RICK NORMAN'S FIELDER'S CHOICE: THE BASEBALL NOVEL AS PHILOSOPHY AND WISDOM LITERATURE

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In the 1980s baseball fiction has taken on more serious themes, utilized the richness of historical contexts, and explored the elements of race and ethnicity as part of the National Game. Novels such as Erik Rolfe Greenberg's The Celebrant and Harry Stein's Hoopla (both published in 1983), Donald Hays' The Dixie Association (1984), and John Hough Jr.'s The Conduct of the Game (1986) all represent the developing maturity of the genre. Historically, baseball fiction has been more allied with comedy, fantasy, myth, the success story or story of ritualistic initiation, or nostalgia than it has concerned itself with serious considerations of tragedy or failure.[1]

This, of course, is not to say that baseball does not have its darker or more serious side. It has had its tragic stories of Ray Chapman, Ross Youngs, Lou Gehrig, Harry Agganis, Ken Hubbs, and Thurman Munson. It has seen the greats of the game die tragically after their retirement, with Christy Mathewson and Mel Ott as the most poignant examples. It has had personal tragedies related to alcoholism, including those of Mike "Pinky" Higgins and Norm Cash. Baseball has also, of course, produced its share of "goats"--those who committed critical errors, made "bonehead" plays or had lapses of good baseball sense or instincts in critical situations, or "choked" and could not produce or rise to the occasion when they were expected to do so. Some players never escaped the humiliation or shame of the misplay, such as Fred Merkle's base running blunder in the heat of the 1908 pennant race, while others like Mickey Owen, with his dropped third strike in Game 4 of the 1941 World Series, escaped a permanent stigma.

Baseball is a sport where one can "die" in a number of ways.[2] It can be the premature end of one's career due to disease, injury, or an unfortunate accident like the cases of Dizzy Dean or Herb Score. It can be the failure to come through in the clutch or to live up to high expectations, which results in being released outright or being put on waivers or sent to the minors. It can be the sale of a player to a perennial cellar dweller or second division team. It could be time and age catching up with a player whose career had held up to a certain point

and then collapsed. It could be a young and undeveloped player who is put in the spotlight too soon as a young "phenom" and who cracks or fails under the intense pressure of a pennant race of the World Series. Whatever the reasons or situation, the fact is that baseball's failures experience a form of athletic death, and the fans or press can be merciless in the way it enshrines them in a permanent "hall of shame" or the way it writes their career or team obituary as they depart the scene.

In the structure of the game runners can "die" on base rather than advance or score, and rallies can "die" due to the lack of a needed hit or an obliging walk that will keep a rally or big inning "alive." Well-hit fly balls can "die" as long outs rather than carry into home runs, and the air can be "dead" in a ballpark. Bats go "dead" in a team slump, and a pitcher's arm can "go dead" and jeopardize a career or end the "lively" fastball. A team that ends up in the basement of the standings finishes "dead last."

Part of the baseball player's experience involves learning to deal with and to accept failure, or to realize that one's dreams of glory may never be fully realized. In nineteen years of playing with the Chicago Cubs Ernie Banks never was able to play in a World Series, and the same was true for Luke Appling with the Chicago White Sox and George Sisler in his career. Others who made it to the World Series experienced only frustration and failure, such as Art Fletcher, New York Giants shortstop who made 12 errors in four losing World Series (1911, 1912, 1913, and 1917) and hit .191 in 25 World Series games. Perhaps part of the multi-faceted appeal of baseball is this struggle against the inevitability and regularity of failure and against the various forms of death. Resurrections, comebacks, revivals or reversals of fortunes are also possible. Hitters break out of horrendous and prolonged slumps; pitchers who could not get batters out turn almost unhittable; teams go on winning streaks that take on miraculous and mystical qualities. Teams can go from last to first from one season to the next.

All of this may seem a roundabout way to arrive at a discussion of Rick Norman's Fielder's Choice (1991). However, Norman's novel is one that expresses deep sympathy for and identification with those who have made glaring mistakes in baseball and survived them

or overcome them. The novel is dedicated "To the Jimmy St. Vrains, John Andersons, Fred Merkles, Heinie Zimmermans, Mickey Owens, Billy Loeses, and Bill Buckners of the world; if not forgiven, may their mistakes be mercifully forgotten."[3] His novel features a young pitcher, Andrew Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder, who in the 1941 season is called up to the St. Louis Browns and in the last and pennant deciding game of the season is called into pitch in relief during the bottom of the ninth with the game tied 2-2 and runners on first and third with two out. After getting the first strike, Gooseball, who started out working from the stretch, then went to the windup after going to the resin bag. His body gets tied up, and he does a "bellyflop off the mound," balking in the process and sending the pennant-winning run across the plate. His "bonehead choke" makes him a hero for the local New York fans, who carry him "around the infield two or three times" and then unceremoniously dump him "back on the mound head first" (86-87). Norman's remarkable novel deals with Gooseball's fear of failure and his avoidance of situations where he might fail, as well as with his failure to act upon his human needs or emotions. After his ignominous embarrassment on the mound he must also thereafter face the shameful label as a "choker."

