



Split Season: 1981: Fernandomania, the Bronx Zoo, and the Strike that Saved Baseball

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The never-before-told story of the momentous season torn in half by the bitter players strike.

1981 was a watershed moment in American sports, when players turned an oligarchy of owners into a game where they had a real voice. Midway through the season, a game-changing strike ripped baseball apart, the first time a season had ever been stopped in the middle because of a strike. Marvin Miller and the MLB Players Association squared off against Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn and the owners in a fight to protect players rights to free agency and defend America's pastime.

Though a time bomb was ticking as the 1981 season began, the game rose to impressive---and now legendary---heights. Pete Rose chased Stan Musial's National League hit record and rookie Fernando Valenzuela was creating a sensation as the best pitcher in the majors when the stadiums went dark and the players went on strike.

For the first time in modern history, there were first- and second-half champions; the two teams with the overall best records in the National League were not awarded play-off berths. When the season resumed after an absence of 712 games, Rose's resumption of his pursuit, the resurgence of Reggie Jackson, the rise of the Montreal Expos, and a Nolan Ryan no-hitter became notable events. The Dodgers bested their longtime rivals in a Yankees-Dodgers World Series, the last classic matchup of those storied opponents.

Sourcing incredible and extensive interviews with almost all of the major participants in the strike, *Split Season: 1981* returns us to the on- and off-field drama of an unforgettable baseball year.

Split Season: 1981: Fernandomania, the Bronx Zoo, and the Strike that Saved Baseball Details

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From Reader Review Split Season: 1981: Fernandomania, the Bronx Zoo, and the Strike that Saved Baseball for online ebook

Nathaniel says

The research in this book regarding the 1981 strike is tremendous. It's well done, it's told well, and it's entertaining. The Fernando Valenzuela story is also well told, and is well tied into the Dodgers winning the World Series. There is a lot of space given to the Yankees, and it's done well. I think there are better books about the Yankees of that season, and the "Bronx Zoo" stuff is well over done. Especially when the entire Zoo is boiled down to George Steinbrenner was an overbearing bully, Reggie Jackson was egomaniacal (except that one time), Gene Michael was a stat guy well before it was fashionable, and Dave Winfield didn't hit.

The book is completely weirdly organized, especially when it comes to being about the baseball season. The baseball only section are jumbled mess, and how stories are told seem completely haphazard. Katz is good writer, but its not like it was beautiful transitions from subject to subject, and it be a shame if you lost that writing. If you contrast the baseball section with the nicely organized epilogue, one wonders what might have been.

Among the other interesting stories is the team focus, Katz can find stories to tell in Oakland - former Yankee manager, and Steinbrenner foil Billy Martin is there; Montreal- star pitcher Steve Rogers was a crucial member of the players negotiating with the owners; Philadelphia - Pete Rose's pursuit of the NL career hit leader Stan Musial and Bob Boone was another crucial player in the strike negotiations; sort of in Houston - Nolan Ryan was magnificent late but less in Milwaukee and even less in Kansas City.

There virtually no mention of Kansas City in the second half until the As sweep them in the Divisonal Series. Milwaukee, who would have won the division, if not for the weird split-season set up, gets more mention, but they're incidental to Katz's narrative.

None of this is unusual cause writers have to make decisions and shape their focus, and that would be acceptable except for the ridiculous amount of space that is devoted to the All Star Game and Cooperstown (I found out later Katz is from Cooperstown, which explains it.) If the All-Star Game was some well played masterpiece, or something historically notable happened, I'd be fine, and understand. It's importance, first game back for the players after the strike, is unquestioned, but it was kind of a disaster of a game. That's disappointing because one could have told interesting stories in Montreal, Milwaukee and Kansas City. Montreal, especially.

It's a weird dichotomy in this book, Katz writes for baseball fans -there is minimal biographical information in the book, and there is even less baseball history in the book. How good was Andre Dawson in 1981, this book doesn't tell you. Steve Rogers, one of the focal points? Nope. If you don't know, this book isn't going to help you. Hard feelings about Thurman Munson gets between Craig Nettles and Reggie Jackson. And who is he, again? Not a sentence. There's this star-player aspect to the book. Fernando! Reggie! Rose! Ryan! It's a book for baseball fans, but baseball fans who only know who the best players are by who makes the All-Star teams.

