

## BASEBALL BOLSHEVIK RETURNS

JIM BOUTON COMES IN FROM THE COLD By Allen St. John

I don't know who said, "The personal is political," but it sure wasn't a sportswriter. While the official theme of Saturday's Old-Timers' Day at Yankee Stadium was "A Celebration of the 1978 World Championship Team," the real story was Jim Bouton's return to Yankee Stadium after 30 years in exile. And while there was a deliciously ironic connection between the two happenings, the media hordes missed it in the search for the perfect tear-jerker sound bite.

You know Bouton's story by now. The former 20-game winner had been explicitly uninvited to the Old-Timers' Day festivities since the publication of his controversial book, *Ball Four*. Last year, his daughter Laurie was killed in a car crash, and his son Michael, unbeknownst to Dad, wrote a letter to *The New York Times* on Father's Day suggesting that it was time to let bygones be bygones and invite Bouton to the annual event. The Yankees agreed. That kind of human-interest story could push a building collapse off the front page, and last weekend saw reporters and news crews hanging on Bouton's every word.

Bouton more than obliged, providing everything from self-deprecating tales about playing for Momma's Pizza in a fast-pitch league — "It always discouraged me when the kids would warm me up without a mask" — to a crafted-for-the-occasion Berraism about his former batterymate and fellow Old Timers' Day exile. "If Yogi doesn't want to come, nobody can stop him." When he talked about the daughter he'd lost and the gift his son had given him, there wasn't a dry eye



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Bouton, safe at home

in the clubhouse. But in a way, this easy mix of the glib and melancholy obscured the bigger story.

On one level, Bouton's return was like "Sammy the Bull" Gravano chowing down at the Gotti family picnic. With *Ball Four*, Bouton broke baseball's omerta, but without a witness protection program. Forget about beaver shooting and Mickey's hungover home run, he wrote about the game's last taboo: money. While it may be an exaggeration to call *Ball Four* a political manifesto, it wasn't the locker room pranks but its influence in helping to tumble baseball's reserve clause that landed it on the New York Public Library's 100 "Books of the Century" list alongside the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Bouton understands that his legacy transcends fathers-playing-catch-with-sons sentimentality and steered the conversation toward the M-word. Recalling that then commissioner Bowie Kuhn tried to browbeat him into signing a statement apologizing for *Ball Four*, he got to the heart of the controversy. "The owners and the commissioner were afraid that a judge or a congressman or an arbitrator would read it, and maybe they'd lose their antitrust exemption." But every time Bouton talked about the big picture, down went the pens, off went the tape recorders.

On another level, *Ball Four* made the afternoon's other celebration possible. If not for Bouton and his book, the free-agent spending spree that

landed Catfish Hunter, Reggie Jackson, Tommy John, and Goose Gossage might not have happened, and the 1978 World Championship celebration would've moved to Fenway Park. And without Ball Four, there would've been no "Bronx Zoo," and the behind-the-scenes turmoil of that epic pennant race would have remained just that.

What would baseball be like if not for Ball Four and the owners' pettiness that inspired it? Perched in the dugout, Bouton indulged in a little might-have-been. "They should have just raised the minimum salary from \$8000 to \$10,000 and then raised it a thousand dollars a year for the next 50 years," he suggested. "The ballplayers would have been happy. We never would have said a word and the football players and basketball players wouldn't have had an example to follow. And all athletes would be making sportswriter money today, which is what they made in the '60s."

Maybe that would make Bud Selig happy, but is sure wouldn't please the afternoon's host. When it comes right down to it, has anyone benefited more from baseball's New World Order than George Steinbrenner?

In a more just and logical world, Jim Bouton would have returned to Yankee Stadium as a conquering hero, hailed by George and the Yankee millionaires who owe their nonsportswriterlike salaries to him. Instead Bouton got a short sitting ovation, overshadowed by the lustier cheers for Dave Righetti and Graig Nettles.

It was a nice day and a long time coming. But baseball's first Bolshevik – arguably its last – deserved better.

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