



# **The Year of the Pitcher: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age**

*Sridhar Pappu*

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***The Year of the Pitcher* is the story of the remarkable 1968 baseball season, which culminated in one of the greatest World Series contests ever, with the Detroit Tigers coming back from a 3–1 deficit to beat the Cardinals in Game Seven of the World Series.**

In 1968, two remarkable pitchers would dominate the game as well as the broadsheets. One was black, the other white. Bob Gibson, together with the St. Louis Cardinals, embodied an entire generation's hope for integration at a heated moment in American history. Denny McLain, his adversary, was a crass self-promoter who eschewed the team charter and his Detroit Tigers teammates to zip cross-country in his own plane. For one season, the nation watched as these two men and their teams swept their respective league championships to meet at the World Series. Gibson set a major league record that year with a 1.12 ERA. McLain won more than 30 games in 1968, a feat not achieved since 1934 and untouched since. Together, the two have come to stand as iconic symbols, giving the fans “The Year of the Pitcher” and changing the game. Evoking a nostalgic season and its incredible characters, this is the story of one of the great rivalries in sports and an indelible portrait of the national pastime during a turbulent year—and the two men who electrified fans from all walks of life.

## The Year of the Pitcher: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age Details

Date : Published October 3rd 2017 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN : 9780547719276

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Format : Hardcover 400 pages

Genre : Sports, Baseball, Sports and Games, Nonfiction, History, Audiobook

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# **From Reader Review The Year of the Pitcher: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age for online ebook**

## **Andrea says**

Full disclosure: I am not a baseball person and I do not generally read sports writing. Fortunately for all involved, this book is about so much more. The year is 1968 and for the first time, sports stars are not just athletes but the voices of social change. The debate over whether and how they should speak out rages from newsrooms to the dugout. And in the midst of all of this, an epic rivalry grows between two incredibly talented and wildly different star pitchers.

This meticulously researched and terrifically written book takes you step by step through this incredible moment in time, shifting seamlessly between play-by-play game descriptions (okay yes there IS a lot of baseball in this baseball book) and the larger historical context. A great read and a GREAT gift for anyone who loves baseball, politics or both.

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## **Chris Dean says**

As a fan and student of this era not only in sports but culturally, I was really looking forward to this book. I learned some new things that I appreciated, such as the Player's Association internal struggles with how to honor/recognize RFK's assassination and Pete Richert's role of visiting veterans at the Washington VA hospital.

Ultimately though, Pappu's role as a fan of the Cardinals and Gibson in particular clouded his opinions and writing style, which he may or may not have intentionally divulged in his retelling of a story of trying to meet Gibson present day.

He seemed as if he relished in taking shots at Tiger manager Mayo Smith, calling him "oafish" and "lucky" to be given the Tiger managing job. I can understand trying to de-constructed the myth of Smith's brilliance with the Mickey Stanley-to-shortstop maneuver, but it seemed unnecessary.

There were also many areas where the writing was sentimental and factually flawed. Dick McAuliffe, for example, did not ground into only one double play in 1967; Pappu continued the tale of an incorrect myth. He also says that Yaz "refused to give Gibson his due" during the 1967 World Series, when the quote was not that biting ("he throws hard, others throw hard too").

Also, Pappu's list of 'experts' were similarly fan's either with common opinions or included for the sake of convenience. Gary Gillette? George Vecsey? Their contributions didn't really add to the thesis and if anything left the reader questioning their supposed authority. Similar the inclusion of Gerald Early's remembrances. Wouldn't it have made more sense to take to players on the Houston Astros who were in Chicago and smelled the tear gas during the 1968 Democratic National Convention? Not sure where Pappu was going with some of those thoughts.

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## **Zach Koenig says**

There is no doubt that the 1968 baseball season was one of the most influential and talked-about in the history of the sport. Besides covering the "main attractions" of that year (Bob Gibson & Denny McClain), author Sridhar Pappu weaves into the story the fabric of U.S. culture itself at the time, especially as it pertains to race relations. Some of it doesn't work (feeling a bit out of place and dragging the story down at times), but for the most part it does work and produces a story about individuals, the team sport, and society as a whole in the summer of '68.

