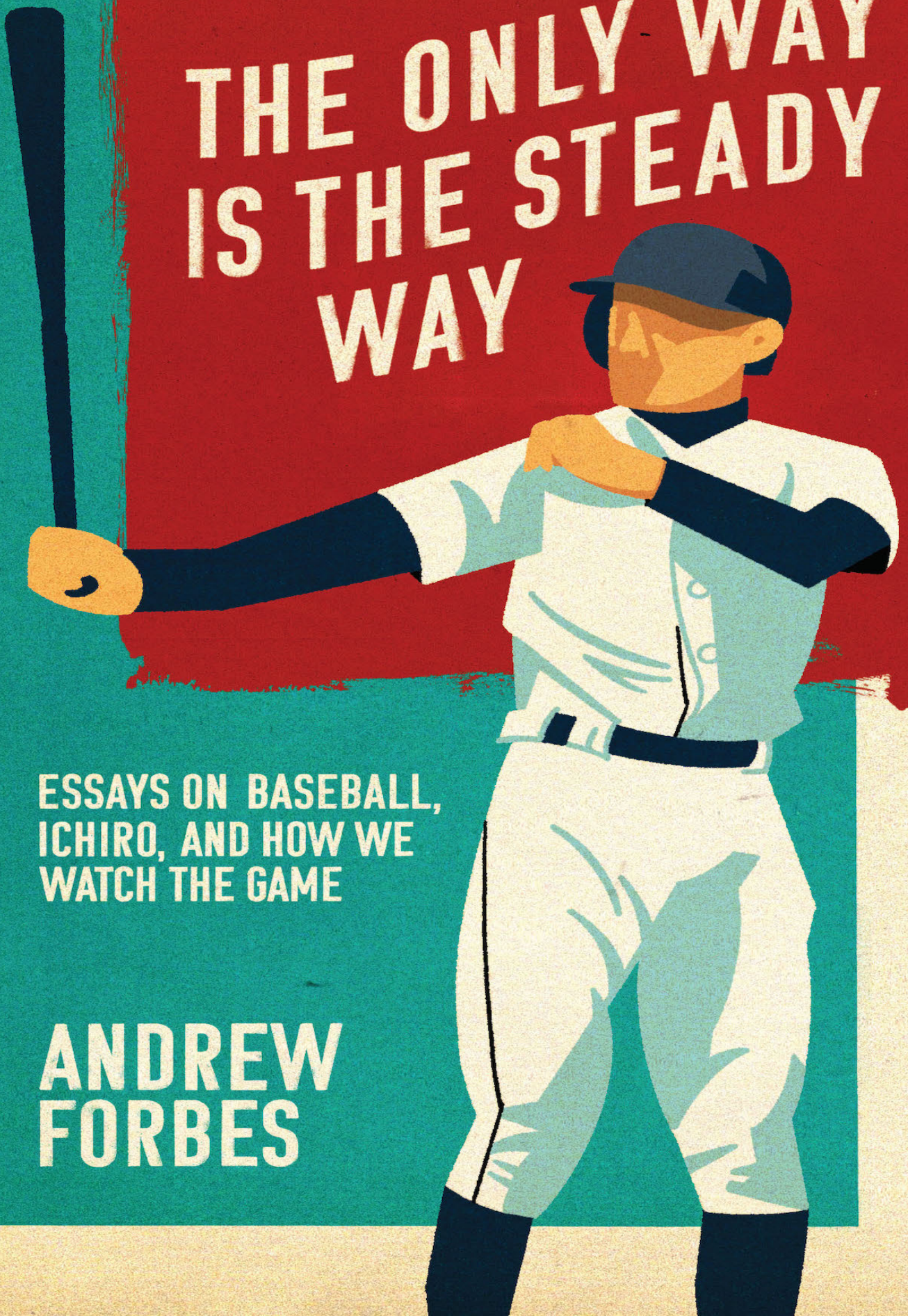


THE ONLY WAY IS THE STEADY WAY

ESSAYS ON BASEBALL,
ICHIRO, AND HOW WE
WATCH THE GAME

ANDREW
FORBES



“You do this for long enough, and you begin to crave originality like a desert wanderer craves cool clear water. Andrew Forbes’s essays are cool and clear and may well slake the thirst of any thinking baseball fan.” – Rob Neyer, author of *Power Ball: Anatomy of a Modern Baseball Game*

