

# 'Strike Zone' a hit with baseball fans, readers alike



ESTHER LITTMANN

Don't worry about withdrawal symptoms in the event of a baseball strike this season. Just read "Strike Zone."

Four, a book whose success was guaranteed when baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn tried to have it banned.

Bouton's collaborator is Eliot Ainsot, author of "Eight Men Out," the story of the 1919 Black Sox scandal.

"Strike Zone" will surely take your mind off the nasty prospect of a strike and let you contemplate the even nastier scenario of a ballgame that's been fixed.

## Cast of characters

First, meet Sam Ward, a "baseball bum," who's crisscrossed the country umpteen times as pitcher for the minor leagues. At 32, Ward is minus family and future, yet driven by a dream that won't let go. Although an injured right shoulder ruined his fastball years ago, his talent is still strong enough to keep him on the brink of a big-league breakthrough.

Ward's determination finally pays off. He becomes the oldest rookie of the Chicago Cubs, and, to his amazement, is designated

opening pitcher in the last game of the season with the Phillies. Both teams are tied for first place, and the game is sure to draw a crowd.

Ward knows he's simply replacing the Cubs' tired and injured pitching staff and that his teammates are dubious about his performance. But those are odds he can overcome. What he doesn't know is that the game has been fixed in the Phillies' favor, the work of high-stakes gamblers and a desperate man who fears for his life.

Facing Ward at home plate is 60-year-old Ernie Kolacka, umpiring his last game before retirement. Kolacka's honesty is legendary. He has never compromised "the way he saw it" or

called "it special for the home team." But now Kolacka is bound by another code of ethics: loyalty to a gambling buddy who saved his life in the Korean War.

Throwing his knuckleball pitches from the mound, Ward can't help but wonder whether Kolacka is purposely stretching the strike zone for the Phillies pitcher and squeezing it for him.

## Epie duel

"Strike Zone" is the story of a duel that takes on almost mythic proportions. It's a conflict between pitcher and umpire, professional duty and personal ties, innocence and guilt. In a series of flashbacks, we confront the characters' pasts, their flaws and frustrations, as well as their ability to come to terms with themselves.

Having built a stone wall with his bare hands, a task begun out of a machistic need to punish himself for his failed marriage, Ward reflects on his achievement: "Building the wall was fun! . . . Just the doing of it. No applause. I didn't need to tell anybody about it . . . For the first time I can remember doing something

for its own sake . . . I needed to feel like a major league ballplayer to feel like a major league person."

During a visit to Borders Book Shop in Southfield on July 8 for a book signing session, Jim Bouton credited his co-author, Eliot Ainsot, with the idea of the plot. Both writers sat down to block out the game between the two teams, pitch by pitch, inning by inning. They also established two guidelines: The narrative would begin at 6:30 p.m., the day prior to the game, and the book wouldn't be bogged down with statistics and technical details.

Bouton wanted a novel that the casual reader could enjoy but would still appeal to ardent baseball fans. (The verdict from this reviewer, a former Little-League mom is "Thumbs Up!") Then each author created his own main character, with a personal history, family and friends.

Coaches and team players in the narrative are real-life individuals: Mark Grace, Rick Wilkins, Pete Incaviglia, etc.

What person of fictional character, Sam Ward, is Bouton him-

self? The former 1960s All-Star pitcher and World Series hero with the New York Yankees turned writer and businessman admitted if he had not made the big leagues early in his career, he would have stuck it out like his character, Sam Ward. Life in the minors.

The minor leagues, he commented, allow major-league hopefuls to continue in the game long after their counterparts in football and basketball would have quit.

How does the fix turn out? The authors' lively prose and sustained suspense make "Strike Zone" a page-turner that's hard to put down. Take it from an old mystery maven like me. The ending will surprise you.

Esther Littmann, a Bloomfield Township resident, is a lecturer in English and German at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield. As an only child, Esther Littmann grew up regarding books as substitutes for siblings. You can leave her a message from a touch-tone phone at 953-2947, mailbox 1853.

## Hotline available for fat questions

During July consumers can call the American Dietetic Association's Consumer Nutrition Hotline for information on the role of fats and oils in a diet.

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