The highlight of this read is Pappu's coverage of the personal lives and overall personalities of Gibson & McClain. Going beyond their statistical and in-game highlights (which are indeed also covered in great enough detail, though), Pappu really compares and contrasts the two off the field, giving an in-depth look (which I had not read before) of how they conducted themselves while not playing baseball. So much I've read before about that '68 season is always laser-focused on the eye-popping statistics (1.12 ERA, 30 wins, etc) and why they occurred, and both of those topics are covered here as well. But Pappu really digs deep into the personalities of the stars and what made them tick as both players and people.

Pappu also widens the tale considerably by taking on the big social issues of the day (race, the Detroit riots of the previous year, Vietnam War, etc.). On one hand, I appreciate the attempt to give much-needed context to the era. On the other, Pappu's tone often feels a bit strange, as if he wanted to write a social studies book first and stumbled into a baseball tale rather than the other way around. I don't think this was the reality of the situation, but that is how it sometimes plays out within the text, what with Pappu sometimes downplaying the "baseball talk" in favor of long stretches dealing with Jackie Robinson (a focus which seems a bit puzzling even upon the book's conclusion).

For the most part, though, "The Year of the Pitcher" still "works" as a solid book because of the fascinating look at the personalities of Gibson and McClain. That angle alone was enough for me to keep turning the pages. The socio-cultural sections are a bit more hit-or-more, but like I said I do appreciate the effort (at times) to widen the tale "beyond the white lines", if you will. Overall, a solid read for baseball historians (or those who lived it).

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## **Sean Kottke says**

If this isn't a shoe-in for a Casey Award, I want to track down the book that beats it. This is simply one of the best books on baseball out there, with a bonus of local interest for Tigers' and Cardinals' fans. There's a self-reflexive passage near the end about writers struggling to imbue sports with more significance than "just a game," and the remarkable achievement of this book is its clear demonstration that, yeah, baseball is just a game, but what happens on and off the field is still intimately woven into the fabric of American society, even when that fabric unravels as it did in the late 1960s. Without a single mention of today's controversies in sporting world, Pappu nevertheless shows that we've been here before, and the several stories that are told alongside those of McClain and Gibson powerfully illustrate that thesis. This is a great companion read to *Nixonland* in the scope of its cultural and political discussion.

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## **J.P. says**

For those who want sports in a vacuum and believe the players should simply go to work and not have any interest nor say in the wider world around them, this isn't for you.

For those who want to be reminded once again of how divided this country really was in the mid- to late-60s and have that division interwoven with the simplicity of a kids' game, this book is excellent.

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## **Mark Mortensen says**

With 2018 spring training gearing up I decided to read this baseball book hoping that it would provide a good biography of pitchers Denny McLain and Bob Gibson. The author provided a historical perspective, but I was not seeking to read a political book too, as the book jumped around covering not only the pitchers fastball movement but also the 1968 civil rights movement. During the 1968 World Series I was a colorblind high school junior when it came to baseball players.

Baseball is about scores, so for those keeping scores and statistics, Gibson, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron and many others were not vocal during the civil rights movement. McLain was neither democrat nor republican. During the 68' summer Olympics two African American medalists stood side by side during the National Anthem with heads bowed in defiance and fists in the air. Olympic great Jesse Owens did not like this, but baseball legend Jackie Robinson was in favor. During the 68' presidential elections Jackie Robinson, who hated the Kennedy's, backed republican Nelson Rockefeller in the primaries and then switched to democrat Hubert Humphry. These are not spoilers but rather an insight to a pattern. I half expected the author to fast forward to the NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem.

I'm also not certain as the title states "...*The End of Baseball's Golden Age*", that there ever was a defined "Golden Age". However in conclusion parts of the book were well worth reading.

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## **Chris Jaffe says**

This is one of the best baseball books of the year. It focuses on (of course) 1968, the greatest season for pitchers in the last century.