Also just to mention, I read a Kindle edition (yeah I know its says hardcover) and the formatting by, I assume, Thomas Dunne Books was unforgiving. A joy of e-books is you can screw around with font size, and line spacing and margins. Some days I like small type, some days, I need like second line on a eye test

big. This book brooked no nonsense with line spacing, and at certain font size (8 point I think) it couldn't format it, so it decided to format about every five screens, leaving me with four blank screens. I'm not sure if that was the publishers first experience formatting for an e-book and were unfamiliar the formatting option Kindle gives readers, or if they were just being hard-asses, but it was disappointing.

(I didn't read this in a day, like I've lied to GR. I don't note the days I start books. I put this down for months on end. I can't even guess how long it took me.)

Steve says

Meh. I graduated high school in 1981 (you do the Math, it depresses me, haha). I was a HUGE baseball fan back then. The strike really, really, really disappointed me. And then my favorite team, the Cincinnati Reds, got screwed. But I still came back and watched baseball (and still do, even after the 1994 strike). I had never read a book on this season; one that I still find fascinating. If there wasn't a split season there could have been four sensational pennant races. Anyway...Mr. Katz has a lot of detail about the strike in this book. A lot. Actually, too much. I glazed over it at times, confused by the writing (and editing) even though I know how it turned out. The actual parts about the season were good, but the strike details bogged down the book. I'll save you some time if you don't want to read it:

1. The Cincinnati Reds got screwed by the idiotic decision to have a split season (mainly to make sure New York and Los Angeles got a playoff berth in my opinion).
 2. Bowie Kuhn was eventually elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, which is a joke.
 3. Marvin Miller has yet to be elected, which is a bigger joke.
-

Tom Gase says

A good read on the 1981 baseball season, one that saw two half's and two winners for each half of the season due to the strike. I liked the parts of this book where it talks about the teams and games being played, especially the last third of the book that talks about the playoffs and the Dodgers winning against the Yankees in the World Series. I really didn't enjoy the middle half of the book that talks about the labor talks, but I do admit it's well researched by author Jeff Katz and vital to the book. I just thought it went on too long. Condense it in half maybe. That being said, I did enjoy 2/3 of this book a lot. I recommend to anyone who is a baseball fan and especially ones that watched a lot on the 1980s. Also, on a side note, this book is written by the Mayor of Cooperstown? That's cool. Can I get a job at the Hall of Fame? LOL. Good stuff, looking to read more by this author in the future.

John says

Much like a split season, this is a split book. Katz starts describing the 1981 season, mixes in some backstory about the current labor situation, and then about 1/3 of the way through, the book shifts to full-on strike coverage. The strike ends, the season resumes, and so does the baseball coverage. I think Katz does a better job describing the labor talks than the baseball. Still, the end of the season was exciting, and the baseball is fun.

Matt says

A good story told extremely poorly. Jeff Katz could have used an editor, but even that might not have helped his sometime lifeless, sometime over embellished (read "seemingly false") telling of this interesting period of baseball history. The author is somehow is able to tell us exactly what the players were thinking over 30 years ago, sometimes using quotations, sometimes not. Either way, it has the feel of someone making the whole shit up, kind of like Erik Larson did in "Devil in the White City." At least Larson could write, even it is ended up being fiction. But, I digress. This book is disappointing.

The positives are that it did not take long to read, there are about 50 words to a page, and the many players mentioned can't help but make one feel nostalgic for the old days (or for me, the beginning of some of my favorite players from my formative years).

I think Jeff needs to stick to Mayoring (assuming he is a better mayor than writer). If you are looking for a good baseball book, go elsewhere. There are plenty to keep you occupied. I hope to see the 1981 strike revisited by someone with a better way with words.

Anup Sinha says

Very enjoyable book for me for mere nostalgia. I was a 10 year-old baseball fanatic in 1981 who suffered with the strike but was thrilled by the on-field heroics of that season. This was a way to relive that season 34 years later with an adult perspective.

Katz did a good job making this readable and compelling. His narrative voice worked for me. I never understood the issues of the strike or the progress towards its resolution as a child, so this was enlightening. At the time, I was more furious at the players and Marvin Miller but I can see now that the owners could have easily stopped this, but really had no reason to financially, if you read Katz's narrative.

Some reviewers have complained that there is too much about the strike and not enough about baseball, but that is what 1981 was! And personally, I was reading to learn more about it. You really get an idea how backwards baseball people were (and still are, really) when you see how they dealt with the issues and their bizarre resolution. Their settled compensation for free agency was nonsensical and it blew up in their faces, even though they missed two months of baseball to get to it! And the split season idea was a complete sham; completely unfair, taking away drama, but adding more television money to the owners coffers. I was intrigued to learn that Reds GM Dick Wagner was one of few dissenters from the beginning and, as fans know, the Reds ended up missing the playoffs despite the best record in ALL of baseball. The Dodgers, who won the World Series, really had no right to get out of the N.L. West and be in the playoffs to begin with when you look at it that way!