“*The Only Way Is the Steady Way* turns Andrew Forbes loose as a writer, and what emerges is a collage of emotion and clever observation of baseball’s larger meaning. His writing is poetic, imbued with nostalgia, and another reminder that baseball is the most literary of sports.” – Brad Balukjian, author of *The Wax Pack: On the Open Road In Search of Baseball’s Afterlife*

“Andrew Forbes writes so well about everything, with such a keen eye for detail and the texture of life, that you can sometimes forget that the occasion for these essays is baseball. And yet, there he always is, like a nimble infielder, with a fresh insight or deft turn on the game. There is no other writer working now whose baseball writing I admire more. This companion to *The Utility of Boredom* is a true gift.” – Mark Kingwell, author of *Fail Better: Why Baseball Matters*

“Andrew Forbes’s love of baseball is the most honest and difficult kind: clear-eyed, thoughtful, willing to see the flaws along with the beauty. This book is a beauty. Through the lens of Ichiro Suzuki’s magnificent career, Forbes examines our potential and our prejudices, helping us see the times that make the game and the game that makes the times.” – Scott O’Connor, author of *Zero Zone and Untouchable*

“You don’t have to love (or even like) baseball to love *The Only Way Is the Steady Way*. Forbes’ writing about baseball, something he’s loved his entire life, transcends statistics,

standings, highlight reels, and hype, and captures soul—not the soul of the game, but the soul of fandom. If you do love baseball, or have had any fond feelings about the game at some point in your life, you will find your feelings put into writing in the pages of this book. Baseball may not save the world, but this book will remind you that it does indeed matter.” – Brendan Leonard, author of *The Art of Getting Lost*

The Only Way Is the Steady Way: Essays on Baseball, Ichiro, and How We Watch the Game

Andrew Forbes



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For CC

*Don't put him on a pedestal, just treat him with respect He
seeks but his own approval, and earns all that he gets.*

—“Ichiro Goes to the Moon,” The Baseball Project

Go, go, go, go, Ichiro

Rounding third and heading for home

Don't you know

Beats the throw

Dave says on the radio,

“Ichiro, you're unbelievable.”

—“Ichiro's Theme,” Benjamin Gibbard

Author's Note

The majority of this book was written between early 2018 and late 2020. Given the requirements of the publication process the manuscript had to be fixed in place many months before its release date of April 2021. This is why you know things that I do not.

The book was perhaps three-quarters done when the novel coronavirus pandemic disrupted life on this planet, and so portions of the book were written when it was not clear whether or not there would be a baseball season in 2020. I recognize that a bat and ball game isn't of the highest importance in such times, but it certainly was of some concern as I tried to finish a baseball book. In the end baseball was played, albeit a shortened season with some strange rules (did they keep the strange rules?), with the stands full of cardboard cutouts. The playoffs were weird. The Dodgers won the World Series. I know that stuff, but as of this writing I still don't know what baseball might look like in 2021 and beyond.

The subjects of other references—such as who occupies the White House—are in flux this very minute. I know Joe Biden was fairly and resoundingly elected, for example, but I don't know how they finally got 45 out of the building. I know there is promising news about vaccines, but I don't know if and how they might allow us to get back to some semblance of a normal life.

Of perhaps greater significance to the content herein, the structure of Minor League Baseball is, as I type, undergoing a massive overhaul. Many teams have yet to finalize their affiliations, and other small-town teams are in danger of disappearing altogether. The majority of these essays were written under a now-obsolete system, and their content reflects that old way of doing things.

