



My Dad, at a baseball game we attended together in the 1990s

The Art of Baseball

By Brian Riley

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The Oakland A's are a special team to me, due to precious memories and experiences I had with my dad growing up, so when the opportunity arose to attend Game 5 of last October's American League Division Series with the A's facing Detroit at the Coliseum in Oakland, I jumped at the chance.

One reason I had for attending the game was to test out my hypothesis that baseball is a type of art, specifically a kind of live improvisational performance art. By this I mean the way the players make choices and influence and determine the flow of the game. I came up with this hypothesis after reading about Austrian-British philosopher [Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory](#) of "family resemblance." His theory was based on his claims about the concept of "game" not being a regular generalization and I disagree with his philosophical analysis.

As baseball aficionados know, the players in a baseball game are continually making particular types of choices as the game progresses, for example, the pitcher chooses how to put spin on the ball as it leaves his hands and tries to second guess what the batter is expecting him to pitch by throwing it to a certain location over the plate. The batter, then, chooses how to swing at the ball in the attempt to hit it where he wants it to go. Fielders have choices on how they approach and catch the ball, who they throw it to, how fast they throw the ball and at what angle, etc. It's the marvelous psychological complexity involved in the intricate interactions of the players that gives baseball most of its artistic value, as opposed to the non-improvisational visual aspects of figure skating, gymnastics and diving, or the brutishly reductionistic simplicity of bullfighting.

It was an exciting game in parts, with the Detroit pitcher, Justin Verlander, putting in a virtuoso performance, and the Tigers winning by a score of 6 to 0.

After typing out my notes and spending two days pouring over them in detail, I realized that I was performing a kind of "Bourdieuian analysis." Pierre Bourdieu was a French intellectual who used deep techniques in social science, including techniques in anthropology, to analyze features of modern French society, including art. I was able to fall into this mode of analysis after spending a lot of time over the last four years studying the culture of the Golden Gate Bridge and developing skills as an anthropologist.

When a baseball game is in progress, anything could happen, but once it's over, we can look back and discover the pivotal pitches and plays. On that basis, I concluded that the beginning of the end for the A's occurred very early in the game, in the first inning, when the A's designated hitter, Seth Smith, accidentally hit a pitch on a [checked swing](#), leaving Yoenis Céspedes stranded on second base. The A's lost their chance to get ahead and dominate the game, allowing Detroit to get ahead by scoring two runs in the third inning.

With my sharp, anthropologist's eye, I noticed that Detroit's pitcher, Justin Verlander, seemed more relaxed and had a "looser" delivery while pitching to Seth Smith in the fourth inning. I had written in my field notes that his relaxed pitching motion reminded me of the nimble moves of the scarecrow character in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. By contrast, Oakland's pitcher, Jarrod Parker, looked to me like he was forcing himself to be loose in the top of the seventh. He had a more rubber-band-like delivery. It was obvious that the A's were starting to play desperation, defensive baseball, as we witnessed the A's second baseman, Cliff Pennington, jumping up toward balls going too high above his head at second base. This is the inning when all hell broke loose and Detroit was able to function in maximum creative mode, forcing two pitching changes and scoring four runs on four hits and a walk, while capitalizing on a batter being hit by a pitch and an error.

The "linchpin," or set of key creative acts accomplished by the Tiger batters in the seventh inning seems to have been their ability to hit the ball at just the right angle (not too high and not too low) and at just the right speed to place the balls in parts of the field where the outfielders were not standing. Most people don't realize the tremendous amount of planning that goes into the placement of the outfielders—placement that usually varies widely according to which batter is at the plate and what their hitting history indicates. As readers of Michael Lewis' book: [Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game](#) know, our beloved Oakland A's are notorious

for keeping track of precisely where every ball is hit and for using computer algorithms to statistically analyze the information in order to try to determine, among other things, where the fielders should stand. There are A's staff people hunched over computers in a back room under the seats in the stadium who are crunching all these numbers as the game progresses, and hand signals are conveyed to the fielders to let them know where they should stand.

I'm not against using statistical techniques in this way, as long as such techniques are kept in their proper place. Using numbers in that way in baseball, in terms of its relationship to art, is akin to how a painter might choose which paint colors to put on the painting palette and which style paintbrushes to use. All that's important, but after that everything mostly depends on how the players make split-second decisions while the ball is in play. An overreliance on computerized analysis would cause the game to be drained of its spontaneity, in other words, drained of its art. This might have been what happened to the A's in Game 5 and why they lost.

To me it seems that winning in baseball should be viewed as a secondary consequence of good creative play. In my view, the game becomes a live work of performance art because we choose to make it so. We look to the players to inspire us as part of a life-affirming activity.

With the growing "de-artification," as well as commercialization of the game, the nature of the game becomes disturbed and the institutional memory of a baseball team becomes obscured, loosening the bonds of the organic integrity of the team and turning the players into playing tokens and commodities. Connie Mack, by contrast, who founded the A's in 1901, [allowed his players the freedom to play creatively](#) for the team's first 50 years of existence. We owe it to him to allow that tradition to continue.

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BRIAN RILEY can be reached at info@brianriley.us

Note: Cf. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, pp. 443, 448. Related key phrases and names: sports as art, sport is art, aesthetic sports, die Entkünstung der Kunst, Ruth L. Saw, Peter J. Arnold.

[CLICK HERE](#) to read Brian's notes for Game 5 (PDF).

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