

'The Umpire Strikes Back'

Ex-ump Luciano talks good game of baseball

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The end result of Luciano's labor is a lighthearted look at the national pastime. He did not intend to stir controversy. He aimed to glorify baseball not create waves as Jim Bouton did in his book, "Ball Four."

"The one thing I didn't want was another 'Ball Four.' I didn't want anything controversial. I didn't want it to hurt anybody," he said. "The book makes Reggie Jackson look good. Do you know how hard it is to make Reggie Jackson look good? The other thing was, that I made ex-president (Richard) Nixon look good. And it's the only book (written) in 15 years that made Nixon look good."

"I didn't want to hurt baseball by

writing it. Like they said on 'Saturday Night Live,' Baseball been bery, bery good to me.' And it has. It's been super."

The lone regret Luciano said he has about the book concerns letting the catcher call the balls and strikes. In the book, Luciano said there were times when he came to the park after burning the candle at both ends and was in no condition to call the game.

He said he is unsure whether that should have been brought out in the book.

"What I should have put in was that this was never done in a Detroit Yankee game that meant something in September. It was usually done in Seattle and Toronto, or California during all those years when they were in last

place in the west, and they'd be playing Cleveland, who was always in last place in the east. Who cares?"

"I'D GET SO drunk the night before, and I'd come in with a headache. Six balls are coming in, and I'd never pick out the right one. The one thing I should have said is they were never important games. But I think that came across in the book. And I said that I did it, not the other umpires."

"There's no hurts in the book. I just wanted to tell the good side of baseball."

Although Luciano tells his view of the good side, some people, including Detroit News sports editor Joe Falls, say he tells a distorted view. In a column dated March 22, Falls accused Luciano of inaccuracies, including his recollection of being involved in a trade which sent Lion quarterback Bobby Layne to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"Joe Falls makes his living by knocking everybody," Luciano said. "I mean, if God came down on earth, he'd say He came too late. He picks something wrong with it. There's no way he wouldn't do it."

"He said I wasn't involved in the

Layne deal. I WAS involved in the Layne deal. I tell everybody it was Layne for Luciano. Now you know that isn't right, because there were 17 people involved, plus Layne, plus millions of dollars, plus six draft choices."

"I was one of the six draft choices. It was a choice Baltimore had given away to Pittsburgh two years before, and nobody wanted it. They said, 'Here, you take it.' But as far as I'm concerned, it was Luciano for Layne. That's literary license. I can get away with that, and I tell that in the book."

LUCIANO ALSO explained his reason for shooting players when he called them out on plays at the bases.

"Baseball can be very dull at times," he said, "especially, let's say, Toronto and Seattle. To watch a shortstop pick up a ball and throw someone out by 40 is not my idea of excitement, OK? So I'd stand there and go 'Bang, bang, bang,' or else I'd get 'em with a machine gun. One time I pulled a hand grenade out."

"Now that made it exciting for me and for the fans at the same time."

Although Luciano was the umpire's version of former Detroit Tiger pitcher Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, Luciano

'Everytime I talk about baseball, my eyes light up. It's a natural high for me.'

— Ron Luciano former umpire

refused to draw a parallel.

"He's flaky. I'm not flaky, I'm nuts," Luciano said. "Fidrych talked to the ball because he wanted it to do good things for him. I talked to the fans because I didn't want 'em to boo me. And I talked to the players and managers because I can't keep my mouth shut for 2 1/2 hours."

In "The Umpire Strikes Back," a chapter doesn't pass without mention of Earl Weaver. Luciano jokingly said there's no animosity between him and Weaver, just hatred.

"No, you can't really say we hate each other, because I respect his managing," Luciano said. "He doesn't respect my umpiring. He never has. There's no hatred, though. There's an understanding that we both dislike each other."

Just like fights in a hockey game, heated verbal exchanges between an umpire and a manager are inevitable.

Luciano explained: "What happens to an umpire is what side of the bed he gets up on in the morning. Some days you feel great, and you do a helluva job. Other days, you

come in with a hangover, and I don't care who it is, you don't want 'em to yell too loud."

"I KNOW THAT Weaver is going to get thrown out. So he comes out and says 'Ahh,' and that's it. I'm going to throw him out because if he hasn't done anything bad, he's going to. So I might as well get rid of him before he does."

"Now you walk out there with Tony LaRusso from Chicago (White Sox). The guy's a lawyer. Do you think this guy's going to make a mistake? No. He comes out and says, 'The trajectory of the ball was rather high. Don't you think the velocity of his arm coming down could possibly precipitate a safe call rather than an out?' I'd say, 'What are you talking about?'"

"You're not going to throw him out, you can't. But some umpires get so involved with themselves that they're stuffed shirts. And if you talk to them after the game, and they blew a call at first base, you say, 'What happened?'"

"Called it the way I saw it," they say. What are they talking about? Tell somebody. I looked at the broad in the third row, and I missed the play."

That's Ron Luciano. Nuts, outspoken, and, though he doesn't intend to be controversial, he will continue to travel across the country and promote the book. And you better believe there will be a sequel.

"The Umpire Strikes Back Again," of course," he said. "There has to be a sequel, because there were 600 pages in the last one, and we cut it to 256. Maybe this time I'll knock Joe Falls!"

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