These will all be footnotes in future histories. Baseball—a

game which daily reiterates its lessons of patience, persistence, and humility—will roll on, somehow. I'm certain of that. The game is something I have needed very much during the long months of lockdown and isolation. The strange mix of anxiety and boredom which has characterized the pandemic could, I found, be kept temporarily at bay by watching or listening to baseball, even when decades-old games were all that was available.

I can't say what kind of world will greet the release of this book. Happily, the larger subject of this volume is the purity of effort, and that's a subject without an expiration date, and impervious to the news cycle. I'm hopeful that there are sunny days ahead when we can gather in person and watch baseball, and share our love of it together.

—AF, Peterborough, November 2020

Love in the Time of

The last truck rolled out of Corktown bearing the remains of Tiger Stadium in September of 2009. Detroit's American League team had played at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull Avenues for better than a century, beginning in Bennett Park in 1896, and then in its replacement, Tiger Stadium, from 1912 until September 27, 1999. In that final game, the Tigers beat the Royals on a warm, cloudy afternoon, and then dug up home plate. It was transported a couple of miles east to their new downtown stadium, which bore the name of a financial services company, and featured a Ferris wheel and a carousel on its spacious concourse.

The ten years between that final game and the ballpark's demolition saw the city of Detroit sink deeper into the debt, corruption, and depopulation that had begun with the White Flight of the late 1960s, and were exacerbated by the oil crisis of the 1970s, and the exodus of auto industry jobs in the 1980s. The city bled jobs and revenue, discontinued services to whole neighbourhoods, and eventually became the largest American city to ever declare bankruptcy. In the midst of this state of crisis, the question of what to do with Tiger Stadium never figured prominently in the public discourse. There were those, including former Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell, who lobbied for preservation, but their pleas were met with a collective shrug, as though everyone thought it was someone else's issue to resolve. When the city finally awarded the demolition contract in early 2008, it looked like the fulfillment of an inevitability.

In 2003, Christie and I took a short trip around Lake Erie. We were not yet married and had no children. It was just us, a sedan, a couple backpacks, a tent, and sleeping bags. We ended up in Detroit and bought tickets to see the Tigers play Cleveland. Hours before game time we stood just north of

the new stadium, overlooking the wide concrete trench of the Fisher Freeway, gazing out toward the Brush Park and Cass Corridor neighbourhoods on the far side. Christie, who is a biologist by training and temperament, is not a person given to overstatement. She grasped the chipped and corroded railing next to the sidewalk, high above the cars flying by on I-75, and surveyed the hollowed-out shells and boarded-up windows of dying city sectors.

“It looks like Sarajevo,” she said.

When I was eight years old, I was convinced I would die in a nuclear holocaust.

My father, a naval officer who was frequently liaising in an official capacity with NATO and who was therefore in a position to know such things, listened patiently as I asked him if all the popular cultural attention paid to the nuclear threat—the songs and music videos and television shows and made-for-TV movies—was warranted.

He exhaled, weighing the potential impact of his words, performing the mental napkin math that all parents are called upon to calculate from time to time, to determine whether the value of truth is greater than the value of innocence.

“Yes,” he finally said. “The threat is very, very real.”

This was sometime in 1984. Ronald Reagan was charging into an election, soon to be granted a second term. Margaret Thatcher’s second premiership was underway. The Canadian Prime Minister was the first Trudeau—though it might have been John Turner or Brian Mulroney.

Truman Capote died that year. Milan Kundera published *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Michael Jordan averaged 28 points per game and was named Rookie of the Year. The Tigers lost just five times in their first 40 games. They did not spend a single day out of first place and wound up

winning 104 games. They swept the Royals in the American League Championship Series and dismantled the Padres in five games to win the World Series. The Doomsday Clock read three minutes 'til midnight.

Three and a half decades later I wake up most mornings and go on the internet to scan my newsfeed, to see whether the world has ended since last I checked. American democracy is currently under threat, peaceful demonstrations are labelled violent uprisings, armed men storm state houses, and law enforcement punishes citizens with impunity. A pandemic envelops the globe, killing hundreds of thousands of people.

