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Book Review: *Town Ball*

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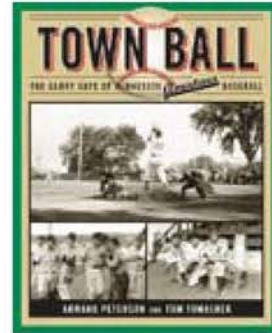
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town ball

**Reviewed by Scott Peterson, University of Maine
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MARCH 12, 2007

This handsome volume would make an excellent addition to the coffee table book collection of any fan of amateur baseball, but it would also be of special interest to cultural and sports historians who specialize in the post-World War Two era and the upper Midwest. Just as its title harkens back to the earliest days of baseball, *Town Ball* takes its readers to one of the last great heydays of the game and allows them to get lost among wooden bleachers under the cloud-filled skies of a Georgia O'Keefe painting. This encyclopedic treatment of Minnesota town ball is divided into three sections: a historical narrative of the years from 1945 to 1960, a description of the towns that hosted ball teams during that era, and a who's who of players, managers, scouts, and writers connected with the game in that state. Clearly a labor of as great a love as the game itself, it is a narrative of the players, by the players, and for the players.



This book is a narrative of the players because Peterson and Tomashek did not come to it with preconceived notions of amateur baseball in Minnesota and they did not impose any "-isms" on their subject. In short, their book is the story of the amateur game as it played out. They show how interest in amateur baseball grew from 1945 until 1950, partially fueled by the return of soldiers from World War Two. The next two years saw decline due to the draft for the Korean War and the fact many towns grew tired of the constant fund-raising required to sponsor a team. Organizers were hopeful of renewed interest in 1954, only to see the number of teams continue to fall. The arrival of the Minnesota Twins in 1961 is usually blamed for the demise of town ball in the state, but the authors show how things were already trending that way with the rise of television and other competing factors, thus avoiding the temptation to blame corporate America.

That Peterson and Tomashek are former town team players shows from the opening page. What started as a project devoted to a beloved manager soon became a paean to all the players, writers, fans, and team officials who made

amateur baseball in Minnesota possible. They even go so far as to apologize to the players (and the families of those players) who went unmentioned due to space constraints. As players, the authors prove they have the player's knack for distilling the key moment of a game (and it no doubt helped that Tomashek is a retired sportswriter). This player's eye for detail serves the authors well in all three sections, leading to a narrative style that is engaging and well-paced. The quality of that narrative is also shaped by the fact they are speaking with the best interests of the players and the game at heart. This does not lead to a one-sided account either, since they spend time describing incidents that are not wholly positive—such as the time a player knocked out an umpire after a disputed call. The key difference is that in a narrative by the players, such incidents are described without ridicule or condescension.

Ultimately, *Town Ball* is a narrative for the players. More than being dedicated to them, the book is a gift to them and their accomplishments. It is a chronicle of days gone past without giving in to the temptation to be nostalgic (an ever-present danger with baseball narratives of all stripes). The book also assumes an audience of players; it does not stop to explain details that players would know. It is told with the voice of a player caught up in relating the events of a game or a season or an entire era. At the same time, a reader does not have to be a player or even a resident of Minnesota to appreciate and admire the effort of Peterson and Tomashek to amass this collection of personal remembrances, newspaper accounts, photos from historical archives, and artifacts, such as broadsides advertising barnstorming teams of former major leaguers and local financial reports. As a true reflection of the time and the place, the faces in the pictures belong mostly to white males, but minorities and women are featured, such as Dick Newberry, who came to the state as part of the Colored House of David team, but stayed on to play town ball and the All American Girls Baseball team, which played exhibitions against town teams in the state from 1955-58.

I had the great fortune to read this book at the same time I was making my way through the baseball novels and short stories of Frank O'Rourke, a writer who, according to the authors, spent his summers in Minnesota from 1947-1952 and quickly found his way onto a local nine. It was informative to have *Town Ball* open alongside *Never Come Back*, O'Rourke's novel about the comeback of a 34-year-old player, which is partially set in a Minnesota logging town. O'Rourke's descriptions of "that heel tattoo on the aisle boards" and how "the lights went off in the towers with that dull thudding sound" were illustrated in the pages and the anecdotes of Peterson's and Tomashek's book. When they

write about \$50 being the going rate for top pitchers in 1947, their readers are in the same ballpark as Grover Bell from O'Rourke's "The Last Pitch" as the aging pitcher tries to earn one last pay day of that same amount. In fact, Peterson and Tomashek go so far as to identify the models for the third baseman and the major league scout featured in "Look for the Kid with Guts," another of O'Rourke's stories. Thus, scholars seeking background for O'Rourke's baseball novels and short stories need look no further than *Town Ball*, which is a credit to the local, social, and sport history of Minnesota. Every state should be so fortunate as to have authors who are willing to create such a record that grows out of the game, is written by former players of the game, and for players of the game.

Peterson, Armand and Tom Tomashek. *Town Ball: The Glory Days of Minnesota Amateur Baseball*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 410 pp. \$39.95.

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