My only complaints of the book are minor and personal. I was a huge Tigers fan at the time and there's little about them in what was really a breakthrough season. Katz focused most heavily on the eventual World Series players, the Yankees and Dodgers, with much emphasis also on other contenders like the Expos, A's, and Astros. I would have liked to read more about other teams and players, but it would have made for a

much longer book and I can understand where Katz has to prioritize. I personally would have enjoyed a longer book more, but perhaps I am in the minority.

Nevertheless, great read that I enjoyed and went through briskly!

Budd Bailey says

The author of the book "Split Season: 1981," has another job. Jeff Katz, it seems, is the mayor of Cooperstown, N.Y. If that doesn't put a smile on your face for a moment, you're on the wrong blog.

Hizzoner already has one book to his credit, the story of the Kansas City Athletics in the days when they traded the stars to the New York Yankees for basically the Yankees' leftover scraps from the dinner table. The former day trader has raised the stakes here by taking on the story of an entire calendar year, and he covers it nicely.

For those older than, say, 45, the 1981 season was unique. It was the first "mid-course correction" from the path of free agency that the sport entered after the 1976 season with the Peter Seitz decision and the ensuing collective agreement between players and owners. The players saw their salaries go up in the years after free agency, while the owners and their representatives complained about increased costs.

The players were ready to strike in 1980 over a proposal to introduce compensation into the system, something that would have restricted movement from team to team. The two sides agreed on everything but compensation in talks about a collective bargaining agreement in the summer of that year, and agreed to study the matter together for a while. Sadly, the two sides remained entrenched in those decisions, with little actual bargain taking place for months.

By 1981, a walkout seemed likely, and the players used a tactic that hadn't been unveiled before - the midseason strike. That way, the players already had some paychecks in the bank, and the owners were looking at missing games in the summer when crowds were bigger. The Summer Game took much of that summer off. There were the usual legal moves that comes with the territory, as well as a variety of combinations of negotiators as everyone searched for a solution. Finally, the two sides came up with a settlement - a compensation plan that was so bad and ineffective for reducing costs that the owners dropped it the first chance they had.

Katz does his best work here on the strike, having talked to many of the principals involved and doing good research. The settlement really did mean that free agency was here to stay, and thus the story has some historical impact. It's valuable to have the tale all in one place. One warning for what it's worth: Katz is decidedly on the side of the players, as owners' negotiator Ray Grebey and commissioner Bowie Kuhn get pounded here. They probably deserve it. It's difficult for anyone to be on the owners' side in this one, especially because they had been so arrogant in the past and didn't handle the new relationship with the players well. Still, the author's point of view does come across loud and clear, which is worth noting if you prefer your history to be a little more even-handed.

The rest of the coverage of the year features the unusual season, split into two parts. The story has a little trouble generating much momentum, in part because the season never did have much momentum. Fernando Valenzuela really got off to a remarkable start with the Dodgers; it's easy to wonder what might have happened to him had the season been played in its entirety.

However, Katz's tale gets back on track with the postseason, which features fewer moving parts and no distractions. The Yankees contributed with their usual hijinks of the era; the stories of disharmony mixed with victory remain as astonishing now as they were then. We even got a good World Series between two very high-profile teams.

Most of the value of "Split Season" will come from the strike coverage, but those looking for a quick lesson in the season itself will find this satisfying. Let's hope there's more to come from this author, assuming he can get away from village board meetings every so often.

And, by the way - if Katz has higher political aspirations, he'll be happy to know that the prime minister of Canada wrote a very good hockey history book last year. Maybe sports books have become a launching pad for political hopes.