Additionally, though no less existentially terrifying, the planet is in a spiral of warming and disjunction. We've reached a crucial moment in human history, and how we respond in a very short period of time will determine whether or not the Earth remains habitable beyond the current century.

In light of all of that, is anything short of total engagement appropriate? Is it purely solipsistic to participate in any pursuit not immediately concerned with social justice, carbon reduction, or advocating for the rights of others?

Gun violence rages. Populism is tilting stable nations toward authoritarianism. Xenophobia is on the rise. There are still Nazis—*literal Nazis*—pushing an agenda of fear and hatred. We're in the umpteenth week of Covid lockdown, and I'm dreaming of sitting in an Applebee's in suburban Syracuse watching Sox-Yanks, sitting at the bar drinking watery domestic beer, happy as a clam. This can't be right. I'm reading in bed, emotionally invested in Jane Leavy's account of Sandy Koufax's perfect game. I get mad about the prospect of expanding oil and gas extraction; I get just as upset when I worry about where the Blue Jays are going to dig up some pitching for next year.

Am I living with my head in the sand? Possibly. Probably. But also, there's this: Every baseball game you've ever

attended or watched on TV or distractedly monitored via push notifications has taken place under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Every book you've read. Every new lover you've taken.

When Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima, the Cubs led the National League by five-and-a-half games over the Cardinals. By the time Fat Man hit Nagasaki, the Cards had narrowed the gap by a half-game.

Consider that the A's won three straight Series while Vietnam seethed. Ty Cobb hit .401 the year *The Waste Land* was published.

The myth of lost innocence is as pervasive as it is fantastical. In reality, the present has always been fraught, the future perpetually in question, the past ever murky and ill-understood.

A pastime is a useful weapon to combat the sense of powerlessness that such calamity breeds. To check in regularly—even daily—to a place where the stakes are mostly imagined, or at least short of life or death, is to salvage one's sanity. Baseball can, amid the churn, provide stillness.

It's at least partially true that I'm performing moral contortions to justify this thing I do not wish to let go, this thing which has adhered to me since my earliest memories, this game which has delivered to me so much uncomplicated joy. But I'm distrustful of pitting engagement in opposition to entertainment. We can fight for the world while still enjoying it. Our efforts can sit alongside those things that make it worth saving. March on Washington in the afternoon, then catch the Nats and Phils as the sun cools and the moon rises over the Capitol. Max Scherzer striking out ten while you sit with a beer and a pretzel in your shirtsleeves is the perfect reminder of what it is we're struggling to preserve, because without the things that express and define our humanity—and baseball certainly fits that bill—we're not living, and not making much of a case

for saving our civilization.

At the end of East 45th Street, Greta Thunberg stood before world leaders at the UN General Assembly and said, “You are failing us.” Up in the Bronx, the Yankees had just won their 102nd game of the season to enjoy a nine-and-a-half game cushion over the Rays.

There are human endeavours that inoculate us against the horrors of existence. When announcing his decision to step down from his role as Chairman of the MacDowell Colony, the novelist Michael Chabon said, “[t]hese feel like such dire times, times of violence and dislocation, schism, paranoia, and the earth-scorching politics of fear. Babies have iPads, the ice caps are melting, and your smart refrigerator is eavesdropping on your lovemaking...” But, he said, “art makes the whole depressing thing more bearable.” Agreed, I thought, but I’d add baseball to round out the sentiment. Or maybe I’d call baseball art.

I understand that the contemporary game is not without its problems, and yet when I see its perfect motion, the expressions of the faultless geometry at its heart, I forgive all of that. I see the game’s power to enmesh us within a community, to encourage productive entanglements, putting us side by side in a grandstand both literal and figurative. I see our kids with the names of our towns across the front of their jerseys and T-shirts. I see us all situated in the warp of history, buoyed by the transparency of the simplest, starkest arrangement in sport: a pitcher and a batter. I see its offer of daily rescue for six months of the year from this increasingly Stygian reality.

