

INTRODUCTION

William B. Gould IV*

Editor's Note: Six of the articles in this symposium arise out of work presented at the Sports Law Conference held at Stanford University on September 18-19, 2003. One of the primary motivators and facilitators of this conference was Hall of Fame sportswriter Leonard Koppett, who passed away last June at the age of 79. In recognition of his remarkable contributions not only to this symposium, but also to sports and writing in general, the editorial staff of the Stanford Law and Policy Review are honored to dedicate this symposium to his memory. We would therefore like to introduce the symposium by reproducing, unedited, the speech given by Stanford Law School Professor William B. Gould IV on the occasion of Leonard Koppett's memorial service in Los Altos, California, on July 7, 2003.

I am indeed honored to be selected by the Koppett family to give this talk about my good friend, Leonard Koppett. I give my condolences to the Koppett family and to his many friends who mourn the loss of him.

My last meeting with Leonard Koppett was June 16—six days before his death in San Francisco at the Symphony. It was one of our periodic luncheons at the Gordon Biersch Restaurant on Emerson Street in Palo Alto where we would meet with no prearranged agenda to talk about the business of baseball or sports, politics, history, music and, occasionally, our Stanford Law School seminar or other joint ventures.

On that day Leonard—dressed in his trademark navy blue suit—had had the Official Rules of Baseball (the 2003 edition) in front of him when I arrived. “Look at this,” he said. “Rule 1.01. Baseball is a game between two teams of 9 players each.” And he looked up at me and paused. “Oh,” I said, “They haven’t taken account of the American League designated hitter rule.” “Exactly,” he responded, as he flipped through the Rules pages, now ready to move the discussion on to new areas.

“You know,” Leonard said, “there are many of these rules that are out of date and need careful review.” And he then launched into a very detailed discussion of contemporary umpiring—so detailed that when he began to talk

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about the number of umpires in the 1940s and 50s and compared them to 2003, the rotation amongst all clubs, the infrequent instances in which each club would now see the same umpire—thus impairing a needed familiarity with the individual umpire, and the consequent difficulties in knowing the umpires' strike zone, I asked him to slow down. I began to take notes on the back of an article he had just provided me. For just a second he seemed bemused by my note taking and then went on with his lecture-like discourse on the state of umpiring and its impact on disputes about the strike zone.

On the evening of June 22, when I began to call some of Leonard's friends to tell them the sad news of his death, I reached Dusty Baker in Chicago and recounted some of that week's discussion to him. "That's exactly what we were talking about today," said Dusty. "We didn't even know the names of most of the umpires out there," let alone how they would call pitches.

That comment confirmed anew Leonard's baseball sagacity and detailed knowledge of the game as well as its history. I noted the *San Francisco Chronicle* obituary which described Leonard's involvement going "all the way back" to Joe DiMaggio—you would think it was before the Peloponnesian War, said one of his friends. Leonard had known the game since his mother took him to Yankee Stadium as a small child, where he saw Ruth and Gehrig play.

No discussion of Leonard Koppett can ignore the wide variety of subjects treated in his writings. They were both humorous and serious—sometimes a combination of the two. In a 1969 *Sporting News* piece, he wrote about what baseball would look like in 2069, noting that after the 2002 season a global consolidation of teams—no one was using the globalization term then—took place because the "...antagonism between East and West, capitalist and communist, Russia and China and the United States, had been worked out."—and then proceeded to allude to a group of colorful characters—like "bruising Boris Borodnitzky, the right-handed slugger who made it fatal to start a left-handed pitcher against the Moscow Bears"; "Show Me How...Peiping's [Beijing today] No. 1 hero [Leonard wanted to call this team the Peiping Toms]; Max (Professor) Moriarity of London, who broke all records for stealing bases; Abba Bubba, the Israeli curveballer who pitched the Rome Cardinals to three straight pennants"—who had all produced a "true Golden Age" in the 2010-2060 era.

