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 ***Eye for Talent: Interviews with Veteran Baseball Scouts***
(review)

Lee Lowenfish

NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture

University of Nebraska Press

Volume 19, Number 2, Spring 2011

pp. 162-164

10.1353/nin.2011.0023

REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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"There is a canned phrase overused and abused by all the teams in baseball: 'Scouting is the backbone of an organization,'" veteran Pittsburgh Pirates scout Lenny Yochim observes wryly in the introduction to *Eye for Talent*. "As scouts are well aware, they are not actually treated as the backbone, but maybe a little lower" (2). Reading these seventeen interviews, you will undoubtedly ask why there has not been a better appreciation within the baseball industry for the vital craft of scouting. The short answer is that most scouts would perform their lonely necessary job out of their love of the game and an endless desire to find the next diamond in the rough. These scouts are great company, and in Dragseth's pages their humanity and optimism as well as their hardheaded realism shine through.

The genesis of the book arose from the friendship of the late scout Dick Wilson (1920-2009) with author P. J. (Phyllis) Dragseth, identified on the book jacket as a "graduate sociologist and professional writer living in Northern California." Wilson provided Dragseth with a long, hand-written manuscript that has been pared down to the longest chapter in the book. Though the hard-hitting catcher and third baseman never made the major leagues, **[End Page 162]** Wilson lived an adventurous and respected baseball life. He was a renowned amateur player in Southern California during the 1930s and 1940s, arguably the most fertile period for grassroots baseball playing in American history. "I played all the time, both softball and baseball," he told Dragseth. "There was no slow pitch at that time" (75). He came close to playing for Branch Rickey's woeful Pittsburgh Pirates teams of the early 1950s, and his minor-league career lasted until 1960, including a four-year stint in the late 1940s with the Mexicali Eagles of the Class C Sunset League—where Wilson was such a popular player that the fans gave him a "night" one season. "I got all kinds of presents," he remembered, "including an English pointer dog covered with ticks" (81). A less happy Mexican memory for Wilson was when one local owner refused to release his popular drawing card so he could

accept a more lucrative offer in the States. "Wilson, you are going to play here for me or you aren't going to play for anybody," declared the Mexican owner using the classic baronial prerogative of management in the years before the perpetual reserve system was shattered in the 1970s. After his retirement, Wilson's scouting career started under the tutelage of San Francisco Giants scout Lloyd Christopher, and it later burgeoned under Jack Schwarz. He credited Schwarz for being "the best scouting director I ever worked for. He didn't try to be a scout like so many of them do now" (90).

The Wilson interview may be the longest in the book, but it is not the most memorable. That distinction is shared by several others. Dragseth aptly compares the story-telling abilities of Ellis Clary (1916-2000), the renowned Washington Senators and Minnesota Twins scout, to "a runaway train" (62). Clary, who once told me that his hometown of Valdosta, Georgia, was so football-mad that they "wouldn't know a baseball player from a crate of pineapples," reflected profoundly to Dragseth, "The only trouble with baseball is that somebody's got to get beat every time" (63). Along those same lines, Al LaMacchia said, "If you think a little bit negative, it's tough to become a productive scout. . . . I always start with the idea that every ballplayer can do everything" (135). LaMacchia and Bobby Mattick (1915-2004) were the first two scouts hired by general manager Pat Gillick when the Toronto Blue Jays began as an expansion team in 1977. In 1983, they became the first two scouts named vice-presidents of a baseball organization, a recognition by top management of the crucial importance of scouting. By 1985, the Blue Jays had made the playoffs, and in 1992-93, they became world champions. Mattick...

eries about his own heritage—even if they come late in the story and without hints that might have piqued the reader's interest or at least prepared him or her for the possibility that unfolds. Historically, baseball writers have honored the game's unwritten rule for keeping it separate from politics.

While Meissner brings politics into the game, he sticks to the formula of the big game in which the young man proves himself to be worthy of maturity and manhood. The big game in this case is opening day of the local team's season, when all of Luke's issues are resolved. Building on the true passion that was present during the tryout and a few other places, Meissner has Luke take his place on the field and some of the best writing in the book ensues. While it would be easy to argue that Meissner would have been better off putting more baseball into his novel, it is clear he had other games to play. By saving the baseball for the closing scene, it becomes a worthy final stage and a fitting resolution.



P. J. Dragseth, ed. *Eye for Talent: Interviews with Veteran Baseball Scouts*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland. 243 pp. Paper, \$39.95.

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