

A Far-From-Instant Replay For Larsen, Berra and Fans

BY ALLEN BARRA

Little Falls, N.J.

It was perfect the first time," says Yogi Berra of Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series, "and it was even better tonight." A packed house in the theater of the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center on the campus of Montclair State University was in full agreement. Roberta Ziemba, who was in her early teens when she saw the game at Yankee Stadium on Oct. 8, 1956, thinks, "It was better than perfect. It was more fun this time around."

In the fifth game of the '56 Fall Classic, Mr. Larsen faced 27 Brooklyn Dodgers and retired them all, including future Hall of Famers Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese and Roy Campanella. The feat was unprecedented in the previous 52 World Series, and it hasn't been duplicated in the 49 that have followed—or, in the immortal words of Mr. Larsen's catcher, "It's never happened in World Series history, and hasn't happened since." Last Friday, 80 guests paid \$300 each to watch the game, with proceeds benefiting the museum and charities designated by Messrs. Berra and Larsen. It was the first time either man had seen a replay of more than brief highlights of the game.

In fact, it was the first time that anyone in attendance had seen a replay of more than short clips of any baseball game played before 1965—except Doak Ewing. Mr. Ewing, a sports film collector, says that there may be only 10 complete or near-complete baseball games (the recording of the Larsen perfect game is missing only the first inning) prior to that season still in existence, all World Series games. "There are newsreels of highlights from thousands of games," says Mr. Ewing, "but nobody thought to keep entire games. Games were looked on as entertainment; nobody knew that we'd regard them as history."

Mr. Ewing bought this piece of history at a flea market; it had been put up for sale by the son of the man who kinescoped it for the Armed Forces more than half a century ago. "The games were recorded in order to be shown to servicemen and then destroyed," Mr. Ewing notes. "We have this one by luck and accident."

Those lucky enough to watch the eight innings of the game looked through a window back to a vanished world. "The first thing you notice," says Berra museum director Dave Kaplan, "is how much faster the game moved then than now. I mean how quickly they got the game going again after each side was out. There was only one commercial after each team's at-bat. Today, you've got three or four."

There was just one sponsor for the perfect game, Gillette safety razors. Some of the commercials were done by the



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game's TV announcers, the Yankees' Mel Allen and the Dodgers' Vin Scully.

Audience member Don MacNair, who admitted to faking illness to stay home from school and watch the game on television, noticed something else: "All you saw on the screen was the game. I didn't realize how cluttered up modern telecasts are until I saw this one. There was no box score in the corner, no ticker tape running across the bottom with scores of other games, no logo for the network or Major League Baseball, and no commercials for other shows flashing on the screen between batters. It was so enjoyable just to sit and watch the ballgame." Jim Pascuiti felt the same way about the commentary: "Mel Allen and Vin Scully were so good. Everything they said was to the point, and when there wasn't anything to say, they kept quiet." Or, as Yogi added, "If they didn't have anything to say, they didn't say it."

Everyone was quick to notice one thing when the first batter was retired—no instant re-

play. "Everyone had better pay attention," Mr. Ewing quipped to the crowd, "because you're only going to see everything once." Once was enough for Mr. Larsen, who got chuckles from the audience when he remarked, "Yup, that's pretty much the way I remembered it happening." As the game progressed, Mr. Larsen recalls, none of his teammates would talk to him. "They were superstitious. I wasn't. I wanted to talk about it. I sat down next to Mickey Mantle"—who helped preserve the perfect game with a great running catch off a drive off the bat of Gil Hodges—"and he was shocked. He got up and moved away from me."

Mr. Larsen wasn't superstitious, but the announcers were. Bob Wolff, who called the game on radio, told the museum crowd: "I never actually said 'He has a perfect game going.' I kept talking around it, saying things like 'Well, all the base runners tonight have been Yankees.'"

Mr. Berra thought that his pulse raced just as fast watching the replay as it did 51 years ago: "I kept worrying before each pitch as if I was playing the game tonight: 'Is this the right call? Am I set up in the right location? I don't want to ruin this by calling for the wrong pitch!' But watching the game again, I guess I did OK." Larsen concurs: "People forget that half the credit should go to Yogi. It was his perfect game as much as mine. He called every pitch of the game, and I had total confidence in him. I never shook home off once. Why spoil a good thing?"

For some, the evening was an opportunity not just to relive a great memory but to pass it on to the next generation. Dr. Paul Liroy, who saw the game with his father, watched the replay with his son, Jason, who flew in from Pittsburgh. Dr. Liroy remembers: "My father actually suggested leaving around the sixth inning so we could beat the traffic. Can you imagine?" Dr. Liroy's father took him out of school early that day so they could go to the game. "I sure hope my grammar-school principal doesn't read this."

In honor of the occasion, Dr. Liroy paraphrased a "Yogi-ism" on the spot: "It was like 'Back to the Future' all over again."

Mr. Barra writes about sports for the Journal.

Own Life Story

The Original Knickerbocker

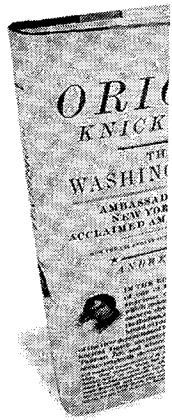
By Andrew Burstein
(Basic Books, 420 pages, \$27.50)

There is a high school in my Manhattan neighborhood named for Washington Irving; a large bust of the author near the entrance looks pensively at the Hispanic students and the middle-class passers-by. Recently a friend asked me who Irving was. My friend is the least literary person I know: He reads the news of the day in the tabs. Yet when I told him that Irving had written about Rip Van Winkle and the Headless Horseman, he knew the stories. That is good market penetration. Only J.K. Rowling, Mario Puzo and the Evangelists have better.

Before you read "The Original Knickerbocker," Andrew Burstein's engrossing biography, before you even finish this review, find a volume of Washington Irving's best stories and read the best of the best: "Rip Van Winkle," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "The Mutability of Literature." There are bigger stories in the world, but none that are better made.

They begin in the clear, warm voice of a capable journalist and a truly nice guy; they depict old times or distant places in clean, precise detail; they evoke some real horror—loss of identity, implacable pursuit, death followed by oblivion—before ending in comedy, sentiment and wisdom. Irving tells primal tales with the polish of a good after-dinner speaker. He is so completely charming that we can forget we have been charmed; so quietly moving that, like my friend, we don't remember who moved us.

Mr. Burstein tells the story of a bustling career without losing sight of Irving's elusive gift. Irving was born in 1783, the last child in the large family of a New York merchant. Bookish and dreamy, he never went to college. After several false starts, he found himself in a literary life. The details of magazines, book contracts, agents and publishers inevitably fill Mr. Burstein's account: The newness of popular fiction in America and the many kinks that had to be worked out—there was no international copyright in Irving's day—recall our adjustments to the Internet. Irving



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