PREFACE

I WROTE THIS BOOK because I fell in love with a story. The story concerned a small group of undervalued professional baseball players and executives, many of whom had been rejected as unfit for the big leagues, who had turned themselves into one of the most successful franchises in Major League Baseball. But the idea for the book came well before I had good reason to write it—before I had a story to fall in love with. It began, really, with an innocent question: how did one of the poorest teams in baseball, the Oakland Athletics, win so many games?

For more than a decade the people who run professional baseball have argued that the game was ceasing to be an athletic competition and becoming a financial one. The gap between rich and poor in baseball was far greater than in any other professional sport, and widening rapidly. At the opening of the 2002 season, the richest team, the New York Yankees, had a payroll of $126 million while the two poorest teams, the Oakland A's and the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, had payrolls of less than a third of that, about $40 million. A decade before, the highest payroll team, the New York Mets, had spent about $44 million on baseball players and the lowest payroll team, the Cleveland Indians, a bit more than $8 million. The raw disparities meant that only the rich teams could afford the best players. A poor team could afford only the maimed and the inept, and was almost certain to fail. Or so argued the people who ran baseball.

And I was inclined to concede the point. The people with the most money often win. But when you looked at what actually had happened over the past few years, you had to wonder. The bottom of each division was littered with teams—the Rangers, the Orioles, the Dodgers, the Mets—that had spent huge sums and failed spectacularly. On the other end of the spectrum was Oakland. For the past several years, working with either the lowest or next to lowest payroll in the game, the Oakland A's had won more regular season games than any other team, except the Atlanta Braves. They'd been to the play-offs three years in a row and in the previous two taken the richest team in baseball, the Yankees, to within a few outs of elimination. How on earth had they done that? The Yankees, after all, were the most egregious example of financial determinism. The Yankees understood what New York understood, that there was no shame in buying success, and maybe because of their lack of shame they did what they did better than anyone in the business.

As early as 1999, Major League Baseball Commissioner Allan H. ("Bud") Selig had taken to calling the Oakland A's success "an aberration," but that was less an explanation than an excuse not to grapple with the question: how'd they do it? What was their secret? How did the second poorest team in baseball, opposing ever greater mountains of cash, stand even the faintest chance of success, much less the ability to win more regular season games than all but one of the other twenty-nine teams? For that matter, what was it about baseball success that resisted so many rich

men's attempt to buy it? These were the questions that first interested me, and this book seeks to answer.

That answer begins with an obvious point: in professional baseball it still matters less how much money you have than how well you spend it. When I first stumbled into the Oakland front office, they were coming off a season in which they had spent $34 million and won an astonishing 102 games; the year before that, 2000, they'd spent $26 million and won 91 games, and their division. A leading independent authority on baseball finance, a Manhattan lawyer named Doug Pappas, pointed out a quantifiable distinction between Oakland and the rest of baseball. The least you could spend on a twenty-five-man team was $5 million, plus another $2 million more for players on the disabled list and the remainder of the forty-man roster. The huge role of luck in any baseball game, and the relatively small difference in ability between most major leaguers and the rookies who might work for the minimum wage, meant that the fewest games a minimum-wage baseball team would win during a 162-game season is something like 49. The Pappas measure of financial efficiency was: how many dollars over the minimum $7 million does each team pay for each win over its forty-ninth? How many marginal dollars does a team spend for each marginal win?

Over the past three years the Oakland A's had paid about half a million dollars per win. The only other team in six figures was the Minnesota Twins, at $675,000 per win. The most profligate rich franchises—the Baltimore Orioles, for instance, or the Texas Rangers—paid nearly $3 million for each win, or more than six times what Oakland paid. Oakland seemed to be playing a different game than everyone else. In any ordinary industry the Oakland A's would have long since acquired most other baseball teams, and built an empire. But this was baseball, so they could only embarrass other, richer teams on the field, and leave it at that.