Stu says

A well written, well researched history of the 1981 baseball season. Not only do you get the events of the season (and the unique strike induced split season format), but an easy to digest look at the strike, its effects and all the players. Very good baseball book written by a guy who, at the time of writing, was the mayor of Cooperstown.....couldn't have been better

Steve says

A great look at the personalities involved in the 1981 baseball strike and the unusual split season that resulted. It was a strange time in major league baseball: free agency wasn't that old; Steinbrenner hadn't been screwing up baseball and the Yankees organization for that long (although he was trying his darnedest); Gary Carter, Andre Dawson and the Expo's were playing some great baseball in the purgatory of Montreal; and Pete Rose was chasing the NL hit record as a member of the Phillies. There were lots of larger than life personalities involved on both sides of the strike and the negotiations took place before the age of the 24 hour news cycle and instant communications. This book was fun to read, full of insights into the backrooms of the labor negotiations as well as the fortunes of lots of the clubs, from those who were there, as well as great narratives of some of the important games of the season. I received a free ARC copy of this book through Goodreads First reads giveaways.

Frank Ogden says

A good book on the strike of MLB players, caused a major uproar in baseball.

The Master says

A well-researched recap of the first baseball season I really "followed" as a kid. I had no idea that the split season format happened because of a players strike (I was very young) so I thought that all baseball seasons

went like this. Soon learned otherwise. Katz has put together a great look back at a unique year in MLB history.

Novel Destination says

I wish that my Dad and Uncles were alive. They were blue collar workers who had little time for TV or radio except when their favorite baseball teams were playing. They never missed watching a World Series. 1981 changed that for them and many others. Fans were confused and unsure what was going on and which media stories to believe. Author Jeff Katz thoroughly reviewed documents and interviewed many of the "combatants"--the owners and the players--to give us a fair appraisal of what happened. "Split Season 1981" was written in a way that makes it easy to understand both sides of the issues. I really appreciated the author mentioning current world events, top songs, and other pertinent trivia to assist the reader in understanding what was happening in the world beyond the baseball embattlement. The management and owners wanted to keep the players from unionizing and gaining various salary rights. Mr. Katz also points out that, while this was a highly stressful circumstance, a number of players reached new heights and personal bests. Having the strike fall midway through the season added much confusion and led to season winners in the first half, the second half and then the World Series. Tame by today's wild stories of excess amongst owners and players in all sports, 1981s split baseball season remains pivotal in the history of the game.

This book will appeal to history buffs and sports trivia enthusiasts alike. Mr. Katz shows some hometown pride (he is the Mayor of Cooperstown, often referred to as the "Birthplace of Baseball" and home to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum)and includes some great descriptions of baseball legends, their stats, and amazing plays they made when they did get to "Play Ball!"

I was given this book by the publisher, through a Goodreads give-away, but it did not influence my review.

Chris Dean says

Loved this book. Immaculately researched and well presented account of a very difficult subject to explain; the labor issues of the game in 1981. In addition, all cultural aspects of the game in this time are covered and all the major events.

Kek says

No better motivation to move through a book quick than the author is on a podcast you listen to and you don't want spoilers! Great Memorial Day weekend going through this one, Jeff breaks down the ins and outs of the '81 strike from both the owners' and players' side. Then deftly moves to the ridiculous split season format they all agreed to that year. Excellent read!

Harold Kasselmann says

I was very disappointed in this book, especially the first 60%. If you are doing a masters thesis on labor relations, this will be helpful. But if you want a satisfying read, this is not for you. The history of the failed negotiations between the players' union as represented by Marvin Miller and the owners council led by Ray

Grebe is painfully depicted in minute detail page after page including where and what people ate for meals. The complex points of negotiation regarding compensation for free agents were not made understandable for most readers. In any event, there was more than enough going on in 1981 to make for an enjoyable book(the rise of Fernando Valenzuela, Tim Lincecum, and Dave Winfield) to make an interesting story. The labor negotiations could have been done in a chapter or two.

I was turned off by the author's extreme bias and characterization of the major actors as either villains(Bowie Kuhn, Ray Grebe, and two thirds of the owners as opposed to the good and righteous guys in the form of Marvin Miller and the player reps like Bob Boone, Doug DeCinces, and Steve Rogers. In addition the author gratuitously made disparaging political remarks about Ronald Reagan that were immaterial but displayed Katz' bias. By 1981 the players had made great strides so the issues weren't black and white. While I agree with the players' position on free agency compensation at that time-since the owners refused to open their books to prove financial insolvency-I don't see it as open and shut as the author. Nonetheless, the chapters about the second season and the playoffs were enjoyable. The unique and flawed playoff format is something that Red Sox fans are probably still annoyed about to this day.

What saved the book for me was the heart warming story about Travis John, the two year old son of pitcher Tommy John, and other stories like Reggie Jackson(Graig Nettles and George Steinbrenner), Billy Martin and his pitching rotation. All in all, it's a mixed bag but enough to give it 3 stars.
