

Skirting the Issues

by Kimberly Gadette

“PINCH ME!”

Football, hockey, basketball ... with so many sports now taking center stage, last month's World Series is probably now more of a blur than the view of a 100 mile-an-hour fast ball zooming over the plate at Comerica Park. Quick, who was MVP? Was it Pudge? Pujols? Or ??? But since it's a long way off until Spring Training 2007, please indulge me with one last analysis this year of the great game called baseball:

After witnessing a brilliantly executed magic trick, the first thought that occurs to the spectator after the cheering subsides is, “How did the magician do it?”

In the professional sports culture of young bodies running faster and leaping higher, there's some kind of oldtimer's peanut shell game going on with Major League Baseball. On one side of home plate, rookie talent is so boyish that sometimes those pesky birth certificates from foreign countries may need to be a tad falsified. On the other side, still starting on today's diamonds, are Roger Clemens (44), Julio Franco (48) and Jamie Moyer (44). Even if you're battling an early case of Alzheimer's, aka Sometimers, most of you will recall that in Game #1 of this year's NLCS, 40-year-old Mets player Tom Glavine pitched a 7-inning shutout against the St. Louis Cardinals and Superman Albert Pujols.



Hobbling down memory lane, we find boys who called it quits at 59 (Satchel Paige), 57 (Minnie Minoso) and 47 (Phil Niekro). Like a senior citizen downing a handful of Viagra, I could go on. But since time flies faster than a pop-up that 42-year-old catcher Pat Borders could have caught blindfolded, I'll finally meander to the point: What's with this fountain of youth called the MLB?

Determined to get to the proverbial bottom of the inning, I first considered the sodium nitrite found in every ballpark hot dog. After all, it's a preservative, a poor man's formaldehyde, no? But no. Not every ballplayer ingests a hot dog with the gusto of a Babe Ruth.

Then a-ha!, what about the baseball itself? Though the innards can be

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made of cork, rubber, or a mix of both, and though the leather cover can be cowhide or horsehide, the common denominator is the 108 stitches of waxed red cotton thread that sew the baseball together. Adding $1 + 0 + 8$, I came up with 9, the number of men on a team. Coincidence? I think not. And why red thread? Was some sorcery involved, perhaps a ritualistic dipping of said thread into a vat of sacrificial blood of virginal goats? But yet ... there are so many balls, even more than Jeter's on an off day, there are simply not enough goats to go around. And definitely not enough virginal goats. But like the instant replay, that's a whole other issue.

And then, in one big hot flash, it came to me. It's the beauty of the Pinch! Pinch runners, pinch hitters, pinch pitchers (OK, relief pitchers but really, what's the diff?). Oh my stars, I felt like I'd just been hit on the head from a surprise ball dropping from the ceiling of the Metrodome. It's the one-two pinch that makes for the magic that is baseball.

Let's say there's a veteran slugger who's got the on-base speed of my great-aunt Gertie. If he can just pull the ball to the opposite field, if he can just mosey on down to first base, then a young rabbit, pre-juiced up on a pot of coffee, can take it from there. And if that particular slugger isn't feeling his Wheaties on a particular day, there's always another dinosaur in the dugout, ready, willing and able—as long as he's had a day or two to warm up.

In the American League, the pinch via the Designated Hitter is set in stone ... stone being far more pliable than most pitchers' batting arms. The concept of a starting pitcher going the distance is almost unheard of today, what with a gaggle of relief pitcher-pinchers tossing their respective balls around the bullpen.

As a character in Bull Durham explained: "This is a simple game: you throw the ball, you hit the ball, you catch the ball." Since the player-in-a-pinch concept can be used for all three of these moves and more—like cowhide on the official Rawlings sphere—the MLB's got it covered.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't cheating. This is brilliant. The pinch allows us to keep rooting for our favorite stars far past the likely expiration date. Unlike Cher turning to her Beverly Hills plastic surgeon—again—the pinch is safe and effective. And doesn't cause anywhere near the ridicule.

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Even in the dugout, to misquote Cher, the pinch goes on. Let's say there's a baseball team full of prowess, but with the collective IQ of a batting glove. Enter the brilliant manager. Though not as obvious, it's still a pinch, utilizing the one-two combo of the manager's brain with the team's brawn. This is AARP on a bender, what with Jack McKeon having led the 2003 Marlins to the World Series at the age of 72. Though he retired at 74, he didn't break any particular geez record: Connie Mack left at 88, and Casey Stengel at 75. This year, the grandpa in the dugout is Jim Leyland. But at 62, he's positively a debutante.

As long as the pinch keeps these Methuselahs going, in perfect sync with their pacemakers, then here's to all the boys, whether wet behind the ears or dry as Leyland's Depends. They're called the "boys of summer" ... which summer is anybody's guess. ❁

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