

A FEEL FOR THE GAME

By Robert Grossbach

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IT WAS A STRANGE COMBINATION, businessman and speculator, collector, lover of baseball. Everyone at the convention had all the elements to some degree, but Curran knew it was a question of which motivation was dominant. If he could find that out, intuit it somehow, discern it, he might get an edge in the bidding.

He tried to keep his face impassive during the Lull, tried to stop the fingers on his left hand from tapping the side of his chair, tried to suppress the sweating, the throat clearing, the swallowing, the dozens of silent, autonomic betrayals of anxiety. The competition had to believe he was in control, calm, cold-blooded, ruthlessly relaxed enough to do whatever was necessary to get The Duke. Whatever was necessary.

He hadn't expected it, none of them had. Only twenty minutes earlier he'd been walking through the aisles, his mood a mixture of condescension and nostalgia. You found all kinds here, from the wide-eyed kid collectors offering individual packs of Elston Darnell's at five New Yen each, to hard core (and hard surface) wheeler-dealers, looking for a quick score on a case of 21st century Ki Fu's or a half dozen "specially preserved" Dwight Gooden's. A hobbyist's tender compulsion expanded (and perverted) to unfeeling commercial carnivore. Conventions of this kind had spread across six terrestrial continents and three lunar colonies, and there was even talk that, next year, there'd be one on Ceres. It seemed like any place you had ten thousand people, regardless of whether there was any external atmosphere, two hundred were in the business.

Of course, baseball was only one category. There were basketball players and football players and actors and politicians. Hell, if you were intellectual, there were even novelists and scientists — but somehow the sound of "I'll trade you two Norman Mailers for a Stephen Hawking," just didn't feel right to Curran. For him, as for so many others, it was baseball that somehow remained special. Baseball, after all, had been first, starting with the tributes two centuries earlier, silver emulsions on cardboard, packaged with chewing gum and memorializing the ancient greats: Ty Cobb and Dizzy Dean, Joe D., Willie, Oisk, Aaron, Clemente, Mickey —

And The Duke.

He couldn't believe it when he heard it. He'd just paused at a station manned by a thirtyish woman hawking "mint condition" Rip Repulski's, when the announcement came over the PA. "There will be an auction in the green room beginning in ten minutes. Among the players available is the Brooklyn Dodgers' Duke Snider, to be sold as a singleton."

Curran had been lightheaded, the funk lasting even through the auction's

opening rounds. He'd been searching for The Duke for years, and now, out of the blue, here it was within his grasp. He'd emerged from his reverie only when the bidding had hit 40 thousand New Yen and the number of bidders had dropped to four. Quickly, Curran had upped the stakes, punching in 53 thousand New Yen and forcing out all but the final two before the Lull.

He knew one of the remaining players vaguely, a paunchy, sour faced man named Rabinall, whom he'd briefly spoken to at a convention in Nuevo Miami in the early 2140's. Rabinall had wanted to buy a Whitey Lockman from him, but Curran had demurred at the last moment, stubbornly refusing to come down a final notch in price. Speculator, he'd thought. Bottom-liner. In-and-outer, with no feel for the game. Of course, it was quite irrational. The other bidder, a woman, was a mystery.

Curran wondered: Had either of them ever played the actual sport, as he had? Were they holo fanatics, as he was, watching game after game, present and past, day after night, losing his wife, his kids, his job—until that became his job? Had they paid a hundred extra New Yen for the old baseball stats to be installed in their neuroplants, so that they could tell you, as he could, George Shuba's batting average in 1953, or Tiamo Victor's ERA in 2089?

Probably not . . . and probably better off for it.

The bidding was about to resume. Why the hell did it have to be live and not over holo? But, of course, that was the idea — smell your competition sweat. Feel his/her tension. Taste it in the air.

“I have a bid for 59K,” announced the crisp synthetic voice of the auctioneer.

Curran looked at his screen. It was Rabinall. Curran had a decision to make, a tactic to decide on, and it had to be done quickly. He had an absolute upper spending limit of 75K. He was a moderately wealthy man, but he'd been investing heavily in his collection — all right, not investing, indulging — but the fact was he'd reached the very farthest edge of his credit. And so it came down to a matter of game psychology. Did he go right to the precipice at once, demonstrating thereby to the remaining bidders a cavalier fearlessness in spiraling the stakes . . . or did he methodically just top the other offers for as long as he could, hopefully projecting a kind of implacable persistence and saving what could be a significant amount of money?

He punched in 75K. And waited.

“Going once at 75K,” said the auctioneer. A blue square appeared at the woman's position on the screen. She'd dropped out.

“Going twice . . .” said the auctioneer.

Curran could barely breathe. He had it, it was his, he'd finally —

Inside Rabinall's red square, a number came up: 80K. A nearly inaudible whimper escaped Curran's lips. It was over. Finito. He punched in his blue square, inhaled, and dazedly stood up. "Sold for 80K," he heard the auctioneer intone, from what sounded like a great distance. He was surprised to see the woman approaching.