At the bottom of the Oakland experiment was a willingness to rethink baseball: how it is managed, how it is played, who is best suited to play it, and why. Understanding that he would never have a Yankee-sized checkbook, the Oakland A's general manager, Billy Beane, had set about looking for inefficiencies in the game. Looking for, in essence, new baseball knowledge. In what amounted to a systematic scientific investigation of their sport, the Oakland front office had reexamined everything from the market price of foot speed to the inherent difference between the average major league player and the superior Triple-A one. That's how they found their bargains. Many of the players drafted or acquired by the Oakland A's had been the victims of an unthinking prejudice rooted in baseball's traditions. The research and development department in the Oakland front office liberated them from this prejudice, and allowed them to demonstrate their true worth. A baseball team, of all things, was at the center of a story about the possibilities—and the limits—of reason in human affairs. Baseball—of all things—was an example of how an unscientific culture responds, or fails to respond, to the scientific method.

As I say, I fell in love with a story. The story is about professional baseball and the people who play it. At its center is a man whose life was turned upside down by professional baseball, and who, miraculously, found a way to return the favor. In an effort to learn more about that man, and the revolution he was inspiring, I spent a few days with J. P. Ricciardi, the general manager of the Toronto Blue Jays. Ricciardi had worked with Billy Beane in Oakland, and was now having a ball tearing down and rebuilding his new team along the same radical lines as the Oakland A's. Ridiculed at first, Ricciardi had, by the time I met him, earned the respect of even the crustiest of the old baseball writers. By the end of the 2002 season, the big fear in Toronto was that he would bolt town for the job that had been offered to him to run the Boston

Red Sox, who now said that they, too, wished to reinvent their organization in the image of the Oakland A's.

It was at a Red Sox game that I tried to tempt Ricciardi into a self-serving conversation. Months before he had said to me, and with some insistence, that there was a truly astonishing discrepancy between Billy Beane and every other general manager in the game. He'd raised one hand as high as he could and lowered the other as low as he could and said, "Billy is up here and everyone else is down here." Now, as we sat watching the Boston Red Sox lose to his brand-new Blue Jays, I asked Ricciardi if he was willing to entertain the possibility that he was as good at this strange business of running a baseball team as the man he'd left behind in Oakland. He just laughed at me. There was no question that Billy was the best in the game. The question was why.

At the bottom of the Oakland experiment was a willingness to rethink baseball: how it is managed, how it is played, who is best suited to play it, and why. Understanding that he would never have a Yankee-sized checkbook, the Oakland A's general manager, Billy Beane, had set about looking for inefficiencies in the game. Looking for, in essence, new baseball knowledge. In what amounted to a systematic scientific investigation of their sport, the Oakland front office had reexamined everything from the market price of foot speed to the inherent difference between the average major league player and the superior Triple-A one. That's how they found their bargains. Many of the players drafted or acquired by the Oakland A's had been the victims of an unthinking prejudice rooted in baseball's traditions. The research and development department in the Oakland front office liberated them from this prejudice, and allowed them to demonstrate their true worth. A baseball team, of all things, was at the center of a story about the possibilities—and the limits—of reason in human affairs. Baseball—of all things—was an example of how an unscientific culture responds, or fails to respond, to the scientific method.

As I say, I fell in love with a story. The story is about professional baseball and the people who play it. At its center is a man whose life was turned upside down by professional baseball, and who, miraculously, found a way to return the favor. In an effort to learn more about that man, and the revolution he was inspiring, I spent a few days with J. P. Ricciardi, the general manager of the Toronto Blue Jays. Ricciardi had worked with Billy Beane in Oakland, and was now having a ball tearing down and rebuilding his new team along the same radical lines as the Oakland A's. Ridiculed at first, Ricciardi had, by the time I met him, earned the respect of even the crustiest of the old baseball writers. By the end of the 2002 season, the big fear in Toronto was that he would bolt town for the job that had been offered to him to run the Boston

Red Sox, who now said that they, too, wished to reinvent their organization in the image of the Oakland A's.

It was at a Red Sox game that I tried to tempt Ricciardi into a self-serving conversation. Months before he had said to me, and with some insistence, that there was a truly astonishing discrepancy between Billy Beane and every other general manager in the game. He'd raised one hand as high as he could and lowered the other as low as he could and said, "Billy is up here and everyone else is down here." Now, as we sat watching the Boston Red Sox lose to his brand-new Blue Jays, I asked Ricciardi if he was willing to entertain the possibility that he was as good at this strange business of running a baseball team as the man he'd left behind in Oakland. He just laughed at me. There was no question that Billy was the best in the game. The question was why.