bedroom wall, where they stayed until the paper yellowed and rolled up on itself or, if in an autograph book, we stuck them in a drawer and as often as not forgot about them. Certainly we didn't run around the corner, as many kids do now, and hawk them with some dealer in sports memorabilia. Anyway, those dealers didn't exist in our Worcester neighborhood.

Which is to say the collecting of sports memorabilia wasn't the passion for us that it is for kids today. We had our stacks of baseball cards, sure, but they weren't any more precious than Indian cards. I'd have swapped a Lou Gehrig for a Geronimo or a Sitting Bull anytime. Autographs? You couldn't pitch them like baseball cards and you didn't swap them around. They were of secondary interest.

Thus when Lefty Grove stopped by the house one day after pitching for East Douglas in a Blackstone Valley League game, neither I nor any of my pals asked him for an autograph. My brother, Ed, was even disdainful. "Just because he can throw a ball better than me . . ." he said.

Ed was 8, maybe 9. The rest of us, a little older and naturally a lot wiser, were awed by Grove—his size (when you're 10 or 11, 6-foot-3 is mountainous), his huge hands, his rural Maryland accent. We had never heard anything like that in our land of the broad a's. We posed for a snapshot with him by the copper beech tree in the back yard, and it was like standing alongside the biblical Moses. To have solicited an autograph would have been unseemly. Besides, he was a guest.

In fact, I don't even remember Grove being approached for an autograph at the park in East Douglas, though it's likely he was. If so, there was no circus. In those days it was satisfaction enough to behold one of baseball's luminaries in the flesh, even if as a ball player on that particular day

he wasn't breaking a sweat. I'd zip it by most any Blackstone Valley League pitcher.

Again, we're talking about Lefty Grove, not the Boston Red Sox, but the Fenway Park Red Sox. On days off a player's time is more precious than bucks to be picked up in a parking lot. They were not that great. Besides, a few bucks wasn't small change. I was lucky enough to have a job.

New England towns took a hit during the Depression and, Depression or not, managers had to prove a town's superiority by bragging rights, as they shopped for outside talent.

Managers were pitchers for one town or another. Lefty Grove was a Hall of Famer. Grove was a neyman or not, he wasn't there. There's precious little of it to be had.

Anyway, Lefty Grove was on the third floor of a three-story building on Vernon Hill. He was there dropping me off en route to work. My uncle, and I had trained for a long time. In the afternoon, hospitality was in order. Lefty Grove was in no rush to get home.

My uncle, be it said, had a job at East Douglas. A former big league player, Philadelphia Athletics and the Boston Red Sox, a scout and friend of general manager Harry Frazar, the two had comprised half of the \$100,000 infield—Eddie Collins and Lefty Grove. I have a picture of them. Come to think of it, I don't remember Lefty Grove. From a half-century's distance, I don't remember Lefty Grove collected as a kid had it occurred to me. Lefty Grove was also the baseball coach at East Douglas. Lefty Grove was a batboy. The signatures were rare. Lefty Grove was an eye for the sure-fire prospect. Lefty Grove seemed, when Holy Cross was in Worcester, would be in Worcester with Stuffie McInnis as coach of the Philadelphia A's infield. One y