There is also a part of this love for the game that resists all logic, evades all questioning, and defies all good sense. Present it as a heat map of the heart—cool blue on the corners, glowing red right down the middle. When asked to locate the animus of his passion for the game, Theo, one of my twin sons, at the time nine years old, could say only, “It’s awesome!” Where eloquence fails, enthusiasm steps in.

It's the comfort of a place you can identify by the particular way the light falls on its recesses and angles, its green grass and white lines during evenings in April, in July, on afternoons in September. It's sunlight sweetened and enriched until it reaches a kind of golden crescendo before disappearing as the leaves begin to turn, because the team has turned in another lost campaign. But *that light*. You'd know it anywhere, and you tune in some days just to witness it.

It's Keith Jackson ("Whooooaaaaa, Nellie!") in a yellow blazer, calling *Monday Night Baseball*, introducing a clip of a dyspeptic manager—Earl Weaver or Billy Martin or Bobby Cox—getting ejected from a game. It's the memory of all that, or the YouTube-preserved video of it called up on a winter morning, to remind yourself that spring will eventually arrive.

It's Frank Robinson's smile and Eddie Murray's scowl. It's Howard Cosell calling Pete Rose "a gritty little guy with the skills that aren't quite what [a] superstar's are supposed to be."

It's a true doubleheader. Friday afternoons at Wrigley. A timely double play. It's Ichiro.

It's a night game at Tiger Stadium, amid the onset of football weather, the lights burning, visible even from across the river in Windsor. It's Goose Gossage refusing to intentionally walk Kirk Gibson, and then Gibson launching Gossage's 1-0 pitch into the second deck. It's Ernie Harwell conveying all that to you, a voice on air, drifting through the dark, making the night feel incrementally smaller, if only for those hours.

Christie and I returned to Detroit in 2019, this time with our three kids in tow. The Tigers were sweating through another hundred-loss campaign, waiting for their most recent glory

days, personified by Miguel Cabrera, to age out, and for the near future to come into being. We stayed at the Book Cadillac Hotel in a beautiful room with a view straight up Shelby Street of the enormous Canadian flag flying on Windsor's waterfront. The hotel is a snapshot of Detroit's waxing and waning fortunes over the last century or so: when the inn opened in 1924 it was the tallest hotel in the world. In 1984, unprofitable and badly in need of updating, it closed for renovations, remaining shuttered for twenty-four years, empty and rotting. Right around the time they levelled the last of Tiger Stadium, the hotel reopened under the Westin banner, sporting new amenities but having discarded many of its most luxurious details.

In May 1939, it was in the Book Cadillac that Lou Gehrig, having played in 2,130 consecutive games dating back to June of 1925, but already suffering from the disease that would come to bear his name, collapsed on the hotel's grand staircase. He later met with Joe McCarthy, his Yankee manager, to tell him he couldn't play that day against the Tigers. You have to use your imagination to picture that scene now: the grand staircase is gone and the new lobby features a Starbucks.

We had a good time in the Motor City, which bore in its downtown all the symptoms of gentrification. It had become a little less Sarajevo, a little more Brooklyn: busy, creative, colourful, and more expensive. We ate Coney dogs and visited the Institute of Art, sat in a park and listened to a band work through Motown hits, and stood admiring Edward Dwight's riverside sculpture commemorating the Underground Railroad.

The Tigers weren't home that particular weekend, though we walked by their empty ballpark anyway, stood outside the gates and took photos of the tiger statues, and the statue of Harwell. Then I took the kids down to Michigan and Trumbull, where Tiger Stadium had been. In place of the old building there stands The Corner Ballpark, where the Detroit

Police Athletic League hosts baseball, softball, and T-ball for local kids. We strode through the open gates and sat at a picnic table immediately behind the screen. It was a beautiful sunny Sunday morning in August. Two teams occupied the turf, one in blue T-shirts, one in yellow, along with a healthy cadre of volunteers, coaches, parents. The players were young—six or eight years old. They wore grey baseball pants, and most of them had socks pulled midway up the shin. Some in cleats, others in basketball shoes. They hit balls along the green turf. Their throws bounced or sailed wide of their intended targets. They laughed and shouted.