However, Jax or "Gooseball" must face an even greater challenge to his dignity and determination to survive after he is shot out of his B-29 Superfortress and ends up in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. At age twenty-two he ends up being put nude into a narrow punishment pipe where he is confined for well over three weeks. During this time of utter misery, deprivation, and loneliness he determines that he is going to give up and die, and he remembers his contemplating suicide back in his hometown of Smackover, Arkansas after he had returned home from New York City and his "bonehead choke" in the big game. However, Gooseball is resurrected from near death when he is jarred back to life and renewed hope by the sounds of hundreds of Superfortresses coming in waves and bombing the Japanese mainland. He is called back to life by the memory of his namesake nephew , Andrew Jackson Fielder II, the son of Jax's older brother, Jugs (Isaac), who had been killed in February, 1943 while serving as a pilot in the Pacific. Gooseball also thinks of marrying Dixie Palmer Fielder,

his older brother's widow.

He survives the remaining time period in the pipe by making plans for a pitching comeback in the majors or minors, and by pitching ball games in his head. As Gooseball puts it,

> Something happened to me while I was pitching them games in my head. It was like getting religion. Not Bible religion. I had got that a dozen times or more. This was something new. I decided that while I had been pitching, my life was right. Everything wasn't perfect, but I knew I was on the right track. After I lost the pennant and decided not to pitch no more, the world had gone plumb crazy. There was the war, Jugs getting killed, and now me stuck in a pipe a million miles from a hot dog. (125)

However, Jax's problems are not over after he is released from the pipe. In his cheering for the Superfortresses that are now pounding Japan into final submission, Jax has his face shattered by the rifle of a Japanese guard, and his eyeball is popped out of its socket with resulting vision problems. Upon returning to the United States after his eventual liberation, Gooseball encounters further problems and setbacks. Dixie, the woman Jax had asked to marry him by letter from a Japanese hospital, has married Jax's younger brother Jude, so part of the dream that kept him alive while in the pipe has slipped away. Jude turns out to be a conniving, opportunistic, and abusive individual who is determined to make Jax's situation difficult. Gooseball also faces the threat of a Army military court-martial for possibly "aiding and abetting" the enemy while he served out the last days of his POW status for Admiral Yamama as his gardener's assistant. During this time Gooseball had served also the pitching coach for the Admiral's son, Yoshi, even teaching him how to throw his patented "gooseball" pitch before young Yoshi goes off to his death as a kamikaze pilot.

Norman's novel is developed and structured around Andrew Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder's meeting with an Army Major as part of the official military inquiry into Jax's activities as a POW in Japan. His Army discharge has been held up, and the Major has agreed to look into Jax's case and to give him the chance to tell his side of the story.[4] In going over his life, especially during the period from 1941 to 1945, Jax must deal with the fact that he has been

made a scapegoat by the press when he pulled his bonehead balk in the pennant-deciding game and later by those, including his younger brother, who sought to find domestic enemies among those who had in a loyal and self-sacrificing way served their country and seen the worst inhumanity and horrors of war. An easy-going and decent man, Gooseball's experiences have changed a twenty-four year old man into a person who has suffered more than enough humiliation and blame while trying to survive and to do the best he could given the circumstances. He realizes that he failed to do several things he should have done, such as being there when his father died in the hospital in 1940 or saying good-bye to young Yoshi and hugging him before he left his father's house for the last time and went off to his kamikaze training.