"Too bad," she said. She was a blonde, not bad looking, impossible to tell (as it always was) if she'd ever been reconstructed.

"Win some, lose some," he noted stupidly.

"You know him?" she asked, tilting her chin in the direction of Rabinall, who was collecting his boxed Duke from the machine.

"Not really," said Curran. "He once tried to buy a Whitey Lockman from me, but that's about it." He paused. "You?"

"Sold him a Monte Irvin last year at Sao Paulo. Were you at that one?"

"I only go to eight a year. I missed Sao Paulo."

"He made quite a splash there. Took home a Willie Mays, if I recall correctly."

"Willie Mays?" Something began to jell in Curran's mind, a complex chain of neurons lost some inter-synaptic resistance. Whitey Lockman, Monte Irvin, Willie Mays . . . He rubbed his eyes, and was not all that amazed to find Rabinall standing next to him.

"You still want The Duke," said the fleshy man, his tone flat and certain.

He held the precious container in his pudgy hands.

"Yes," said Curran shakily.

"And you know what I'm after."

Curran inhaled. "You're collecting . . . Giants. New York Giants of the nineteen-fifties."

Rabinall lifted an eyebrow. Curran had misjudged him. Misjudged him entirely. There was passion here, and quite beyond the financial.

"Trade," said Rabinall.

“You haven’t found another Lockman,” ventured Curran, and he knew immediately he was correct. “So what is it, Whitey for the Duke?”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Rabinall. “The two weren’t remotely comparable players. Check the stats. Check the market.” He paused, pursed his lips. “I know you have a Sal Maglie.”

So that was it! Matter of fact, Curran had several Maglie’s, because Maglie, over his career, had been both a Giant and a Dodger. Curran considered, inhaled (he hoped) inaudibly. He took one more shot. “I give you Maglie and Lockman, you give me the Duke — and a player to be named later. Market worth 10K.”

“No player,” said Rabinall. “Straight-up trade.”

Curran waited, stalled just to see Rabinall sweat. Because he understood Rabinall fully now, understood him as well as he did himself. Finally, tight grin slowly widening, he said, “Deal.”

Later, when it had all been done, the exchanges made, the guarantees signed, Curran had gone for a walk, childishly and foolhardily still clutching the singleton container of the Duke.

He’d done it, he finally had a team. Brooklyn Dodgers, circa 1952. Complete at every position. Erskine on the mound; Hodges, Robinson, Reese, and Cox in the infield; Campy behind the plate; Pafko, Furillo, and now Duke in the outfield. And he’d bring them to term, too. No computer investing for him, no hoarding the seeds without tasting the fruit. No sir. He hadn’t bought all that equipment for nothing. The Artificial Womb alone had cost 40K; the Nano-neural Educator, 32K; the Growth Accelerator, a cool 75K (including re-conditioning).

Once more, he fondled the battery-cooled container, with its cargo of precious cells. He wondered from where on the Duke’s lithe body they had come, whether they’d been donated or stolen, scraped or shed, sold legally or black-marketed. No matter, he’d have plenty of time to read the pedigrees, as he’d done so often before. One of the pleasures of ownership.

Yes, these cells would be cloned, all right. They’d develop, they’d mature, and the Duke would play again. Glide effortlessly through the green grass in center field to make a graceful, leaping, time-frozen catch against the fence. Lift a high drive to right with that sweet, fluid swing — a ball going, going, gone for a home run.

Yes, the Duke would return to the game. They all did, and why not? Sure, the Educator would pre-dispose them to accept the contracts he would offer — not that they wouldn’t be eminently fair — but, more cogently (was he a mystic?), it was in their blood. To be a ballplayer. The best of the best. What else could they do?

They'd have a great time. He'd take them on tour, his own team, and they'd play everyone. The tragic 2032 Eagles, whose cells were all scraped from the site of the sub-orbital crash. The awful 1998 Florida Marlins, losers of 136 games in a single season. The 2129 Slashers, with the robot third baseman. All of them, every one.

Some day, thought Curran, they might even meet the 1950's New York Giants. And, come to think of it, Sal Maglie might conceivably end up pitching for each team. The thought made him smile. Now that would be a game.

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Robert Grossbach last appeared in F&SF in April, 1985, with his story "Rift." He returns with the second baseball story of this issue, "A Feel for the Game." Robert belongs to that most passionate group of all baseball fans, the Brooklyn Dodger fans. Like his team, he has moved from New York to Los Angeles. "I suppose my move to LA began to stimulate some strong feeling of nostalgia," he writes, "and one day I simply felt an overwhelming compulsion to write this. I am usually a planner and a plodder but this one emerged, if you'll pardon the analogy, like a cat coughs up a hairball. It wasn't a bad feeling."