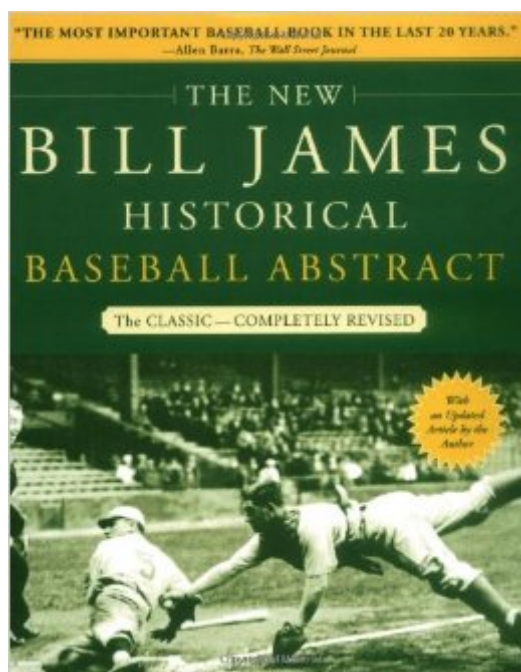


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The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract



Synopsis

When Bill James published his original Historical Baseball Abstract in 1985, he produced an immediate classic, hailed by the Chicago Tribune as the "holy book of baseball." Now, baseball's beloved "Sultan of Stats" (The Boston Globe) is back with a fully revised and updated edition for the new millennium. Like the original, The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract is really several books in one. The Game provides a century's worth of American baseball history, told one decade at a time, with energetic facts and figures about How, Where, and by Whom the game was played. In The Players, you'll find listings of the top 100 players at each position in the major leagues, along with James's signature stats-based ratings method called "Win Shares," a way of quantifying individual performance and calculating the offensive and defensive contributions of catchers, pitchers, infielders, and outfielders. And there's more: the Reference section covers Win Shares for each season and each player, and even offers a Win Share team comparison. A must-have for baseball fans and historians alike, The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract is as essential, entertaining, and enlightening as the sport itself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you like baseball books, in depth analysis and have a keen interest in the history of the game ... you NEED this book. Bill James' revision to his classic historical abstract weighs in at a hefty 1000 pages and a big price tag. But it's worth it. You really get two books. Book I: A decade-by-decade look at the game. As James says in his preface, he's not trying to give times and dates. Each section gives the reader a feel for what baseball was like in that decade - who the popular players

were, how they played, where they played. Who was the biggest player, the smallest player, which team had the best infield, best outfield, best pitchers. He gives an OJ Simpson award for each decade, a Clint Hartung award for the biggest flop, the Paul Krichell award for the dumbest trades and signings. He also details the biggest problems the game had in each decade. You can read a chapter and almost hear the fans debating Wagner vs. Cobb, commenting on what a jerk Rogers Hornsby was and venting frustration as New York teams dominated the 1950's. He also has one section on the Negro Leagues. The last section has his (brilliant) solutions to the problems the game has in the 90's. Book II introduces James' new method of player evaluation -- Win Shares. A quantum leap forward in analysis, Win Shares quantifies everything a player contributes - pitching, hitting and defense -- in terms of how many WINS it brought his team. This corrects for park effects, different eras (you'll be surprised to learn how good those 60's hitters were) and is a massive improvement in evaluation of defense. He rates the top 100 players in history based on career value, peak value, clutch performance, etc. This top 100 includes 12 Negro League players and has some surprises (Oscar Charleston at #4).

The great classic returns in somewhat different form. The original version was James' greatest achievement and belongs on a short list of the most essential baseball books ever written. And the new version? Most of the new book has been completely rewritten, yet it retains the same flavor as the original. If pressed, I prefer the earlier edition. This is partly because I read it often in the last decade and thus am somewhat biased in its favor, but also because James' new rating system - Win Shares - is introduced in only in general, without demonstrating the nuts and bolts. James promises that his next book (out next year?) will tell us a lot more about this interesting and probably excellent system, but in the meantime we have to take Win Shares on faith. However, this reservation pales next to the excellence of the book. The historical overview and the player rankings are a tour de force, as before. In particular, the ranking section is much more ambitious and comprehensive, with many more comments than before. This is one of those books that is more fun to read by skipping from place to place rather than from cover to cover. Note: this is actually the 3rd edition of this book. The "original" was actually two very similar editions - a 1985 hardcover and a 1988 paperback. Here are some things I particularly liked:

- * Decade-by-decade outlines of the game.
- * Greatly expanded capsule lists of odds and ends in each decade.
- * Sidebars describing interesting events and stories from each decade.
- * New 1980s, 1990s, and Negro Leagues chapters.

The Negro Leagues chapter is the best addition to Section 1, the historical overview.

Bill James is famous for his ability to collect, publish and analyze statistics about baseball. This is the second edition of his history book covering through the entire 20th century. But as James says in his preface this is more than just an update. In reviewing the first book he found that he didn't like a number of things that he did and so he has changed. Some may think for the better others for the worse but in my case I never read his 1980s edition so I have no basis for comparisons. James is not a professional statistician but has good statistical intuition and is respected by professional statisticians who specialize in sports statistics. James covers the rules of the game and is very detailed about the players and the rule changes and strategy changes. What I enjoyed most about the book was his lists of the all time top 100 players at each position. This is something sports statisticians think about often and using statistical adjustment techniques and Bayesian methods professional statisticians like Schell and Berry have written articles and in Schell's case a book on how to do this. Schell's book includes a list of the all time greatest hitters with Tony Gwynn at the top. The book tells you how the list is constructed and teaches statistical methods along the way. James has no formal statistical method for constructing his lists. At each position he ranks the top 100 players and does a good job of mixing the old timers with the present day players. Though subjective, this is a difficult task for anyone and James is one of the few who knows enough detail of the history and players in baseball to be up to the task. I may not agree with all of his rankings but that is part of what makes talking about baseball fun.

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