However, in the course of his monologue with the Army Major, Gooseball, in reviewing his life, realizes that while baseball made him a "goat" at the vulnerable age of nineteen, and "Gooseball" became "Goofball" in screaming headlines, it was the dream of baseball that brought about his resurrection and his conscious choice of life over death. After Jax returns home from the war, and even with the disabling eye injury that causes double-vision, he is focused on the idea of playing baseball again and pursuing a dream that seems improbable. He even agrees to "play one season, majors or minors, for room and board" (164) when the manager of the St. Louis Browns agrees to have the club pay the $1,000 it will cost for the plastic surgery that will repair Jax's cheek and reset his eye. Connie White, the Browns manager, is willing to take a chance on Gooseball, but more importantly, he has become a man who has now learned to enjoy baseball and to care for the game and his team. Mr. White has changed from the hard nosed and mean manager who could only say to Gooseball "Indecision will kill us all, son." after Jax bellyflopped off the mound and balked in the winning run. The year that Mr. White finally did something nice as a manager (allowing a baseball loving "simpleton" named Jeffrey to wear an old Browns' uniform and to take care of the pitcher's jacket) the Browns began to win and won their only pennant in 1944. White is even willing to help Jax play baseball in Mexico if he chooses to go there rather than answer to an

unfair and trumped-up Army court-martial. The country that Gooseball returns to is the country of baseball, a game that he discovered that the Japanese loved when he first saw a "baseball diamond, bigger than Dallas" while flying on an incendiary bombing run to Tokyo and when he met Admiral Yamama, who, as it turns out, was in Yankee Stadium and saw Gooseball pitch in the last game of the 1941 season. The Admiral remembers Gooseball not as a "goat" or "choker" but as an American League pitcher and professional who can teach his son to be a pitcher. Even in the worst days of the war for a defeated Japan, forced to resorting to sending its young sons to die in suicide missions, the talk of baseball and simple games of catch provide hope or a respite from the horrifying death and waste.

Rick Norman's novel has a deeply pacifist theme, and he has told me that "A decision was made early on by the publisher to concentrate on the baseball aspects of the novel. Had I been in the position to do so, I would have tried to emphasize the war aspects of the novel more."[5] Gooseball's experiences after he is shot out of the protective bubble of his top turrent gunner's spot on the B-29 Superfortress make him realize that the hated Japanese are human and that they have reaped the bitter harvest of their military imperialism and their code of warrior honor. The Admiral has to send his son off to die in order to uphold military honor, and seeing Yoshi leave after a game of "burnout" catch with his father is one of the most difficult moments for Gooseball.

> Major, I can't tell you how bad I feel to see that boy go off to kill hisself. I'd gladly took him for a little brother. He would not have hurt me for the world, and he was going to fly a Jap plane into a carrier or a destroyer or a battleship full of guys just like me. I would not hurt him neither, but I'd been out there trying my dead-level best to shoot down young Jap pilots like him and get our bombs dropped on their factories and harbors and cities. You figure. (156)

Gooseball has come to realize the ways that war inevitably sacrifices the young as nations pursue some vague but compelling ideas of national destiny, and as other nations are forced to respond. He remembers his time at the Admiral's house as "probably the best I spent the

whole war" because "It was the most like home somehow--home like I remembered it. Home like it once was." (158). This time period brought more than compassion for the enemy; it brought a feeling of identification and unity, a shared sense of being victimized by forces that had been set in motion and could no longer be controlled until they had been played out to their tragic conclusion. In connecting himself to the Admiral and his son, Gooseball takes Yoshi's ball and glove with him. As a result of his experiences in a POW camp, in a Japanese hospital, and at Admiral Yamama's place, Jax has become an avowed pacifist who is not afraid to state his conviction, even to the Army that is court-martialing him:

> I don't know how a father could send his boy off to die, but then didn't my mother send me? Major, I made up my mind in the Admiral's front yard that I would never send my son off to war, at least not until the Huns crossed the Mississippi. (156)

While the war has produced a profound and irreversible reality of loss for Gooseball (his oldest brother, baseball, and Yoshi), he returns from it with a renewed spirit and with a clearer understanding of what has happened to him and why. He refuses to accept the label as "traitor" or "collaborator" and becomes angry at the stupidity, mean spiritedness, and conspiracy against him. Unapologetic for his time with the Admiral and Yoshi, Gooseball realizes he made the right choice in befriending Yoshi and teaching him to pitch. He did the right thing for the right reason, and that was because he loved this young Japanese youth and saw the love of the Admiral for his son. Jax had wanted to protect Yoshi from his chosen fate, and had even tried to talk him out of it by telling Yoshi he could have a "great future in the pro ball." The only collaboration Gooseball was guilty of was trying to talk the young man and his Admiral father out of succumbing to a last desperate hope that somehow the war would not be lost for Japan. Of course he fails, but he realizes that "a fellow's got little control as to whether a choice he makes turns out to be the right one. All he can do is make sure he done it for the right reason" (191).