In this same vein, I particularly liked the less lighthearted piece laced with sarcastic irony last year in *The New York Times* entitled "Business of National Pastime Is Unpatriotic." I read the following lines and others to many a friend. Leonard wrote:

Many have scoffed at baseball's claim that 28 of its 30 teams lost money over the last seven years, including \$500 million in 2001 alone. But I have no basis for doubting their figures or their sincerity. What shocks me is their utter lack of patriotism. How? By refusing to share, with the rest of the American business community, the secret of their greatest discovery: how to

lose millions year after year, stay in business and even double their revenue. Such selfish secrecy can only be called unpatriotic... And they won't tell the rest of us how they do it? It's particularly disturbing because President Bush is one of their recent alumni. He deserves their help. This [is] no way for the custodians of Our National Game to behave.

The name Leonard Koppett was first part of my consciousness from the time that my father and I bought a program for 25 cents at our first National Basketball Association game in March 1953 between the pre-Bill Russell Boston Celtics and the New York Knickerbockers. Leonard was with the *New York Herald Tribune* then, and in the program he provided a punchy prose which fused the excitement of previous games between the clubs with solid business analysis of the rise of the Celtic-Knick rivalry, the Boston-New York "population centers" as important to the NBA. "Whoever loses this series," Leonard wrote, "The NBA wins."

In both conversation and the classroom, one of Leonard's central theses was that in order to understand the business "don't approach it as a fan." However, as the 1953 program showed, this didn't keep him from a genuine love of the game. In language reminiscent of that 50-year-old program on Opening Day this year in both San Francisco and Oakland, he allowed that he was excited about the possibility of another Bay Bridge World Series.

I began to read his columns in both the *Post* and the *Times* regularly as a young man, but had no contact with him until we both moved to the Bay Area in the early 70s. Our first meeting was in '76 or '77 when some of our students had invited him to speak at Stanford Law School. This began a professional and personal relationship with this Renaissance man for the past quarter century which flourished all the more when we began a seminar at the Law School with Al Attles in 1988.

One never worried about a conversation lag with Leonard. Ideas, viewpoints, and arguments flowed nonstop. Through intellect and personality he displayed a feistiness, both obdurate and resilient, which met all my own points and arguments and those of others who discussed and debated with him as well. Sometimes I accused him of taking a position just because I had taken another. He rarely yielded. Sometimes he *was* wrong and occasionally, as I recall, in a few instances he actually admitted it. But as ex-Yankee catcher Charlie Silvera said to me in discussing Leonard, "You didn't win. You might get a tie."

Leonard Koppett was both classy and classic—in a class by himself among sports writers. The author of sixteen books, he told me that because of its voluminous resource material, his "Koppett's Concise History of Baseball," published in 1998, was the one that he viewed as essential to publish before his death.

Leonard was the only writer ever to be a member of the Writers' Hall of Fame in both baseball and basketball—elected in '92 and '94 respectively. And he was respected widely by not only his peers, but also by the baseball

barons whom he frequently criticized.

The fundamental dimensions of this wonderful man became clear to me only as our association developed in the 1980s.

When Leonard Koppett left this world, I think that many or most with whom he had contact felt that they had some special relationship with him. This is because Leonard was a very giving man, as well as a learned man.

When I first began to write baseball newspaper articles on race and labor in the mid-80s, I turned to Leonard for advice in a number of areas. He was an adviser and counselor, never in the least interested in credit or attribution for himself—notwithstanding the fact that he really prompted the approach that I took to my very first pieces of this kind.

Leonard was one of those unusual people who was really on the level about race. In this respect, as well as in so many others, he was unalterably authentic. Although I did not know him from the 1940s and 50s, I know that he was one of those people who was outspoken and honest when it was not fashionable to speak of equality between the races.