In the distance, dead centre and just shy of 440 feet from home plate, rose Tiger Stadium's old in-play flagpole. They'd intended to move it to the new ballpark, but wound up leaving it on the original spot and erecting a new one downtown. So the old one stands yet, resolute amid the wild galloping horses of progress, a monument to neglect or stubbornness, I'm not sure which, or if it couldn't be both.

A Handful of Dirt

Each March, Japanese high school teams play the Spring Koshien near Kobe, just as we here in North America are settling in for the opening of another big league season. The Koshien tournament is equivalent in scale to March Madness, and filled with just as much emotion and drama. It's the first of two annual tournaments; the Spring Koshien kicks off a season of ball that culminates with August's Summer Koshien, the larger of the two. In each, dozens of teams from across Japan play instant-elimination games in front of crowds of nearly fifty thousand at Koshien Stadium. Millions more watch on TV, and the pressure is impressive. Win or lose, most participants end the tournament in tears.

If you can locate a reliable streaming feed, you'll see boys in brilliant white uniforms play conservative, fundamentally sound baseball, as near to aesthetic perfection as you can imagine, the sole blemish provided by the telltale ping of aluminum bats. The pageant is opulent: players stand outside their dugouts before the first pitch and then sprint en masse toward the plate, where they meet in the batter's box, standing in straight, opposing lines. They bow to one another and to the day's umpires before sprinting to their positions. The first pitch is heralded by an air raid siren. Fans dressed in school colours sing, play brass instruments, and cheer through small bullhorns.

Since 1915, most of Japan's elite baseball players have seen action in the Koshien, including home run king Sadaharu Oh, one-time Yankees slugger Hideki Matsui, Angels designated hitter/pitcher Shohei Ohtani, and Ichiro Suzuki, who played in the Koshien in 1991, primarily as a pitcher, though he did manage to hit .505 for his three-year high school career. His efforts, though impressive, were not sufficient to help his school, Aikodai Meiden, emerge victorious from the Koshien's imposing gauntlet. As

consolation, he was drafted by the Pacific League's Orix BlueWave, for whom he went on to rack up 1,278 base hits, becoming a superstar of Michael Jordan-like stature in Japan.

When I set about writing this book, Ichiro was about to begin his thirteenth season with the Seattle Mariners, albeit after an interruption of seven campaigns spent with the New York Yankees and Miami Marlins. He arrived at camp in the spring of 2018 after a winter of contract uncertainty that very nearly saw him without a Major League team. He was reportedly mulling the possibility of returning to Japan when a slew of injuries to the Mariners' corps of everyday outfielders thrust him into the arms of his old team.

He returned to Safeco Field in March dressed in the home team's uniform for the first time since the first Obama administration, and he did so not as an All-Star right fielder and on-base threat, but as a left fielder called upon only out of necessity. His reintroduction to the Seattle faithful was warm and emotional—precisely the sort of circumstance that prompts fans to spend princely sums on souvenirs. Even the least cynical among us was forced to consider the likelihood that merchandising opportunities informed the decision-making process; there were other younger outfielders among the field of free agents when the Mariners committed to bringing Ichiro back to the Pacific Northwest.

Ichiro was forty-four years old at the time, which is paleolithic in baseball terms. White Sox legend Minnie Miñoso collected one base hit at fifty. Charley O'Leary was either fifty-one or fifty-eight (uncertainty and debate hover over his actual birthdate) when he pinch-hit for the St. Louis Browns in 1934. Satchel Paige pitched at fifty-nine. The thread common to all of those feats is that they were publicity stunts engineered by some of the greatest hucksters in the history of both baseball and capitalist enterprise. Neither O'Leary nor Miñoso were viable everyday ballplayers by the time they took their last cuts (Satch was another story, a man who did seem to have found a way to