This is the situation that Jax Fielder finds himself in at the end of the novel. He must choose between facing an unjustified court-martial and answering to totally unwarranted

charges or heading off to Mexico to play baseball. He must choose between leaving behind his five-year old nephew and a woman Jax deeply cares for to an abusive Jude Fielder or pursuing a dream that has been denied him now in the major leagues (due to the scandal of the Army charges against him) but may still be possible in another country. He chooses to stay and "stop Jude, once and for all" (185). Jude's abuse of his older brother's son is finally stopped by Gooseball and Bubba Broadax, the head deputy sheriff who warns Jude out of town after his abusive and violent nature are made evident. Jax realizes that "Jug's little boy and sweet wife" would be left "to the devil" if he did not confront Jude. As he says, "They was the only people left on this earth that meant anything to me, even though they weren't mine" (185). What Jax has realized, of course, is that the bonds of humanity are not defined by or restricted to family as defined by legal marriage or to nation as defined by race. We are all caretakers for children in need of protection; we are all members of an universal family with the same needs for family and community life.

In the end Andrew Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder overcomes and rises above all the stigma that has been attached to his earlier life. He does not "choke" or avoid making a decision when it comes to protecting his nephew and ending the reign of terror and abuse that his younger brother has inflicted on those whom he should love and care for. His best pitch ever is the "gooseball-style" one he makes with a Babe Ruth autographed baseball, which nails a shotgun toting Jude "about chest high and knocking him on his behind" (187).

In the newspaper article postscript that ends the novel, titled "Gooseball Flies Again" and dated Sept.. 4, 1966 from Washington, D.C., we learn sadly that Fielder was "blacklisted by the major leagues in 1946" and that even though the Army cleared his name, he "was never again allowed to play professional baseball." However, at age 44, he is honored at a Fan Appreciation Day twenty years after his being banned, and he is presented with an apology and the Air Force Medal of Valor by Commissioner of Baseball William D. Eckert, who is "credited with having arranged the ceremonies." We also learn that in addition to all the dignitaries and former 1941 St. Louis Browns teammates in attendance at the ceremonies is

"Fielder's 24-year old adopted son and namesake, Andrew Jackson Fielder II," now a promising third year minor league pitcher in the Yankees' farm system and former All-American at the University of Arkansas.

While Jax's dream of pitching in the big leagues again cannot be realized, he teaches his adopted son to throw his famous gooseball pitch, and sees him seasoned and prepared to possibly handle the pressures of major league pitching rather than to be shed into the limelight as Jax was at the age of nineteen in the 1941 season. Gooseball has married Dixie (the "Fielders' choice"), and when he delivers the ceremonial opening pitch on his Fan Appreciation Day, he stumbles "in the middle" and evokes "a hearty laugh from the capacity crowd." He also receives a "standing ovation when he delivered a reasonable facsimile of his gooseball into the strike zone to start the game." While Rick Norman has admitted that the newspaper article "was as much a 'cop-out' as anything inventive" and that his publisher (August House) wanted another chapter that he "didn't have the time or the inventive juice to write,"[6] the ending illustrates the point of his dedication of the novel to those players who have had to live with the stigma of committing what Norman sees as "the worst mistakes in professional baseball." Gooseball's day in Washington D.C. contains all the elements of a ritualistic forgiveness and a belated recognition of his remarkable achievement in the 1941 season (making it to the major leagues and helping his team compete for the pennant with his effective relief pitching) rather than his highly visible and nationally publicized blunder on a pitch he was never able to deliver.

What Rick Norman has shown in Fielder's Choice is how the "goat" questions himself and forever questions why they may have "choked," as well as how he has to "live with the stigma imposed by the fans." He acknowledges that he empathizes with these players because as an athlete he has "always had an inexplicable tendency to choke." One of his most painful memories occurred during his senior year in high school when his team lost a state semi-final football game because he was called for holding on what would have been the winning touchdown. As he relates this, "I was persona non grata through the rest of the

school year and even five years later, my name appeared in the Baton Rouge paper as having been responsible for losing the game."[7] That indeed was a harsh judgment and penalty to pay, but of course, part of the costs of a cultural emphasis on winning and athletic superiority is to blame individuals for highly visible and critical mistakes. Team failure is often more difficult to assess or pinpoint, and games appear to hinge on isolated situations where individual success or failure can be spotted. Such blame does indeed attach stigma projected by disappointed and celebrating fans alike on the failing athlete, and self-doubt or the eternal question of Why me? will become part of the individual's mind. It may be hard to forget that it is, after all, only a game, and that what one does on an athletic field of endeavor is only a brief moment or a fraction of what one is, or will be, in the multiple areas of one's life, relationships, and other activities. Reactions to game situations are, of course, physiological as the body reacts in a performance way to complex circumstances that demand instantaneous decisions or choices, and to the expectations of oneself and all the others anticipating the result.