The book's main focus is on the two pitchers who had the most sensational seasons on the year - and who would meet in the World Series: Denny McLain and Bob Gibson. In fact, the book takes a good chunk of time going over their lives and careers prior to 1968, giving us background.

But it isn't just about those two. Other people make appearances. Don Drysdale? A little bit. Sure, he's famous for his scoreless inning streak that occurred in '68, but it was just a great streak, not as much as great season. No, the main non-Gibson/McLain characters here are Johnny Sain and Jackie Robinson. Though Sain had long since retired, he was the pitching coach for the Tigers and Denny McLain that year, and an interesting person in his own right.

Jackie Robinson is a bit of an odder choice as he was out of baseball - and largely disinterested in baseball - by 1968. But he helps open the door to other avenues.

You see, while this book is on the Year of the Pitcher in baseball, it isn't just about baseball. It's constantly related baseball to the wider world of America - and Lord knows there was plenty going on in America at that time. Some ins are easy. Moments before his assassination, RFK congratulated Don Drysdale on another shutout win. The sport had to decide what to do during after the assassinations of MLK in April and RFK in June. The Tigers played in Detroit, where the giant '67 race riot occurred, and Mickey Lolich was a national guard reservist for it. But Jackie Robinson helps tie the game to matters as well. In that season, Robinson endorsed Hubert Humphrey for president - and even attended a World Series game alongside Humphrey. Robinson's son had serious legal problems that year - he'd come back from Vietnam all messed up.

I really like how the book handles incorporated the non-baseball stuff. It gives the baseball some context. Bob Gibson's persona was tied to his race, for instance - even though Gibson himself was never that political. (But, as the old saying goes, sometimes the personal is political). Pappu manages to avoid any false/easy equivilances between baseball and society as a whole.

My favorite thing about how he handles the intersection of baseball and the real world: he really attacks easy, cheap, and largely meaningless feel good narratives. That's key, because the 1968 Tigers have historically been the subject of just that. The narrative: the city burnt in 1967 but the Tigers brought the city back together in 1968. Pappu castigates this as pure rubbish. Or, more accurately, he acknowledges that people across the city did feel good about the Tigers.....but that didn't change damn. White flight still happened. Mayor Coleman Young came to power. The burnt up areas by Tiger Stadium didn't recover. The feel-good story wants you to think that the Tigers allowed the city to put it all behind them, but look at Detroit history - the hell it did.

Oh, and Pappu does a good job telling his story. You never get too lost in the weeds of game accounts. The whole thing is nice and easy to read.

Criticisms? Nothing to severe. There a series of drive-by insults of Tigers manager Mayo Smith that aren't really earned. I mean, maybe he was a terrible manager, but Pappu never really explains why other than to say he didn't get along with Johnny Sain. (Actually, given Sain's track record, I've always had the sense he was the problem. I mean, he's a great pitching coach, but he can't get along with his managers. If a pattern keeps repeating, that's on him). Also, at the very end Pappu buys into Denny McLain's narrative that "I never woulda embezzled from that company's pension fund if my daughter hadn't died." I mean, McLain has a track record of his own. And while his daughter's death is very tragic, rumor has it that the overwhelming majority of people who have a child die on them don't end up embezzling.

Overall, thought, it's a great book.

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## Counsel182 says

The first professional ballgame I went to was September 14, 1968, when the Tigers won in dramatic fashion to secure Denny McClain's 30th victory that season. I picked up this book with the hope of reliving that remarkable year and series. I also have been fascinated by Bob Gibson and what seemed to drive and posses him. Pappu paints an interesting portrait of him and the racism he had to endure but Gibson wasn't simply that one dimensional. Pappu also puts McClain in his plane but maybe is a bit too generous? From a Tiger

perspective him seems pretty down on the team--he is driven to destroy the "myth" that the '68 Tigers "saved the city" the year after the riot. He also gets some of his "facts" wrong particularly on describing the Detroit sports writers and their relationship with McClain. He does sing the praises of Johnny Sain--an overlooked fellow-- and is pretty down on Mayo Smith, depicting him basically as "a drunk" who got lucky in moving Micky Stanley to shortstop in the series to keeping Lolich in and allowing him to bat in Game 5 of the series as well as having him pitch Game 7 on two days rest.

