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## BATTY? A MAN TRIES TO LOG EVERY PLAY IN BASEBALL

### DAVID SMITH FEELS PAST IS KEY TO NATIONAL PASTIME

By STEFAN FATSIS

NEWARK, Del.—David Smith yanked open the drawer of an old gray filing cabinet and pulled a random sheet of paper from a manila folder labeled "Phillies 1964." He read from the sheet:

"Tony Taylor leads off. The count goes to two and oh. Then two and one on a called strike. Then he puts the ball into play. He got a single to center field. The next batter is Cookie Rojas."

Mr. Smith looked up from the paper. "Isn't that wonderful?"

James Murray had the Oxford English Dictionary; Mr. Smith has baseball's play-by-play history. His obsessive quest: to document every individual play of every big-league baseball game ever held. Along the way, Mr. Smith has found hundreds of errors in baseball's hallowed statistical record, but he says his project is more about preserving history than about correcting it.

Despite its fixation on numerical minutiae, Major League Baseball for more than a century threw out its game-by-game records once the statistics they contained were tabulated at the end of each season. To

Mr. Smith, a 54-year-old biology professor at the University of Delaware, baseball's failure to preserve its history down to the last pop fly is puzzling. "How can it be that our national pastime does not have something as fundamental as a complete record of what happened in each game?" he asks.

During the past decade, Mr. Smith and a small group of researchers have collected 105,000 play-by-play accounts, including multiple versions of some games. Those represent more than 60% of the 115,717 games played from 1901, the start of baseball's modern era, through 1983, after which complete records exist. (The researchers also are interested in 19th-century games.) The project, known as Retrosheet, has relied mostly on score sheets, the coded, annotated accounts of what happens during a game, which can include everything from balls, strikes and hits to the temper-

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sheets. A fan who read about Retrosheet in a baseball magazine supplied the last missing Milwaukee Brewers game. Retrosheet staffers scour newspaper archives. One checks the Internet auction site eBay daily for needed score sheets.

Rebuilding baseball's past this way might seem "like trying to re-create a puff of cigar smoke from William Howard Taft's mouth. It's so ephemeral," says Paul Dickson, who has written a book about baseball scorekeeping. At the same time, he says, that's the essence of baseball's allure: "It's the thing that makes baseball so different from other sports. The past really counts."

The project has uncovered more than 1,000 discrepancies with MLB's official record, and Mr. Smith believes there are thousands more out there.

Most are tiny bookkeeping errors committed during manual entry of statistics. Cliff Johnson of the Toronto Blue Jays grounded into 11 double plays in 1983, not 10. A home run charged to Chicago White Sox pitcher Jesse Jefferson on Sept. 5, 1976, was actually yielded by teammate Bart Johnson.

The biggest catch to date has been that New York Yankee Roger Maris probably was credited with an extra run batted in in 1961, which would drop him into a tie for the league lead that year. MLB hasn't recognized that change because it isn't satisfied with the evidence, says Steve Hirdt, executive vice president of the Elias Sports Bureau, MLB's official statistical service, which has worked for baseball since the 1920s.

But Mr. Hirdt says MLB is willing to examine any of Retrosheet's finds, no matter how trivial. "We would look at anything they sent us," he says. "It's worth it to us. I'm not sure it's worth it to more than 10 people outside of here," he says of altering obscure statistics.

Historians say baseball has long been protective of its records and reluctant to accept discoveries made by outsiders. It took 14 years for MLB to recognize, in 1995, research showing that Ty Cobb was mistakenly credited with two extra hits in 1910. That dropped his lifetime batting average to .366 from the widely known .367. John Thorn, co-editor of the encyclopedia "Total Baseball," believes MLB

would rather not admit that its statistics are flawed. "This is the world's biggest ball of yarn, and it will start to unravel with one tug," Mr. Thorn says.

Mr. Smith starts with the assumption that the official record is right. He recognizes that score sheets are often unreliable. A scorer can record a ground-out to third base (5-3 in scoring notation) as a ground-out to shortstop (6-3). People daydream or buy a hot dog. Former Yankees broadcaster Phil Rizzuto often wrote "NL" on his scorecard, for "Not Looking." Mr. Smith cross-checks possible errors against other score sheets, box scores and newspaper stories.

Retrosheet researchers have been finding 50 to 60 likely mistakes per season—with a peak of 120 for 1975—and expect to find more the further back in time they delve. But while Mr. Smith believes all errors should be corrected, he isn't fighting for them with MLB. "I've decided it's not a very cost-effective use of my time," he says. Instead, he simply posts the play-by-play of every game and any discrepancies on Retrosheet's Web site, [www.retrosheet.org](http://www.retrosheet.org).

Mr. Smith says he fell in love with scorekeeping while attending his first big-league game in 1958 in Los Angeles. "I decided right then I wanted to keep track of everything I possibly could," Mr. Smith says. Now he has to budget time for his 20-hours-a-week baseball hobby, a full teaching schedule, a wife and a four-year-old son.

In 1989, Mr. Smith formed Retrosheet and asked every big-league team if he could copy their old score books. Most didn't return his calls. One public-relations director hung up on him. Others, who couldn't be bothered or thought him a crank, said the books didn't exist.

Through a friend, Mr. Smith got access to the Baltimore Orioles' score books from 1954 to 1983. He used his Orioles access to persuade the Philadelphia Phillies to let him photocopy their books. Mr. Smith says the New York Mets' PR director refused to lend the team's records, but an underling let Mr. Smith copy them when the Mets were on a road trip.

Mr. Smith was shocked by how much history was lost. The Atlanta Braves' books went back only to 1974, with nothing from more than a century in Milwaukee and Boston. The Pittsburgh Pirates

tossed their score books when they moved out of Forbes Field in 1970. "The Dodgers have, nothing from Brooklyn," Mr. Smith says sadly.

Every team eventually came around. About 20 retired reporters and broadcasters also lent their books. Bob Stevens, who covered the San Francisco Giants for the San Francisco Chronicle for nearly 30 years, had Mr. Smith near tears when he told him, "All these years I never knew why I saved my score books. I guess I was saving them for you."

Mr. Smith's collection fills 36 drawers in nine filing cabinets in the basement of his house. It includes every American League game back to 1963 and every National League game to 1974. Metal shelving bows under the weight of copies of the Sporting News dating back to 1960.

As time goes on, some sources are drying up. Mr. Smith expects Retrosheet to end up 25,000 games short of a complete record, but that doesn't trouble him. "It is attainable in principle," he says, "even though we know that we're never going to do it."



David Smith