*Homestand: Small Town Baseball and the Fight for the Soul of America*

Will Bardenwerper

Reviewed by

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*Homestand: Small Town Baseball and the Fight for the Soul of America* byWill Bardenwerper (Doubleday, 2025) is an engaging and valuable read particularly for those who follow sports and are interested in the effects of sport on culture. The book expands on the author’s article, “Minor Threat”which appeared in the October 2021 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. In both the article and the book, Bardenwerper is critical of Major League Baseball’s decision to restructure the minor leagues; a restructuring that resulted in the elimination of over forty teams.

In *Homestand,* Bardenwerper follows the Batavia Muckdogs throughout its 2022 season. The team was one of those minor league clubs retrenched by the MLB restructuring. The Muckdogs, however, resurfaced and now competes in The Perfect Game Collegiate Baseball League. Bardenwerper bought a Muckdogs season ticket for 99 dollars, stayed in a LaQuinta Inn in the small western New York town of Batavia, attended the games, and interacted with a host of characters.

And there were characters. In Batavia the author meets: a married couple who own both the Muckdogs and the rival Elmira Pioneers--the husband an ex minor league hockey player who spent many minutes in the penalty box; two women friends--ardent fans from Buffalo--who travel the 45 minutes to Batavia for each of the games; the indefatigable clubhouse manager who cleans the Muckdogs’ uniforms every night staying on the job until after midnight; an aspiring broadcaster who, for no compensation, does the Muckdogs YouTube play-by-play; a major, not minor, league contrarian; a very loyal to the Muckdogs married couple and their author son; and several other idiosyncratic sorts. During trips to Elmira, Bardenwerper encounters a fellow who stands outside the ballpark each night to catch stray foul balls, and the popcorn concessionaire who contends he has a secret recipe. These characters all have stories to tell and, together, form a composite that has, the author suggests, salubriously coalesced because of the existence of minor league baseball.

There are three related and recurring themes in *Homestand*.

* Major League Baseball was irresponsible and greedy when they made the decision to retrench minor league teams. The cost saving, Bardenwerper contends, was minimal when compared with the income major league baseball generates and the salaries owners pay the players. The author pulls no punches when it comes to this point. He argues that in the name of a debatable efficiency, major league baseball yanked the soul out of communities that found baseball to be not only or primarily a game, but a nourishing communal experience.
* Analytics and those who attempt to quantify all aspects of baseball have created a relatively antiseptic product and fueled insidious decisions. The author refers pejoratively to those who do the counting as quants who have diluted the game and rendered it less appealing.
* Minor league baseball nourished community. Batavia, Jamestown, Elmira, Utica, Amsterdam—all teams who play in the Perfect Game Collegiate Baseball League—have endured difficult times. The author describes how each town has had their economies gutted. The minor league teams brought people together despite the hardships. In Batavia, when people came to the games they left behind, at least temporarily, their political perspectives and coalesced behind the Muckdogs.

At times the book is so very well written. The last chapter was especially endearing. The Muckdogs had a strong season. They made it to the playoffs and were within one game of the championship. The last chapter describes the team’s final contest. The Muckdogs had to win the second game of a doubleheader to be the champions. However, like the fans who attended the game, readers will likely focus less on the game’s outcome than the sad truth that the season would soon be over regardless of which team prevailed.

Some suggestions. Throughout *Homestand* the author refers to books about germane issues. It would have been good to have a section in an appendix that listed these various books. Also, readers became familiar with the various characters during the book. It would be good to know where they are now. The book is written about the 2022 season. Are Betsey and Ginny still going to all the games? How has Robbie managed with his painful leg? Did John find a job as a play-by-play announcer for which he is paid? Is Erik still washing uniforms until 2 in the morning? How have the players fared? Is the league itself still solvent?

While I enjoyed the book and recommend it, I don’t think the subtitle is apt. Bardenwerper unequivocally makes the case that Major League Baseball was irresponsible and greedy and that communities were damaged. However, “Small Town Baseball and the Fight for the Soul of America,” is a stretch.

One final point. Throughout, the author describes the emotional turmoil of being away from his young children and wife in Pittsburgh. He clearly loves his family and comments several times about the stresses on his wife because he is so infrequently at home. I was curious to know why he picked the Batavia Muckdogs to follow. Why Batavia, when he could have followed Altoona or Jamestown, teams that would have shortened his journey and then resulted in more time with family. The answer may be that Batavia was the closest of the 40 plus teams to have been retrenched and then resurrected. Yet the value of minor league teams for community building would likely have been apparent following Altoona or Jamestown. If the author, as he does in not only the book but the *Harper’s* article, recurringly discusses his misgivings about doing this type of research given the distance from home, it would have been good to know, why Batavia, New York.

These concerns are minor. If you are interested in sport and society, you will enjoy this engaging read.