I always treasured his comments which he wrote on Jackie Robinson in *The Sporting News* piece that he did in 1972:

...what is so hard to remember now (and completely unknown to younger people) is the devastating fact that until Jackie Robinson, there was no pressure whatever from the “decent” people to break the color line that all accepted.... So when all is said and done, as much as Robinson meant directly to his own people—as an example and inspiration and pioneer—he meant even more to the white society. He did more than any other single human being could do to focus their attention on the inequities of a system in which lily-white baseball was only one small symptom. The consequences of the waves his appearance made spread far beyond baseball, far beyond sports, far beyond politics, even to the very substance of a culture.

In 1988, when Leonard, Alvin Attles, and I began to teach our sports law seminar together at the Law School, our contact increased. We looked forward to our meetings, and many said that the hallways were livened with the jocular banter of not only ourselves, but also some of the interesting guests that we brought in—usually through Leonard’s efforts. The students were wowed by Leonard’s friends like Bill Walsh, Willie Mays, Dusty Baker, the late Larry Fleischer, and the like. Leonard taught at Stanford (he also taught in Communications and Continuing Education at Stanford), and when we took our show on the road to Oregon’s Willamette Law School last fall, he was a hit there as well!

This is because Leonard was a fabulous teacher. He created a “timeline” of professional and amateur sports which we distributed with our materials, giving the students a sense of how the major sports had developed. Leonard brought dry case doctrine to life with colorful and sometimes first-hand accounts of the case’s background. He dominated the classroom—so much so that Al would turn to me and whisper, “He’s taking over the class.” And he was! We all

benefited from that.

Equally unforgettable was the same giving attitude—that I described earlier—towards the students. The students enjoyed and loved Leonard! So many of them have written to me these past two weeks to express their sadness about his death. I shall always remember the beginning class when I would announce office hours. Then I would turn to Leonard and Al, and Leonard would always say to the students, “You can come and see me anytime!” That was the way he was.

We had planned so much for the coming months and years—this week a panel on which we were both participating—“Baseball in 2020” at the Society of American Baseball Research Convention in Denver, then a celebration of the 75th anniversary of his arrival in the United States, a sports law conference here at Stanford, and another one up in Portland, as well as another round of classes this fall.

It may be that the most remarkable feature of Leonard Koppett’s distinguished life is its most recent years. No comparable writer continued writing with such fervor and frequency as they moved into their seventies.

It almost seemed as though he was taking it up a notch as he described in one of our last conversations the series of books and projects which he had scheduled. In recent months, he was contributing to the Hall of Fame Publications, writing articles for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* on pitch count, the disputes about the strike zone, and most important of all, his unpublished “White Paper,” entitled “Reorganizing Baseball.” And in a piece published two days before his death, he argued that it was futile to attempt obtain “competitive balance” because of market disparity between different major league cities and he contended that there was a relationship between this subject and the need to contract the number of teams in baseball. He was a great proponent of contraction of teams—but for reasons different than those put forward by the owners. Said Leonard about competitive balance in vintage Leonard Koppett: “The whole history of baseball, if they [the owners] would bother to read it, spells out how and why it [balance] is impossible.”

In one of our last discussions he held forth with vigor on the silliness of recent flavor-of-the-month books like “Moneyball” which purported to present the significance of on-base percentages and the abilities of players with unorthodox physiques as new ideas. This was but a corollary to one of Leonard’s many valid theses, i.e., that nothing had fundamentally changed the game since 1903, and that its century-long stability and tradition allowed it to transcend successive generations.

Truly, at the end of his life—with book projects pending (one book on baseball and the press will appear soon), weekly columns in the newspaper, and numerous teaching assignments—Leonard was operating on all cylinders!

The world has lost a great man and I have lost a very good friend indeed. It is hard for me to accept the reality that I shall never again witness this consummate gentleman’s gallant bow when I would introduce him to a friend

or acquaintance, or, when the telephone rings, hear that voice say: “Bill!—Koppett!”

I extend my heartfelt condolences to his wife, Suzanne, and to his children, David and Kathy, and the grandchild that he never saw, Lia.