My biggest complaint with the book is that Pappu uses a haphazard approach in describing things that seeming had nothing to do with "the year of the pitcher"--most notably going on and on about Jackie Robinson and his own seemingly inconsistent views on racism and politics. there is however one remarkable chapter taking about how the owners in 1968 feared that baseball was in decline with the then fast pace world and technological advances it was on its way out. football was king. it echoes the same concerns about the game today.

the book also highlights the over emphasis we place on sports and celebrities. they may not all be as nice as you think they might be simply because they play on your team. Basebook books should be fun. I found this one to be more of a homework assignment. Cruel but fair.

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### **John Dugan says**

This book had its ups and downs. In all honesty, I was expecting a book that revolved around the lives and careers of Denny McLain and Bob Gibson, two phenomenal pitchers who made baseball history in 1968. Instead, I got bits and pieces of exactly that, with a bunch of chapters talking about the Civil Rights Movement and the effect that Robert Kennedy's death had on the baseball community. I'm not a fan of writers who veer off the main road and start sidetracking about broader topics that aren't the reasons I chose a book to read off the shelf. No doubt there were times where I would be reading along, captivated by the author's collection of what happened in the 1968 World Series and what made these two players of opposite race so similar in their dominance. All in all, this wasn't a terrible book, it just could've stayed on track a little better.

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### **Jill Meyer says**

"The Year of the Pitcher: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age", (now that's a mouthful!) is a book about baseball that encompasses so much more than the game and the players. Author Sridhar Pappu looks at the year 1968 - already justifiably famous for non-sports events - as the St Louis Cardinals' Bob Gibson, and the Detroit Tigers' Denny McLain tear up major league pitching. McLain, still a "bad boy" years after his retirement from Major League Baseball and Gibson, who rose from poverty on the basis of his all-around abilities at sports, met in the 1968 World Series. The series went seven games, with Detroit winning the title.

Sridhar Pappu does an amazing job comparing and contrasting Gibson and McLain that year while looking at other societal factors at work that year. The book is extremely well written and would be a great choice for a sports fan and an armchair historian.

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## Riley Cooper says

As a lifelong Tigers fan who was 14 in the summer of '68, I expected this book to be another rehash of stories that I already knew along with some new insight gained by the passage of time. Instead, the author gives us much more than a simple baseball story. In fact, I would say that this book belongs equally to the cultural history genre as to sports. Further, I enjoyed the depth of background in fitting the baseball season into the perspective of race relations, politics, and the troubles experienced by the city of Detroit. For the record, I found the author to be very good about keeping his personal biases (whatever they might be) out of the story.

The cover of the book makes it quite clear that Bob Gibson and Denny McLain are the focal characters in the story, but there is so much more here than just them. People who also play major parts here include Johnny Sain, Jackie Robinson, and Mickey Lolich, and there are many more who are woven in and out of the narrative.

On a personal note, my family moved from Michigan to Wisconsin in the summer of '68, so I had to listen to the second half of the season on an often faint signal beaming from Detroit's WJR radio station across Lake Michigan to a Milwaukee suburb. Having to go sit in the car at night to hear the end of many close games added to the feeling of witnessing something special. But it was the following summer when I had my up close and personal interaction with the Tigers.

In the summer of '69, the Chicago White Sox decided - due to poor attendance - to move one home game against each opponent up to Milwaukee's County Stadium. I was able to get chosen as one of a crew of 12 batboys/ballboys who would rotate into those games. The joy of my life (up to that point) was being able to serve as the batboy for the visiting Detroit Tigers!