In the 1941 pennant-deciding game against the Yankees Gooseball does not want to be put on the spot and signaled in from the bullpen, but he is the last Browns' reliever available. His starting a windup rather than going back to the stretch resulted from his concentration on the catcher's mitt because he knew he had to throw strikes. His first pitch had gotten away from him but had struck the batter's bat rather than his head. So he went behind the mound to use the resin bag. It is an inexplicable lapse of concentration on the mechanics required to deliver the next pitch, but his balk is caused by a concentration on the catcher's mitt and the strike zone. He is caught in his windup motion, and the speedy runner on third has been sent home. The result is a "bonehead" or "goofball" play that will haunt him and cause him to doubt himself and his mental abilities. However, it is important to remember that he is just nineteen years old, has only limited experience pitching in pressure situations since being brought up by the Browns from Toledo, and is put in a difficult and critical situation by a manager who expects "magic" from him. Gooseball's failure is, of course, not indicative or reflective of his character, nor is it determined by some flaw or weakness. It results due to his youth, relative

inexperience, and indecision based on wanting to do the right thing in order to succeed for his team. Later he learns that in the scheme and relative scale of things baseball, while important as a source of pleasure and joy, does not affect the most important and critical areas of life: love and concern for others, bonds of humanity, the horrors and more permanent scars of war, the need to choose on the basis of the right reason. His life goes on even after he is unfairly and unjustly banned from professional baseball after 1946, and he is rewarded for his integrity and humanity with the family he deserves and to which he is finally bonded. He is rewarded with wisdom and self-knowledge, and he is even rewarded with a sense of humor and wit when he tells the press, who ask about his son pitching for the Yankees, "I spent all those years trying to teach him how to throw my gooseball and I reckon I ought to have been teaching him how to keep better company."

Rick Norman's Fielder's Choice is a remarkable novel with its message of human compassion, its theme of personal redemption through integrity and decisions or choices made out of the universal emotion of love, its focus on the horrors of war and its human toll. He is not concerned about it being recognized as a "baseball" novel but as a novel that conveys deeply humanistic concerns. Ted Parkhurst, the President of August House Publishers, wrote to Rick Norman, after an initial reading of the manuscript then titled Gooseball, that it struck him "as the kind of novel most publishers would say 'isn't commercial.' While it might not become a blockbuster, I think there are some folks out there who would enjoy reading it as I am."[8] The novel has to date only enjoyed modest sales, and Rick Norman has said 'Other than a few kind reviews, I don't think the novel has been very successful." However, this may well be a novel that gains in recognition and stature as more people become aware of its philosophical richness, its provocative commentary on war, and its humor and seriocomedy. The novel is especially valuable for its perspective on the so-called "chokers" or "goats" who serve to illustrate the unfortunate tendency for the fans and the press to stigmatize the mistake makers. Sports should serve to remind us of our weaknesses, limitations, and even our

own mortality. The ways we respond to sports and to athletes, especially those who fail or those who struggle and persist without fame or glory, is a test of our humanity and our capacity for sympathy.

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1 For a good discussion and description of "five readily identifiable types" of baseball novels see Peter C. Bjarkman's "Introduction" to Baseball & the Game of Life: Stories for the Thinking Fan, ed. Peter C. Bjarkman (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. ix-xix.

2 For an excellent discussion of the topic see Howard S. Slusher, "Sport and Death" in Sport Inside Out: Readings in Literature and Philosophy, ed. David L. Vanderwerken and Spencer K. Wertz (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1985), pp. 752-761.

3 Rick Norman, Fielder's Choice (Little Rock: August House Publishers, Inc., 1941), p. 5. All page references are subsequently cited in the text of this paper.

4 As Rick Norman has communicated to me in his letter dated September 17, 1991 he "had first written the novel as a grand jury transcript and the foreward was a letter by Gooseball's nephew explaining how he came to find the transcript."

5. Rick Norman to Douglas A. Noverr, September 17, 1991.

6 Rick Norman to Douglas A. Noverr, September 17, 1991.

7 Rick Norman to Douglas A.l Noverr, September 17, 1991.

8 Ted Parkhurst to Rick J. Norman, January 23, 1990. The original of this letter is included in the personal notebook of Rick Norman, which he generously sent to me and entrusted me with in order to aid me in my work on Fielder's Choice. I would like to thank Rick Norman for his many kindnesses and his willingness to respond to my inquiries.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE: CASE STUDY OF A YOUNG-ADULT AUTHOR AND A STUDENT AUDIENCE

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