The experience with the Tigers was ... interesting. Right off the bat, due to my size, I couldn't fit into their normal batboy uniform, so I had to wear a warmup jacket for the whole game. Still, it was fun to run around and get so many autographs before the game (Al Kaline - my baseball hero!) until Bill Freehan asked me if I was getting my work done. (Spoiler alert - there was no work to do yet. Crank.) But something was amiss. Where is the starting pitcher for the game - Denny McLain? I'm not sure how late he turned up, but I do know that the coaches were concerned.

Fortunately, Denny showed up in time, and I was able to get his autograph in the clubhouse before he came out. You'd think that running late would make him surly or uncooperative, but he said "Sure", drew his D----- M-L----- (literally, those were just lines) and went out to warm up. My other interaction with Denny McLain came when he walked in his second plate appearance, so I had to run over to the dugout to get his warmup jacket and then run it out to him while he stood at home plate. I knew I was taking too much time, so I tried to casually flip it to him, but it got caught on my finger and flopped down on home plate. With laughter ringing in the stands, I quickly snatched it up, said "Sorry", and handed it to Denny. He was very kind as he took it from me and headed down to first base. I felt very embarrassed by the whole sequence, but he thought nothing of it. My point is that both times that I interacted with Denny McLain were situations where another athlete might have been put off or exasperated by my request and my faux pas, but this young man - the reigning Cy Young Award winner and on his way to another that year - was very nice to me. To tie this back to the book, my view of Denny McLain fits very well with how the author portrays him.

I highly recommend this book.



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## **Tom Gase says**

A very good book on the year 1968 in baseball, which was dominated by pitchers, especially Bob Gibson, Denny McClain and Don Drysdale. The book talks about the entire season as well as a little bit from the 1964 and 1967 season's since the Cardinals won the World Series those years and were in the Fall Classic in 1968. Also discussed in this book were world events that occurred during the year such as the Vietnam War, MLK and RFK being killed and the Detroit Riots. Very well written and the research is great. Baseball fans and history fans will enjoy this one. Looking forward to reading more books by Sridhar Pappu.

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## **John Taylor says**

This book is almost underserved by its title. It's not just a look at how the assertion of several dominant pitchers set the tone for baseball in 1968. It's also a fascinating look at the journeys taken by Bob Gibson and Denny McLain ... two utterly dissimilar men whose paths collided in '68. Papua is more than a sports journalist ... he weaves together social history, sociology, current events, and much more to create a book that would interest and captivate even someone who has never seen a pitch thrown. He uses the stories of Gibson and McLain to shine a light on what America was in 1968, how it had come to get there, and where it headed as a result. Very highly recommended.

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## **Jon Spoelstra says**

This is more than a baseball book. It's a history book about changing times that weaves around two great pitchers in 1968.

Here's some misc thoughts about 1968 that stuck with me:

The pitching mound was heightened after Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's home run record in 1961.

Both Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated during the baseball season.

MLB office mishandled the mournings bringing the player union to life.

The pitching mound was lowered because of Bob Gibson's 1.12 ERA in 1968.

Both McClain and Gibson regularly pitched way more than 100 pitches per game. In one game, Gibson lost in ten innings 1-0 and threw 179 pitches. McClain routinely had cortisone shots to keep on pitching during the season.

Denny McClain wanted to make \$100k per year; after winning 31 games he settled for \$60k.

This was a fun book to read.

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## **Mike says**

A knockout of a baseball book and social history of the game of baseball and the United States in the mid to

late 1960's. Pappu threads the narrative of his story through multiple perspectives, and as a result of this brilliant series of lenses, the reader is transported through vibrant entry points into the lives of Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, Jackie Robinson, and the pitching coach Johnny Sain. The book jacket invokes the work of David Halberstam as a comparison point to Sridhar Pappu's prose, and I have to say, much to my awe and delight, that the comparison is a more than appropriate one. Pappu writes with such grace, while never forgetting to expose the rancor, bone, sinew, and humor that can arise around men in stressful moments of competition. I began reading *The Year of the Pitcher* as the first log thrown on my wintertime Hot Stove fire, and found myself transported into 1968, invariably weighing the politics and baseball of our modern times to the events Pappu's book shares so impressively. I can not recommend this book enough.

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